



# POPULAR EDUCATION PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES

For a Thriving Culture of Participation



**Facilitating  
Power**

# A THRIVING CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION

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Participation means giving of oneself. It means taking a risk to offer one's voice, one's lived experience, one's precious time to something that feels worth it. It means believing that together we can solve our shared problems, or at least make life a little better. It means trusting in the potentiality of change and transformation. It means being willing to show up again and again to take a chance on collective action.

Educators, organizers, service providers, and planners can apply the following principles and practices to any effort as a way to create the conditions for authentic participation.

## Acknowledgement

The principles and practices outlined here are grounded in a long history of popular education, a pedagogical approach with roots in indigenous practices of democracy, in the democratization movements of Latin America, in movements for Civil Rights, Black Power, Disability Rights, and Education Justice, as well as in movements to reclaim the Commons. We acknowledge the work of Paolo Friere, Augusto Boal, Ella Baker, Howard Zinn, bell hooks, and so many community visionaries who have practiced what they teach about how people make change together.

**THIS HANDBOOK BELONGS TO:**

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# HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

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This simple set of principles and practices is just a starting place. Here are some ideas for how you might put them into use:


## ① To put words to what your intuition already tells you about how to inspire meaningful participation:

- Read through the principles and practices on your own, taking time to jot down your own ideas and questions about what they look like in action within your own work.

## ② To inspire and inform program, project, and process design:

- Read through the principles and practices, and take some time to reflect on the program, project, or process you are designing, using the reflection questions listed at the end of each section.

## ③ To initiate practice shifts within an organization:

- Divide up the principles (and their corresponding practices) among team members, each taking responsibility for doing deeper inquiry on a given principle or set of principles:
    - *What does this principle mean to you?*
    - *How is it relevant to our work?*
    - *Where are the opportunities to apply this principle? What would that look like?*
    - *What questions does it bring up?*
  - Invite each team member or small group to present to the rest of the team what they understand about the principles and practices they explored.
  - From there, work collectively to name next steps for putting your ideas into action.
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# TOWARDS AUTHENTIC PARTICIPATION\*

Read through the qualities of participatory groups vs. those of conventional groups. Then, reflect on the role of the facilitator in fostering the practices of participatory groups...

PARTICIPATORY GROUPS	CONVENTIONAL GROUPS
Everyone participates, not just the vocal few.	The fastest thinkers and the most articulate speakers get more "air time."
People give each other room to think and get their thoughts all the way out.	People interrupt each other on a regular basis.
Opposing views are allowed to co-exist in the room.	Differences of opinion are treated as conflict that must either be stifled or solved.
People draw each other out with supportive questions. "Is this what you mean?"	Questions are often perceived as challenges, as if the person being questioned has done something wrong.
Each member makes the effort to pay attention to the person speaking.	Unless the speaker captivates their attention, people space out, doodle or check the clock.
People are able to listen to each other's ideas because they know their own ideas will also be heard.	Instead of listening, people are busy rehearsing what they want to say or resenting the fact that they don't feel heard.
Each member speaks up on matters of controversy. Everyone knows where everyone stands.	Some members remain quiet on controversial matters. No one really knows where everyone stands.
Members can accurately represent each other's points of view – even when they don't agree with them.	People rarely give accurate representations of the opinions and reasoning of those whose opinions are at odds with their own.
People refrain from talking behind each other's backs.	Without permission to be direct during the meeting, people talk behind each other's backs outside the meeting.
Even in the face of opposition from the person-in-charge, people are encouraged to express their position on issues.	People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.
A problem is not considered solved until everyone who will be affected by the solution understands the reasoning.	A problem is considered solved when the fastest thinkers have reached an answer, and other expected to get on board.
When people make an agreement, it is assumed that the decision still reflects a wide range of perspectives.	When people make an agreement, it is assumed they are all thinking the same exact thing.

\*Adapted from the *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, by Sam Kaner

# THE PRAIXIS OF POPULAR EDUCATION

Personal is Political

LEARNING

REFLECTION

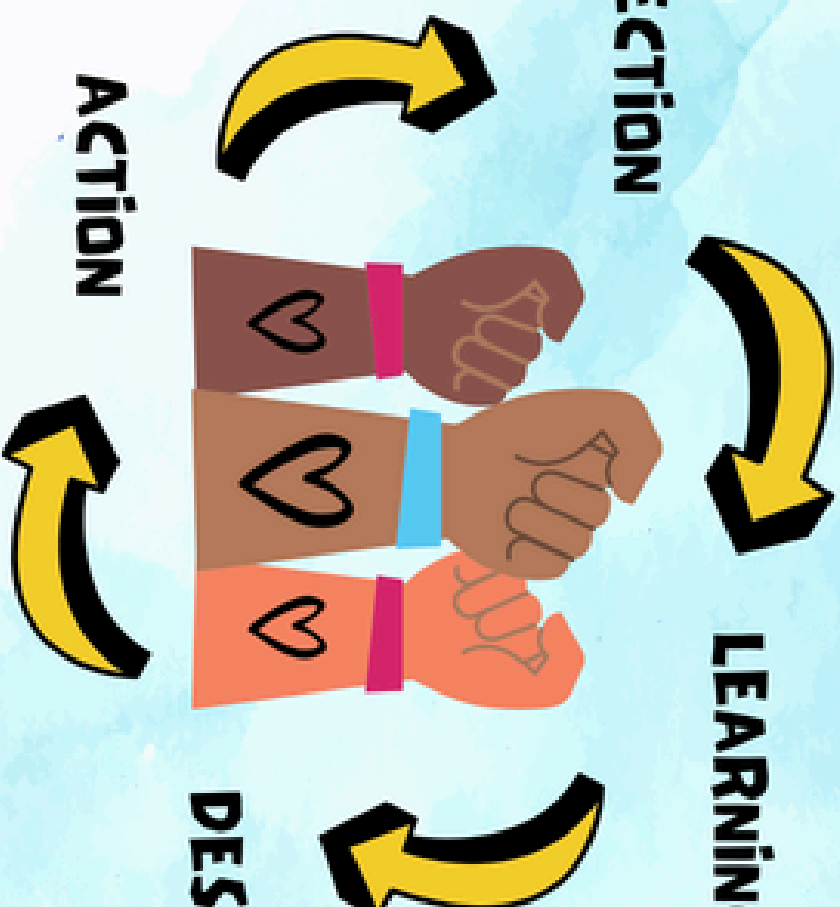
Critical Inquiry & Creativity

DESIGN

Community Knowledge

ACTION

Liberatory Power





**INTEGRATE AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP - BUILDING THROUGHOUT**



**RECOGNIZE COMMUNITY EXPERTISE**



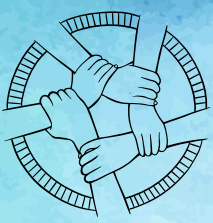
**DRAW ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AS WINDOWS INTO SYSTEMIC REALITIES**



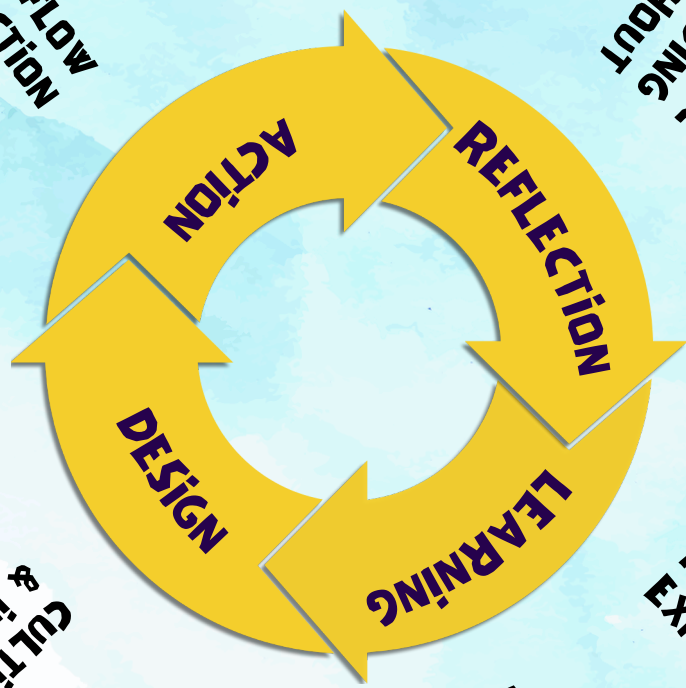
**TAP INTO THE POWER OF CIRCLES**



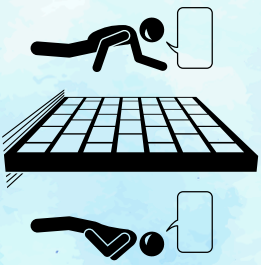
**ACTIVELY SEEK TO UNDERSTAND & BUILD LIBERATORY POWER**



**CREATE A DYNAMIC FLOW BETWEEN IDEAS AND ACTION**

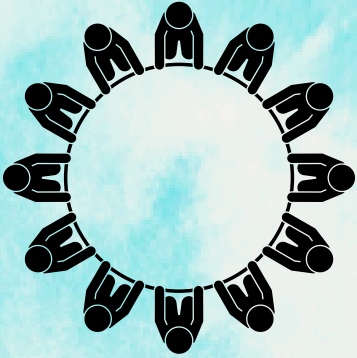


**CULTIVATE CREATIVITY & INTUITION**



**CREATE SPACE FOR CRITICAL INQUIRY AND LIBERATION**

# 1 TAP INTO THE POWER OF CIRCLES



"Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls... The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were. [L]ife.. is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves."

- BLACK ELK  
Holy Man of the  
Oglala Lakota

There is an inherent power in circles. The circle is a life-giving form. The earth, the sun, the moon, a mother's womb. When we convene in circles, we increase our capacity to germinate the seeds we are carrying. A circle is the number zero. In colonial world views zero holds the least power. In Nature-based world views, the zero is powerful beyond our perception. Zero represents infinite potential and it is the number of ascendance. There is a power beyond the material realm that we can access by emptying ourselves. We can bring forward the wisdom of circles to help us embody the kind of power dynamics that support a culture of deep participation, a leadership for the whole.

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## PRACTICES

- When possible, start and end sessions in a circle.
- Bring forward the wisdom inherent in circles by asking people, "what do circles have to teach us?"
- Ask people to name the values they see holding the circle together and ways to put those values into practice as a group.
- Become aware of structures and methods that exclude people.
- Practice working in structures that center people.
- Seek to understand the points of unity & connection within the group.
- What is our shared purpose? What is at the center of this circle?

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## REFLECT

*Where are the opportunities in our work to tap into the power of circles?*

*What habits might we need to interrupt?*



# 2 INTEGRATE AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP- BUILDING THROUGHOUT



"An act of love can transform a relationship in an instant, or it can leave seeds of forgiveness and hope that may manifest within a day, a week, or many years later. It can impact an affirmation that empowers another whom you may never see again to live with courage, or it can kindle a connection with another that can lead to ongoing collaborations to make good happen in the world."

- Roberto Vargas  
FAMILY ACTIVISM

Genuine trusting relationships between human beings who believe in themselves and each other are what makes a thriving culture of participation possible. Relationship-building can happen throughout a process from beginning to end. Making space for the diversity of backgrounds, opinions, and perspectives that people come with (not just parts of people) helps to build true solidarity that inspires action. Problems communities face affect everyone either directly or indirectly and can unify people around a common cause. Love for self, family, and community drives participation.

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## PRACTICES

- Treat every action as an opportunity for people to build deeper relationships with each other.
- Honor, celebrate, and explore differences to foster true respect.
- Ask people what solidarity looks like and feels like and to name the practices that demonstrate true solidarity.
- Listen for what people love and reflect that back to them.
- Create space for people to share their cultural wealth and knowledge.
- Find shared problems that can be addressed collectively; or connections between unique problems people are facing.
- Create space for people to identify the unique role they play in helping to address shared challenges. Everyone has a way to contribute to the whole.

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## REFLECT

*What are the opportunities in this process to build or strengthen relationships?*

*What are the shared challenges the group is looking to address?*

*What are the unique roles people play in addressing these challenges? How can people support each other across roles?*



# 3 RECOGNIZE COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS EXPERTS



"Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it."

- Ella Baker

All people are experts in at least one thing— their own lived experience. As facilitative leaders, our responsibility is to tap into that expertise. People's experiences, knowledge and skills are a springboard for critical questions and the foundation for new learning. Beginning with and honoring the knowledge people bring with them is important for two reasons: 1) This is how humans learn: we make connections to what we already know; and 2) This is how we begin to dismantle internalized oppression. Learning & liberation are the axes around which deep participation moves.

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## PRACTICES

- Initiate learning with opportunities for participants to share their own knowledge.
- Create space for people to analyze their own realities and articulate their own questions.
- Connect new learning to people's lived experience.
- Prioritize community members conducting their own community mapping/research, and apply their findings to the problems they are working to solve.
- Build skills as needed so the expertise is within the community.
- Practice cultural humility.
- Seek to understand before teaching. Good facilitators of participation are good students of the groups with whom they work.

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## REFLECT

*How can we tap into and honor the expertise of those participating in the work?*

*What existing power dynamics could get in the way? How can we create the conditions for community members to recognize and assert their own knowledge and analysis?*

# 4 DRAW ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AS WINDOWS INTO SYSTEMIC REALITIES



"When we speak of systemic change, we need to be fractal. Fractals - a way to speak of the patterns we see - move from the micro to the macro level... We must create patterns that cycle upwards. We are micro systems... Our friendships and relationships are systems, Our communities are systems, Let us practice upward."

- adrienne marie  
brown  
EMERGENT  
STRATEGY

Our own lived experience can help us to better understand the systems that affect how we live. Interpersonal and internalized oppression provides starting points for understanding structural oppression. And in turn, understanding structural oppression can help us heal from internalized oppression. Facilitative leaders create the conditions that allow people to connect our personal experiences to an analysis of systemic realities. This is the foundation for developing collective strategies for social transformation, and key to taking informed and inspired action.

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## PRACTICES

- Invite people to share relevant personal stories in small groups and identify patterns across multiple stories.
- Use existing frameworks for understanding systemic issues.
- Create space for participants to articulate how they are impacted personally by systemic issues.
- Invite participants to map issues exploring the personal, the interpersonal, and the structural.
- Use theater games and other forms of simulation to create microcosms of systemic realities from within which the group can experiment.
- Contextualize: Root contemporary issues within a historical context and create space for visioning the future we wish to build.

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## REFLECT

*How can we meaningfully reflect on lived experience as a way to better understand the systems and structures that have led to the shared problems we are looking to address?*

*How can we do this first as facilitators so as to facilitate such processes with authenticity?*

# 5 CREATE SPACE FOR CRITICAL INQUIRY AND LIBERATION



"The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works."

- bell hooks  
TEACHING CRITICAL  
THINKING

Liberation happens when people join together with their communities to critically reflect on the conditions and structures that impact them, and then imagine and try-on possibilities for something much better.

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## PRACTICES

- Prioritize opportunities for shared analysis of the problems and barriers people are up against.
- Be explicit about oppression, power and privilege and support participants in questioning the status quo.
- Work together to uncover what dominant mind frames and/or internalized oppression may be keeping us from our power.
- Create opportunities to reimagine the world.
- Be open to possibilities outside your own thinking.
- Avoid shutting down new ideas.
- Hold space in your own imagination for what may be possible through people power.

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## REFLECT

*What narratives or belief systems are contributing to internalized oppression?*

*What new narratives could break down the walls between us and our collective power?*

*What frameworks might we use to better understand the root causes of the problem we face, and to identify the solutions that address them?*

*How can we orient towards collective care?*

# 6 ACTIVELY SEEK TO UNDERSTAND & BUILD LIBERATORY POWER



"Power is relational; it plays out in interactions. Structures, rules, and systems are the artifacts of our interactions. Therefore, useful liberation practices focus on effective interactions - in which we seek mutuality and egalitarian interactions and refuse powerless identities."

- Cindi Suarez  
THE POWER MANUAL

Community participation is community power, and often involves transforming our relationship to power. This means having an analysis of power and understanding the different types of power: dominant and liberatory power. To build a thriving culture of participation, we must tap into liberatory power both personally and collectively to interrupt patterns of institutional violence, exclusion and control (dominant power).

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## PRACTICES

- Develop an analysis of power, and the specific power dynamics affecting the community.
- Draw on existing frameworks for understanding power.
- Create space to understand how dominant power dynamics contribute to existing threats to the community; and to identify opportunities to cultivate personal and collective power to advance community vision, values, and priorities.
- Seek to demystify dominant power.
- Foster a multi-dimensional understanding of power (political, economic, cultural, and spiritual).
- Engage multiple learning modalities: art, music, theater, dance, games, construction, sewing, cooking, agriculture, math, philosophy, etc.
- Create opportunities to reject powerless identities and challenge dominant power norms.

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## REFLECT

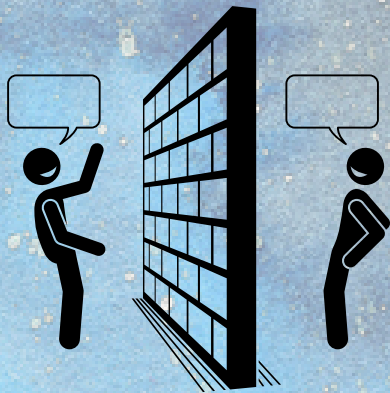
*What is our understanding of power based on our lived experience?*

*In what ways are patterns of exclusion, institutional violence and control contributing to the problems our community faces and/or inhibiting the power of the community to affect change?*

*Where are the opportunities to challenge dominant power norms, refuse powerless identities, and cultivate mutuality?*

*How can the process we are designing help cultivate liberatory power, or our capacity to affect change?*

# 7 CULTIVATE CREATIVITY & INTUITION



"A revolution that is based on the people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation is one of the great historical contributions of humankind."

- Grace Lee Boggs

Humans are creative beings; the more opportunities to nurture our creativity, the more we blossom in our humanity. We use our creativity to solve problems. Capitalism serves to rob people of our creativity, as it entraps us in outsourcing "problem-solving" to corporate headquarters. Community participation is a chance to reclaim our creativity. It is generative, calling on a range of creative means to vision, to understand problems, to navigate them, and to do something about them. Participatory democracy is the art of building the world anew.

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## PRACTICES

- Start with the body and the land through grounding and centering.
- Build in space for people to connect with the wisdom held within our bodies.
- Use embodied practice (such as breathing, somatics, Yoga, Tai Chi, dance, and theater) regularly and in relevant ways.
- Invite people to reflect on how they apply creative problem-solving skills daily.
- Create space for creative problem-solving.
- Engage multiple learning modalities: art, music, theater, dance, games, construction, sewing, cooking, agriculture, math, philosophy, etc.
- Treat challenges as opportunities.
- See community participation as supporting a much larger creative problem-solving effort to achieve a true democracy.

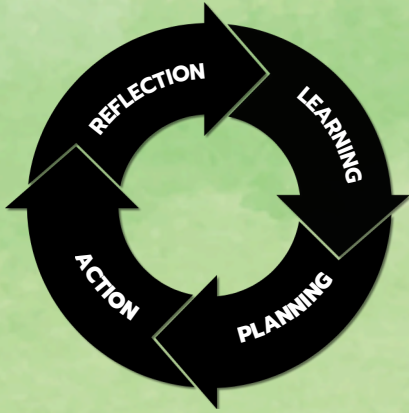
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## REFLECT

*What methods for learning and action will inspire creativity?*

*What shifts in culture and practice are needed for us to fully embrace our creativity and intuition?*

# 8 CREATE A DYNAMIC FLOW BETWEEN IDEAS AND ACTION



"For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."

- Paolo Freire  
PEDAGOGY OF THE  
OPPRESSED

Learning is for the sake of informed and strategic action and all action holds great learning. Our goal is to create a dynamic relationship between ideas and actions, reflection and practice, movement and theory. In this way, we are reclaiming our capacity to read the world, to affect change in the world, and to pose new ideas about what is possible. In that process, we break the bonds of current structures and dominant narratives that inhibit change. The learning process starts before the workshop and continues well beyond it.

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## PRACTICES

- Start by creating space for people to share and reflect on their own experiences, and identify the ideas they already hold about the topic.
- Invite people to identify problems they want to solve or critical questions they want to address relevant to the topic.
- Create space for participants to generate theories and solutions that they can test.
- Use simulations to try-on new ideas and solutions.
- Build opportunities for action and implementation of ideas
- Avoid shutting down new ideas.
- Reflect on actions taken and from there refine solutions or actions as needed.

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## REFLECT

*How can we build into the process the time needed for learning, planning, action, and reflection?*

*What kind of learning and knowledge will inspire action?*

*How can we reflect on our collective actions in ways that uncover lessons learned, and in turn apply those lessons to the next opportunity for action?*





**"Give light and people will find the way"**

-Ella Baker



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