# The international popular education network: its purpose and contribution

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The Popular Education Network (PEN), of which the author is the co-ordinator and one of its founder members, was established in 1997. This is an international network of university teachers and researchers who share an essentially radical and socialist understanding of what their work is and why it matters. The network was established after discussions between a small group of university adult educators in the United Kingdom and colleagues at the University of Barcelona in Spain (Martin et al, 1999). One of main purposes of the network is to defend the radical margins of university adult education by sustaining a sense of solidarity and common purpose among politically committed academics who are trying to work with marginalised community groups and social movements in civil society, but who themselves exist in increasingly precarious isolation on the margins of their own institutions. This paper presents a critical review of the work of the network to date, an analysis of how its founding principles and aspirations have been developed in practice, and an assessment of what can be learnt from its short but subversive history.

University-based teachers and researchers can choose to use their work to support popular struggles for greater democracy, equality and social justice – at a time when all the demands being made upon them are, seemingly, towards institutional *dis*engagement from social and political action. Universities are, at one and the same time, privileged and contradictory places in which academics, whatever the pressure and constraints they encounter, still enjoy a high degree of relative autonomy. Perhaps this applies most where it may seem to matter least: in the more marginal areas of the academy's activities, such as university departments of adult education and lifelong learning, where it may still be possible to make a distinction between the particular *job* we are paid to do and the wider *work* we choose to undertake. Politically committed academics can choose to use this relative autonomy in different ways.

## The politics of popular education

The term 'popular education', as it is used here, is essentially an answer to the

question: Whose side are we on? It unambiguously takes the side of those social interests and movements which are progressive in the sense that they are concerned to challenge inequality, exclusion and discrimination and to be part of the broader struggle for democracy and social justice. Like all educational terminology, popular education is subject to a range of competing interpretations which reflect a variety of historical traditions and cultural contexts. So it is as well to be clear about what is meant here.

PEN is an informal international network of university-based teachers and researchers which meets in conference every two years. Membership of the network is open and free to all who are willing to subscribe in general terms to the following statement of intent:

**Popular education**

Popular education is understood to be popular, as distinct from merely populist, in the sense that it is:

- rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people
- overtly political and critical of the status quo
- committed to progressive social and political change.

Popular education is based on a clear analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression, and is informed by an equally clear political purpose. This has nothing to do with helping the ‘disadvantaged’ or the management of poverty; it has everything to do with the struggle for a more just and egalitarian social order.

The process of popular education has the following general characteristics:

- its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle
- its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development
- it attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action.

**Linking the local and the global**

Although the term ‘popular education’ has come to be associated with relatively

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recent developments in Latin America, it has strong resonances with many traditions of radical adult education. Popular education seeks to connect the local and the global. In every context it proceeds from specific, localised forms of education and action, but it deliberately sets out to foster international solidarity by making these local struggles part of the wider international struggle for justice and peace.

**The purpose of the Popular Education Network**

In the short-term, the purpose of the network is to:

- bring together university-based teachers and researchers with an existing interest in and commitment to popular education
- forge active links and solidarity at both national and international levels.

In the longer-term, the network seeks to:

- catalyse action by linking local activists, workers and politically committed academics
- produce and provide educational resources for social and political action
- reassert and reinvigorate adult education's role as an integral part of progressive social movements.

The point to emphasise is that this statement is intended to be uncompromisingly political and partisan. The implicit theoretical base is a materialist political economy. This, in our view, requires an essentially modernist analysis of late capitalism that links the major social divisions of power in class, gender and 'race' formations. In this sense, popular education seeks to take the side of and be in solidarity with particular collective identities and interests – and it stands against others. In practical educational work it may be necessary to deploy such a modernist rigour with a postmodern sensibility – showing, for example, how cultural identity is related to structural position – but what must always be maintained is that popular education is essentially and fundamentally a political project. In this respect, the danger of technicism – of reducing purpose to process – is precisely that this depoliticises popular education. This is why it is essential that practical pedagogy in popular education is systematically theorised, and that its theory is ideologically justified.

Education, understood as a dialectical process, is constituted of contradictory

interests and intentions. Thus, in Paulo Freire's terms, it embodies simultaneously the potential both for 'liberation' and 'domestication', transformation and reproduction. No neutral position is possible. It is true, of course, that no education is ever neutral in the sense that it always reflects particular values and serves particular interests. What is distinctive about popular education is that it is quite explicit about its political purpose and the ideological commitment that informs this. Crucial choices must therefore be made in answering the question: Whose side are we on? Finding a space for social purpose adult education is increasingly difficult for individuals isolated in their institutions. It requires an explicit commitment to work politically and strategically against some of these forces which influence our work.

## Working dialectically

If education is understood as a dialectical process, it is also necessary to recognise that politically committed educators are dialectically positioned 'in and against' it. This is, perhaps particularly and increasingly, the case in universities today. One consequence of the trends we have described that there is simply not enough intellectual and political argument going on in the academy – at least the kind of argument that can make a difference to most people's lives. An urgent and distinctive task of popular educators in the academy is therefore to develop new arguments and re-invigorate old ones – for instance, arguments about unfashionable things like equality and justice. By bringing together relatively isolated individuals *in* the academy, PEN provides a set of arguments *against* the dominant discourse of the academy.

The contradictory positioning of university-based teachers and researchers can be harnessed to the politics of popular education through different kinds of social and political engagement. Politically committed academics can help to show how different types of action have different effects and consequences, thus elucidating the grounds for making strategic choices. Perhaps one of the most important contributions of the academy is in developing theoretical analysis to clarify, inform and synthesise popular action – simultaneously making visible some of the key contradictions and conflicts of interest that lie at the heart of much academic work. In this respect, history and historical consciousness are important. Popular education is strengthened by research which seeks to excavate silenced, repressed or discounted histories of radicalism and to reconnect them with today's struggles. This is also a reminder that certain kinds of adult education and adult learning have always been an integral part of progressive social movements. In this sense, PEN is

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a reminder that politically committed academics need to see their work in history – and to see themselves as exercising agency within historical processes.

In popular education, what counts as knowledge and understanding is actively constructed in the creative encounter between the expertise of the teacher and the experience of the learner, each role conferring a distinctive kind of authority. This, surely, is what Marx meant when he said, 'The educator must himself be educated'. Pedagogy is a matter of principle and purpose rather than mere technique. Methods of teaching and learning must therefore be developed and deployed in ways which enable the teacher to learn and the learner to teach. The idea of a pedagogy which generates such dialogical knowledge is liberating in two senses: first, because it claims that knowledge itself can be emancipatory and that what counts as knowledge is contestable; second, because it suggests that alternative and sometimes subversive ways of knowing and acting can be liberated through teaching and other kinds of educational work.

One of the crucial questions that arises is the epistemological distinction and relationship between the formalised and codified knowledge of the academy and other forms of knowledge and knowledge production – for example, the knowledge embodied in indigenous languages and traditions, the knowledge derived from lived experience, and the 'knowledge from below' of exploited, oppressed and marginalised peoples. Some would argue that a genuinely deliberative democratic process must be based on a dialogue of such knowledges – something that is deeply subversive of the academy's traditional assumption of its own legitimacy in defining what counts as worth knowing.

Popular education, as proposed here, is best understood as a distinctive kind of political commitment and the attitude of mind that accompanies it. Consequently, it is not confined to particular educational sites. As the role of the state changes, so new spaces for popular education are opened up in the reconfigured relationship between the state, the market and civil society. This presents an opportunity to move into the spaces created by the contradictions and unintended outcomes of policy. Popular education often operates in this gap between the intentions and outcomes of policy. There is both the need and the potential to create opportunities and spaces for popular education in all aspects of academic work: teaching, research, training and consultancy. One way PEN has sought to break down the isolation of academics and further the aims of the network has been through the organisation of international conferences, which help to ensure that the virtual reality of email contact becomes the concrete reality of face-to-face meeting and

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discussion. It is in creating this space for things to happen when like-minded people meet that PEN has served a distinctive niche in supporting popular education inside and outside the academy.

## The Popular Education Network in action

One distinctive characteristic of all PEN conferences is that they are low cost events, with subsidies to students, which aim simply to cover expenditure rather than generate income. One way this has been done is to strip out the usual conference paraphernalia of bags, pens, books and CDs so that the charge for the event simply has to pay for the basics of meeting and eating. Local organisers have also done their best to acquire institutional support. This practice of keeping the conference fee low is itself becoming a subversive activity in a context where, increasingly, conferences are expected to be large scale, profit-making ventures that have financial targets to meet. A remarkable fact is that PEN has never had a budget in 15 years of its existence.

A further distinctive aspect of the conference is that there are no conference proceedings and academic papers are not required. Whilst this helps to keep costs low it also works pedagogically in that it serves to create a more flexible and dialogical space; contributors are invited to open up discussion, present accounts of research or practice, reflect on their experience or a particular theme and work in this more open-ended way rather than to present and defend an academic argument presented in a text. The latter is not barred but it is not usual – indeed, some academics have to present papers to legitimate their participation with their institutions. Moreover, encouraging participants to meet for social activity, to eat and drink together helps to break down barriers and facilitate challenging and good-natured discussion. The unprogrammed space of a conference is as important to the experience of those who participate as well as what happens inside the conference programme. In more conceptual terms it might be appropriate to think of the organisation of the conference as an aspect of, to borrow Raymond Williams' (1977) term, 'the structure of feeling' which is created. The culture of the conferences has also been enhanced by the shared nature of the commitment to popular education. Participants are provided with a history of the network and a definition of popular education, which does not claim to be the only way of thinking about it as an educational and political practice. But it does help to frame what the purpose of the conferences are and generally speaking brings together ideologically sympathetic participants even if, at times, individuals do not subscribe to PEN's definition of

popular education. The aim of providing a definition also seeks to avoid academic navel gazing, so instead of analysing what we mean by popular education more energy can be spent on what we do in its name.

The work of maintaining the network and organising conferences is squeezed into the spaces we can create between other commitments. It is true, of course, that the aims of the network and what some people may want to use it for may sometimes differ. Giving a presentation at an international conference can, after all, be good for the CV, and participation at such gatherings may require little further commitment from people when they return to their own institutions. However, the network does represent an opportunity to pursue an explicitly politicised and internationalised interpretation of education for citizenship. Bringing together isolated individuals and groups who are located *in* the academy enhances the possibilities of supporting them in initiatives that are increasingly *against* the dominant discourse of the academy.

A review of the conferences to date adds some depth to the distinctive nature of these events.

## Conference 1: Edinburgh – Engaging the academy

The first PEN conference was held in Edinburgh in June 2000 and attended by 46 people from 12 different countries. It built explicitly on the original political understandings of popular education, identified at its founding the previous year in Barcelona, (see the statement of intent described earlier).

The conference consisted of a welcome from the core group, a keynote paper on ‘researching learning in social movements’, workshops organised around four themes: conceptualising and theorising popular education; popular education: historical and contextual perspectives; popular education and personal/biographical experience; popular education: engaging in educational practice; a ceilidh (vigorous collective folk dancing and singing) and final workshops and a plenary on taking the network forward.

The workshops were able to draw on a range of radical perspectives from women’s and disabled people’s movements, global contributions from Brazil and South Africa as well as many different parts of Europe and engage with key themes, from citizenship and trade union education to ‘systematisation’ and praxis. Amongst the sometimes vigorous debate that took place over the conference, it became

apparent that, despite the explicit social and political purpose identified for the conference, there was not yet a wider meeting of minds or agendas. As two participants from South Africa put it:

We were unsettled by the wide range of conceptualisations of popular education that emerged …….. There were accounts of 'citizenship education' that seemed to treat as entirely unproblematic the potential of such work to incorporate 'marginalised groups' into the hegemonic world view of capitalism, and hence to neutralise their potential opposition to the status quo. And then there were those participants who interpreted their commitment to popular education as involving only research – with no apparent social action component to their work

**(Von Kotze and Cooper, 2001, p. 22)**

A central part of the conference (and part of a developing PEN tradition) was participants' engagement with local popular educators involved in the Popular Education Forum for Scotland who organised a very enjoyable (and bonding) ceilidh and social event, 'where we all learnt to dance to the same tune!' (Ibid, 2001, p. 23).

What was agreed at the end of the conference was a continued assertion of the founding principles of the network but linked to more praxis as well as 'more stories, more questions and more time to work towards moral decisions about how we should act in response to the challenging of what seems at times overwhelming hegemonic control' (Ibid 2001: 23). More concretely there was a commitment to further conferences, further engagement with like-minded people and the development of a book based on the conference themes (see Crowther et al 2005).

## Conference 2: Barcelona – In and against the academy

The second PEN Conference was held in Barcelona in September 2002 and attended by 49 people from 12 countries. Once again the largest groups of participants came from Europe but with wider attendances from Canada, the USA, Mexico and South Africa. This was a more formally structured conference, which probably reflected two factors: there had been a series of prior planning/preparation meetings by the core group and a need had been identified for a more conventional academic format (largely so that participants could access university funding). Thus abstracts

were published in advance, papers were paired and national/regional reports, roundtable discussions and panel sessions were programmed and some informal translation (English-Spanish, Spanish-English) organised.

Seminar themes were quite diverse, including different international case studies of working with social movements; language, culture and poetry in popular education; a variety of historical and methodological perspectives on popular education; the role of research in popular education and an exploration of programmes of 'popular universities'. Roundtable and panel discussions covered wide topics involving ideology, feminism, research, globalisation and migration in relation to popular education. The conference ended with a series of self-selected discussion groups where a recurring theme was the dilemma of working in and against the state (and the university) and the tensions between investigating specific case studies and focusing on wider (macro) issues, both of which perhaps reflected the existential problems for university educators working on the margins of their institutions. As part of this more systematic approach, the core group which met at the end of the conference issued some concluding notes. These included a restatement of PEN values from an explicitly internationalist standpoint, an overview of the relationship between theory and practice and ways of working and some feed-back on the way the conference had been run, particularly a plea for more (unprogrammed) space for discussion and dialogue.

In his review of the conference, Jonathon Grossman, a sociologist at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, reflected on the continuing tensions amongst conference participants:

A conference like this appears …….to present a safe refuge to take a few risks. It could easily become primarily a comfort zone on which we converge as refugees from the often hostile environments of universities which are **not** progressive.

**(Grossman, 2002, p.1)**

Grossman's point was that as university educators we should not just play the academic game, albeit a more radically-sounding game:

It is one thing to decide whose side we are on – as the overall mission of PEN makes clear we have. It is another to translate that into struggle against those on the other

side.

**(Ibid, 2002, p. 2)**

He wanted us as academics to show more honesty in exploring our dilemmas, for example:

reminding ourselves that we were parts of institutions which **are** part of the problem…..The challenge is to go back precisely to the core of our routines and comfort zones, where integrity will be most challenged and compromised, and disrupt things

**(Ibid, 2002, p. 3)**

## Conference 3: Braga – Developing praxis

The third PEN Conference took place in Braga, Portugal in December 2004. It was attended by 32 people from 8 countries, again mostly European, alongside colleagues from Australia, Canada and South Africa. The programme reverted from the academic format of Barcelona back to a more informal approach, which was facilitated by the smaller numbers involved and the growing links between a hard core of ever-present participants increasingly familiar with each other's working contexts, ideas and experiences.

The conference programme included a welcome from the core group, a keynote paper on popular education and citizenship, themed seminars on 'universities and popular education' and 'arts, culture and popular education', a panel discussion on 'global voices and local choices' emanating from Portugal, South Africa, Australia and Scotland; a series of workshops on different ideological, methodological, cultural and linguistic approaches to popular education and a final plenary session on reflections and projects.

The issues and problems explored in this conference were similar in many ways to those of previous conferences – in Jonathon Grossman's words there were 'no epistemological breakthroughs' – and, curiously, the whole issue of 'in and against the state' was rehearsed through the contributions of two visiting Portuguese 'popular associations' and the responses of many conference participants to their

(heavily state/EU supported) work. But, overall, the debate was more comradely (maybe more 'comfortable' in Grossman's terms). This may have been for two main reasons. First, participants were more beleaguered – the Bush re-election had just been decided and solidarity seemed to be at a premium. But at least as important was the particular effort that had been made to allow space for relatively unstructured dialogue and interaction, to some extent as a result of the Barcelona feed-back, to some extent due to the natural hospitality of the Portuguese hosts and to some extent due to the limited size of the conference. Thus key issues and problems were chewed over at length in small groups, in workshops and in plenary sessions while more Northern participants learned to discover the joys of 'slow food' as a political response to global capitalism!

In keeping with this mood, no written report on the conference was commissioned. Instead there was an extended final plenary review when almost all participants spoke. Recurring themes were popular education under siege and the need to recharge our batteries, the importance of locating our work in an historical analysis of radical education and social change, the need to build on this particular conference solidarity, to expand the network, to build strategic international alliances about common purposes and to link up with popular movements outside universities.

## Conference 4: Maynooth – reasserting the local in the global

The fourth PEN conference was held in Ireland, April 2007, and was hosted by the Department of Adult and Community Education on the Maynooth Campus of the National University of Ireland. In all there were 48 participants from Ireland, the UK, Canada, Portugal, Spain, South Africa and Sweden.

The conference programme involved a range of interactions and conversations, plenary seminars, panel discussions, workshops, marketplace of experience and stories as well as opportunities for conviviality. Whilst the themes individuals discussed are inevitably broad it is equally inevitable that some seem to dominate at different points of time and in different contexts. The Irish context (at this point of time) was witnessing an expanding economy but with notable increases in inequity and the silencing of community voices for change behind government projects and schemes. Reasserting the local into wider global processes is, in such circumstances, an important educational task particularly in terms of addressing increasing ethnic diversity and the need to develop solidarity both at a local level and through global campaigns. In such contexts the language of local concerns is

open to manipulation and depoliticisation through state sponsored schemes with the task of popular educators to keep open the option for radical change.

Peter Taylor in a review of the conference noted that ‘a recurring view as we moved towards the final session of the conference was that we need to develop healthy optimism for the future, but also we must continue to be as awkward as possible – to challenge the dull, the conformist and the manipulative. In short we need more “arsiness” in popular education’ (2008, p. 7).

## Conference 5: Seville – Crisis and Resistance

The fifth PEN conference was planned for Edinburgh in 2010 but was cancelled because of travel disruptions caused by volcanic eruptions in Iceland. Instead the conference was relocated to Seville in September 2011 and was hosted by the Paulo Freire Institute of Spain in conjunction with the University of Seville. There were 58 participants drawn from Spain, Portugal, the UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, Belgium, South Africa and the USA.

The theme of crisis and resistance as neo-liberalism undermines the role and purpose of universities, denigrates public institutions, rolls back welfare provision and diminishes the life of people in communities, was central to the issues of the conference. The programme involved a mixture of plenary seminars, workshops, case studies, film showings, informal meetings and a strong sense of camaraderie cemented through the common difficulties participants shared and the convivial nature of the conference. The curriculum involved plenary inputs from local activists on grassroots work in Andalucía, the sharing of experiences in the academy from a range of speakers, analysis of the deepening impact of neoliberalism on universities particularly in Portugal and Ireland, popular education and schooling, learning in social movements including educational work in HIV and AIDs support groups, internationalisation and globalization’s impact on higher education, amongst other things.

The mixture of structure and informality in the programme served to reinforce the culture of openness, experiment and support which those who attended valued. Perhaps some of the unsolicited feedback from participants gives a better sense of the value it held for them. Below are just a few of the many comments that were sent to the organisers after the event:

‘… thanks to everyone who made this a stimulating and thoroughly enjoyable experience, sustaining and encouraging, not to say inspirational…’

‘..it was a great conference I will not forget…’

‘ After two days back at work, it’s already beginning to feel like it happened in another world (which I guess in some ways it did); but am hanging on to really good memories of engagement, inspiring stories of resistance, some great discussions…’

‘ it was a welcoming and warm experience, especially as a first time PEN attendee, as well as stimulating and interesting…’

‘ thanks for continuing the PEN traditions of reconnecting old friends and introducing new ones in a really positive space for resistance.’

‘It was a memorable and inspiring gathering! I felt honoured to be there and I really appreciated the genuine atmosphere of the conference’.

‘I came back both tired (from travelling) and re- energised (from the conversations) which is a wonderful mixture.’

## Conclusion

Academics like other educators have to acknowledge that education is a necessary rather than sufficient condition of social, economic and political change. Nevertheless, education can have an essential part to play – not least in providing both theoretical and practical resources for change. It is in this sense that a commitment to *praxis* must remain at the core of the relationship between popular education and the academy. Engaging the academy in popular education will always be a struggle that has to be fitted in among all the other things academics are expected to do. To exploit academic autonomy in a purposeful way, it is necessary to engage dialectically with the opportunities and constraints of the academy. There are always new spaces to be opened up and new connections to be made. This process is much more creative and congenial in the company of others, which is one of the reasons for the existence of the Popular Education Network.

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## Notes

[1] This article draws on and updates the history of PEN which was first written by Crowther, J., Johnston, R. Martin, I and Merrill, B. (2006) ‘Defending the radical margins of university adult education’ in Antikainen, A., Harinen, P and Alberto Torres, C (eds.) *In from the Margins*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp 53-64.