

Myles Horton - "Reading to Vote: The Citizenship Schools"

(Taken From "A Long Haul", the Autobiography of Myles Horton)



We had made the decision to do something about racism - we were having workshops with black and white people to figure out some answers - but we didn't know how to tackle the problem. The Highlander staff didn't approach it theoretically or intellectually, they just decided to get the people together and trust that the solution would arise from them.

We were in a stage with no clear-cut program, but we were beginning to have a lot of people coming to Highlander from Asia and Africa who couldn't find any other place in the South where they felt comfortable. This was getting us more and more interested in trying to work with people on an international level, not as a major program, but just another facet of Highlander. At this time *Eleanor Roosevelt* was looking for people to do unofficial support work for the United Nations, and we thought that might be a way to work with people in other countries. In 1955 we decided to have an exploratory workshop to see how interested people would be in using the United Nations volunteer organizations as a possible basis for relating to other countries. It was a shot in the dark.

As it turned out, we did a lot of analysis in that workshop, but it was analysis of the South, not the United Nations. We had economists there, political scientists, people connected with the United Nations, just trying to find out if there was an interest in that subject. The Highlander board had decided we had to deal with the problem of racism. It was on the basis of attempting to do something about racism that we were exploring these other possibilities and trying to find out from people themselves how we could go about it. We had set ourselves a goal, but we didn't have the slightest idea how to achieve it.

Some of the people who came to the UN workshops were from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, a chain running north and south of Charleston down into Georgia - little islands that were populated by the last group of slaves brought over to the United States before slave trading stopped. Many of the people there speak Gullah, a mixture of an African language and English. It's a little difficult to understand at first, but once you listen closely, you can figure it out.

The people who began coming to Highlander from the Sea Islands started talking about their problems. One man, *Esau Jenkins*, was an enterprising businessman from Johns Island who had a restaurant and a motel, and also ran a bus for people from the island who worked as domestics for the rich folks in Charleston. On the trips back and forth across the bridge, he would try to teach them to read well enough to pass the examination that was required for people to vote in South Carolina. But the trip was only thirty minutes long, too short to do much, and he also discovered that although a few people had passed the test, some were only memorizing the Constitution and not learning to read at all. Esau said that he wasn't interested in the United Nations, but he was concerned about getting a teacher to help people learn to read and write, so that they could vote.



Another UN workshop participant, *Septima Clark*, got interested in Esau's program. She was a teacher from Charleston, South Carolina, who had taught on Johns Island and knew the situation there.

Now Highlander doesn't initiate programs; we help former students carry out the programs that they themselves ask us to help them with. I went down to John's Island and was in and out for almost a year trying to figure out how to help Esau. I'd get acquainted by going fishing with the people. I'd spend the night with them, work with them on their farms and play with their children.

We weren't thinking of it primarily as a literacy program, because teaching people to read and write was only one step toward their becoming citizens and social activists. The immediate goal was getting the right to vote. Becoming literate was only a part of a larger process. We tried to fit literacy into a program that would be clear enough to be effective, and one the people could run themselves.

It didn't take long to learn that there was money available for literacy education in South Carolina. In fact, they couldn't spend the money they had. There was federal money and state money, there were literacy teachers on the payroll who hadn't had a student for years, so it wasn't a matter of money or teachers. Obviously we needed to look for something else. Once we put our minds to it it was easy to find out that all the past efforts at trying to teach the Johns Islanders to read and write were demeaning programs carried on by rather dominating, opinionated teachers who made the students feel so inferior that they didn't want to have anything to do with them. We were looking for the opposite approach, one that would be based on respect and make people feel as comfortable as possible in a new and difficult learning situation.

I knew from the early days of Highlander that you couldn't carry on an educational program with the kinds of people we were interested in working with until you could forget many of the things learned in college and start listening to the people themselves. I was trying to apply this "learning from the people" idea to the residents of the Sea Islands. As I got acquainted with them and acquired more understanding, it became quite simple. The only reason problems seem complicated is that you don't understand them well enough to make them simple. We needed to determine what the motivation would be, who could best facilitate learning and what would be the best learning environment.

Certainly the first people you want to avoid are certified teachers, because people with teaching experience would likely impose their schooling methodology on the students and be judgmental. We wanted someone who would care for and respect the learners, and who would not be threatening - which meant that the teacher should be black, like them.

Then we decided that it would be threatening to people to bring them into a formal schoolroom. Some unsuccessful literacy programs brought these people into the schools, where their grandchildren went and made them sit at desks so small that they couldn't get their legs under the tables. The children called the adults "daddy longlegs." We decided to find an old building of some kind where they'd be comfortable and feel at home, and since there was already a cooperative store on the island, we decided to use its back room for the school. We put in a potbellied stove, tables to write on (there were no desks) and some chairs.

Before the first Citizenship School started and the Highlander staff members were working on the idea, I did something that I've found very useful. I pretended that we had already started one of the schools in an informal place, with a nonjudgmental person in charge. The adults were there to learn to read so they could register and vote and perhaps learn other things they might want to know. I could just see these people in my mind's eye in an informal nonschool setting. Then I could see somebody who hadn't been a teacher before struggling along learning with them and working with them and drawing them out. I went through the next night and the next, and then I decided the students couldn't take it every night, so they would go twice a week. In almost the same way, I decided the program had to be condensed into a period short enough that they could see an end to it, say, the three-month period between crops, when they would have some leisure time on their hands. I figured out the length of the program primarily on the basis of the crops, not by intellectualizing about learning.

I made up a movie in my mind of what would happen during those three months, and when I'd see certain things going wrong in my mind's eye I'd re-edit the film or erase the movie and start over again. Then I replayed the film until I finally got most of the bugs out of it. After that I wondered how it would look if I ran the movie backward, and when I tried it I found some things I hadn't caught in running it forward. I'd sit by the hour and imagine all these things until I got it simple enough that I could throw away the excess baggage and all the things I'd done wrong. I did this because I don't think it's right to experiment with people when you can work out a hypothesis in your head.

When I thought I had it all worked out in my mind, Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark and I decided it was time to find a 'teacher.' Septima recommended her niece, Bernice Robinson. She had been to workshops at Highlander and had told us that if she could ever do anything for Highlander to let her know, but when we told her what we had in mind, she said, "Oh no, not that, I'm not a teacher." I told her, "That's exactly why you're going to do this. You know how to listen, and you respect the adults who want to vote."

Bernice was a black beautician. Compared to white beauticians, black beauticians had status in their own community. They had a higher-than-average education and, because they owned their own businesses, didn't depend upon whites for their incomes. We needed to build around black people who could stand up against white opposition, so black beauticians were terribly important.

That's how we started the initial class. Bernice and her fourteen students decided to call it a Citizenship School. The first thing Bernice put up on the wall for them eventually to learn to read was the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Since we were operating from the basis that these were adults with dignity, it was important to challenge them with something worthy of the attention and concern of an adult. Our objective was to help them understand that they could both play a role at home and help change the world.

Bernice began the first class in the back room of the cooperative store by saying, "I am not a teacher, we are here to learn together. You're going to teach me as much as I'm going to teach you." She had no textbooks or teacher's manuals. Her only materials were the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the state constitution and some materials for teaching schoolchildren which she quickly realized were too juvenile for mature adults.

Bernice and the students developed the curriculum day by day. They learned to write letters, order catalogs, and fill out money orders. They made up stories about the vegetables they grew and the tools they used.

"They tell me a story," Mrs. Robinson told us, "a story which I write down, then they learn to read the story. It's their story in their words, and they are interested because it's theirs." She gave priority to their immediate interests so they could experience the usefulness and joy of learning.

At the beginning there was a problem over pencils. Many of the people in the class were in their sixties, and most of them were used to holding a plow or a hoe, or throwing out a fishing net. When they'd first hold a pencil, nine times out of ten they'd break it. The physical adjustment isn't easy. You could hear those pencils snapping all over the room. We decided right there that no teacher should ever show any concern about pencils, because that would be intimidating, but simply hand students another one and say there're plenty more. Because they had so many other obstacles to overcome, we tried to make unimportant things like that as insignificant as possible.

This first Citizenship School, which met twice a week for three months, grew from fourteen to thirty-seven students, and 80 percent of them graduated and got their certificates, that is, they registered to vote. People on the neighboring Edisto Island heard about the Citizenship School students' success in registering to vote and asked if they also could have a school. Although we hadn't thought beyond that first experimental class, we said, "All you have to do is find three people and a teacher. That's all. We'll furnish the pencils." They asked for some help, so Bernice went over and helped them set up their school. What we believed in was starting people on a path of group action. As becoming literate, they learned to organize, they learned to protest, they learned to demand their rights, because they also learned that you couldn't just read and write yourself into freedom. You had to fight for that and you had to do it as part of a group, not as an individual.

All the time Highlander was involved in the Citizenship School program, we insisted that while voter registration was a great goal, voting wouldn't do the job alone. We don't hold with those who say that you mustn't challenge people, that you have to be very cautious and tell them that if they take this first step, they'll win. That's an insulting thing to say to a person. We say, "That's the first step, but it's only the first step. If you're black, white folks aren't going to pay any attention to you even if you can vote. Sure, get in there and vote, but then you've got to demonstrate."

The idea was to stretch people's minds. One way we did that was to bring in visiting black activists from other places in the South to share their experiences with the students. We believed this all had to be done by black people for themselves in order for it to be educationally sound. By the time the Citizenship School students finished their classes, they knew that voting by itself was not enough. Even before the school was over they'd go to Charleston and demonstrate and make demands that public facilities be opened up for them. These were people who only a short time ago had believed they couldn't do anything. They felt confident now; they were being challenged; and most of all, they were forcing whites to treat them with respect.

When I first knew Septima Clark, she was a grade-school teacher with no significant experience in adult education. She had been an active member of the NAACP and was, in fact, fired because she refused to withdraw from this organization. So she wasn't an inactive person, but her experience wasn't the kind that would prepare her to work at a place like Highlander. She was recommended by the fact that she stood up and because she was already interested in the Sea Islands. At that time Highlander needed an approach to professional black people. Our record was with labor black people, not with teachers. Septima seemed to be the kind of person who could make a contribution along those lines. I had confidence that she would learn whatever else was needed.

It was a sign of her growth in understanding that this professional teacher agreed within two years of her arrival at Highlander that we should not use other professional teachers in the Citizenship Schools. Septima moved on to become the director of the integration workshops at Highlander, and then the director of the Citizenship School program, in which she was responsible for organizing and spreading the Citizenship Schools throughout the South.

As the first teacher, more than Septima or I or anybody else had done, Bernice Robinson developed the methods used by the Citizenship Schools. Never having been a teacher, she had to figure out how to accomplish this in her own way, and in doing it she hit on things that people now are doing in many different settings. Paulo Freire talks about it, people in Nicaragua are talking about it. Bernice was talking about those things then. She just got it from common sense, from her own intelligent analysis of the situation, from loving people and caring for them and, above all, from respecting people and dealing with them as they are.

Septima had selected Bernice. She backed Bernice. Then she took the Citizenship School idea and spread it all through the South. She played a major role not only at Highlander, as a workshop director, but later on as a Citizenship School director. Septima is honored as one of the outstanding women of the civil rights movement, along with Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker. To take the benchmark from where she started and where she ended is the exciting part, because it shows her growth and development. Quite often her way of doing things wasn't my way of doing things. She was less interested in asking questions - I'd run a whole workshop and never do anything but ask questions. Septima relied on materials. I was trying to help people learn, and she was trying to teach people. The way I tried to help people learn was to share my interest in learning with them. She was doing the same thing - that was her way of learning - so she shared that with them. In that sense we were doing the same thing. Her approach was much more popular than mine. People want help. They don't want you to ask them a lot of questions.

Soon the Citizenship School program started island-hopping. We never brought anybody into that system from the outside. After it started island-hopping it began to move into other states and within two years it was growing by the hundreds. It was very spontaneous because it was so simple. Then Highlander was asked to help work out a program to orient more teachers. We found that by bringing twenty potential teachers at a time to Highlander for a residential training program and using Citizenship School teachers to train them we could use these new recruits to come back the next time as teachers for the next group. They were not only successful in helping people in their own communities learn to read and write and become citizens and learn to protest and demonstrate, but they got the dignity and satisfaction of training other people. Part of their job was to keep the process going.

We finally said, "Look you don't need to come to Highlander if you're down in Louisiana. Get a place for the class to meet. You can do exactly what we did. You know who the teachers should be. You can do the whole thing yourselves." And so it became a self-perpetuating system. We just mixed in the yeast at the beginning and set the process in motion. With Septima Clark to provide the leadership, the program expanded into Georgia and other parts of the South.

Highlander's chief interest is in starting up programs. Sometimes we start off programs that get people going and our job is to get out of the way before we are run over. The Citizenship School project eventually became too big for us; in fact, it became bigger than all the rest of Highlander put together. When it gets to that stage, other people can take it over and operate it. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom I met when he was a junior at Morehouse College, asked if we would set up an educational program for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and I asked him exactly what he wanted. After we talked about it several times, I said, "We've got a ready-made program that you can have. Take the Citizenship School program, it's too big for us." He backed off at first, but then he very meticulously went over the records and the costs and finally decided this was a program he wanted to recommend to his board. SCLC took that program over and we helped set it up. Septima Clark and Andrew Young (who had come to Highlander earlier in the year to work with the program) joined the SCLC staff.

In February of 1961, when we turned the Citizenship Schools program over to SCLC, I gave the following farewell talk to the prospective teachers who were in training at Highlander, the people who would be working on spreading the program throughout the South:

"People learn faster and with more enjoyment when they are involved in a successful struggle for justice that has reached social movement proportions, one that is getting attention and support outside the movement, and it's socially big enough to go far beyond the individuals involved. It's a much bigger experience than anything you've had before as an individual. It's bigger than your organization, and it's qualitatively different, not just more of the same. I want the struggle for social and economic justice to get big and become so dynamic that the atmosphere in which you're working is so charged that sparks are darting around very fast, and they explode and create other sparks, and it's almost perpetual motion. Learning jumps from person to person with no visible explanation of how it happened.

To get something like this going in the first place you have to have a goal. That goal shouldn't be one that inhibits the people you're working with, but it should be beyond the goal you expect them to strive for. If your goal isn't way out there somewhere and isn't challenging and daring enough, then it is going to get in your way and it will also stand in the way of other people. Since my goal happened to be a goal of having a revolutionary change in this country and all over the world, it's unlikely to get in the way in the near future."

