

## Highlander School's Model of Community Organizing

### Overview of the model

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The Highlander School model was born in the larger social context of racial segregation in America. The founder, Myles Horton, combined education with community organizing to establish the first Highlander School in his native Tennessee in 1932. His concept of education was revolutionary to the traditional American education system. Drawing from the new Danish folk high school model, Horton introduced a student-led classroom content and interaction to his civic education school program. Later the program moved to South Carolina where Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson joined Horton. Students in the classroom directed what was to be taught, based on their own needs and experiences in the world. Open-discussion, chanting and story-telling were vivid methods for the community teachers to engage the students and foster an integrated group. Later with the Citizenship Schools, Horton's educational model played an important role mobilizing Black Americans and advocating for racial integration and equal rights in the Civil Rights Movement. The Highlander School's teacher-organizers educated and mobilized their Black students to be active participants in American politics and social movements.

### How is it unique?

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The features of the Highlander model include:

1. **People development.** Horton regarded people development as the centerpiece of community organizing. Developing the capabilities of people who are not from the elite class to participate in democracy is more important than program development that delivers services to help and assist the poor. Highlander attempted to instill democratic leadership in African-American communities that had a tradition of patriarchal leadership. Horton was skeptical of charismatic leaders. For him, the role of charisma should not override grass-root empowerment.
2. **Student-led classroom.** Students direct the content of the school by initiating the discussion of the problems they deal with in their home and community. Teacher-leaders in the Highlander school tap on these issues and integrate literacy, problem solving, trade skills and leadership development into the curriculum. The formats of classes are diverse, with films, meetings, talks, and out-of-classroom experiences. There were no syllabi, lectures, textbooks and traditional sense of teachers. Mutual learning was the norm. Students were encouraged to share their own stories and challenges; nobody was supposed to dominate the meeting. This collective learning experience empowers students. A democratic teaching environment embodies the spirit of democracy.
3. **Civic education as community mobilization.** Literacy was the main obstacle that prevented African Americans from activating their voting rights. Highlander, therefore, linked literacy with civic responsibility education. The ideology of Highlander was to engage the politically disadvantaged in the democratic system, instead of revolutionizing the institutional arrangement. To Horton, education was the only nonviolent revolution.
4. **Cross-racial relationship building.** Highlander built up an alliance of Black and White laborers in the labor movement of the 1930's. The common learning and sharing experiences across race built trust and solidarity, moving this alliance to question and challenge the reality of racial segregation in the country.

### Theory of Change

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Change is brought by engaging the disadvantaged in the democratic process. Educate the poor and empower them by forming a community that bonds the poor and provides a venue for their sharing of

problems, problem-solving and mutual support. Cultivate the capabilities of the poor to activate their agency in democracy and instill the value of democratic participation.

### **Concept/role of power**

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Power is decentralized in Highlander. People empower themselves. The role of teacher-leaders is to guide people to think critically of status quo themselves, educate themselves and create social change by being an active citizen. The traditional patriarchal leadership style in African American communities is challenged.

### **Noted practitioners using this model**

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- Septima Clark, Anne Braden, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, Ralph Abernathy and John Lewis

### **Prominent case studies**

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- The Civil Rights Movement and the Citizenship Schools
- The labor movement in Tennessee in the 1930s

### **Strengths**

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- Working within the democratic system does not result in the kind of destruction wrought by a revolution
- The education focus raises the civic awareness and sense of responsibility of citizens
- Decentralized leadership style empowers the students
- Student-led curriculum is both engaging and relevant
- People are seen as active agents in promoting change instead of passive recipients of help

### **Limitations**

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- The political system and institutional arrangements are not directly challenged.

### **Relevance to today's issues?**

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The Highlander Research and Education Center (formerly known as the Highlander Folk School) is still active today in issues of democratic participation and economic justice, with a particular focus on youth, immigrants, ethnic minorities, the gay community and low-income individuals. (<http://highlandercenter.org/>)

### **References**

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