DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 677 CE 068 801

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TITLE Using Problem-Posing Dialogue in Adult Literacy Education. Teacher to Teacher.
INSTITUTION Kent State Univ., OH. Ohio Literacy Resource Center.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; *Critical Thinking; Curriculum Development; *Dialogs (Language); High School Equivalency Programs; *Literacy Education; *Participative Decision Making; *Problem Solving; Skill Development
IDENTIFIERS *Problem Posing

ABSTRACT

Problem posing is a tool for developing and strengthening critical thinking skills. Freire expanded on the idea of active, participatory education through problem-posing dialogue, a method that transforms the students into critical coinvestigators in dialogue with the teacher. Problem posing begins by listening for students' issues. Teachers select and bring familiar situations back to the students in a codified form. Teachers begin by asking a series of inductive questions, which moves the discussion of the situation from the concrete to the analytical. The five steps of the problem-posing process directs students to do the following: (1) describe the content; (2) define the problem; (3) personalize the problem; (4) discuss the problem; and discuss alternatives to the problem. Two examples of problem posing in action are from actual literacy programs. In the first case, the adult basic education instructor introduced the issue of child care in "codes" for problem solving. In the second case, the instructor practiced problem posing in General Educational Development classes so that students were involved in building the curriculum of their own class. (YLB)

039-0300-0008
March 1995

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Teacher To Teacher

USING PROBLEM-POSING DIALOGUE IN ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

by SARAH NIXON-PONDER

A group of women are gathered around a table, deep in discussion. Spread sheets with schedules, open notebooks with lists, copies of government documents, and a diagram with measurements of a living space are spread before them. The women are discussing several options, looking earnestly at the pros and cons of each, and speaking in detail on specific aspects of one option. While two women are searching for a specific reference in the government documents, another is rapidly taking notes on the discussion at hand. In all aspects, this appears to be a professional business planning meeting, right? Close, but not quite. This is a group of women in an adult literacy class who have arrived at a solution to their childcare situation by using a process called problem-posing dialogue.

Problem-posing is a tool for developing and strengthening critical thinking skills. It is an inductive questioning process that structures dialogue in the classroom. Problem-posing dialogue is rooted in the works of Dewey and Piaget who were strong advocates for active, inquiring, hands-on education that resulted in student-centered curricula (Shor, 1992). Freire (1970) expanded on the idea of active, participatory education through problem-posing dialogue, a method that transforms the students into "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p. 68).

Learners bring to adult education programs a wealth of knowledge from their personal experiences, and the problem-posing method builds on these shared experiences. By introducing specific questions, the teacher encourages the students to make their own conclusions about the values and pressures of society. Freire (1970) refers to this as an "emergence of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality" (p. 68).

So how is this done? What does it look like? What is the final outcome? Let's take a look at these questions as we walk through the process of problem-posing.

HOW TO CONDUCT PROBLEM-POSING DIALOGUE

Problem-posing begins by listening for students' issues. During breaks, instructors should listen to students' conversations with one another and make notes about recurring topics. Based on notes from these investigations, teachers then select and bring the familiar situations back to the students in a codified form: a photograph, a written dialogue, a story, or a drawing. Each situation contains personal and social conflicts that are of deep importance to the students.

Teachers begin by asking a series of inductive questions (listed below) which moves the discussion of the situation from the concrete to the analytical. The problem-posing process directs students to name the problem, understand how it applies to them, determine the causes of the problem, generalize to others, and finally suggest alternatives or solutions to the problem. The "responsibility of the problem-posing teacher is to diversify subject matter and to use students' thought and speech as the base for developing critical understanding of personal experience, unequal conditions in society, and existing knowledge" (Shor, 1992, p. 33).

FIVE STEPS OF PROBLEM-POSING

Auerbach (1992) has simplified the steps of problem-posing. Problem-posing is a means for teaching critical thinking skills, and many adult learners need the initial structure these steps provide in order to build confidence and esteem in their ability to think critically. When beginning to problem-pose, it is important to spend time on each step, for these are all essential components in learning how to critically think about one's world.

1. Describe the content.

The teacher presents the students with a *code*. Codes are a vital aspect of problem-posing. They *must* originate from the students' concerns and experiences, which makes them important to the students and their daily lives. According to Wallerstein (1983), codes can be

- written dialogues, taken from a variety of reading materials, that directly pertain to the problem being posed.
- role-plays adapted from written or oral dialogues.
- stories taken from the participants' lives and experiences.
- text from newspapers, magazines, community leaflets, signs, phone books, welfare or food stamp forms, housing leases, insurance forms, school bulletins, etc.
- pictures, slides, photographs, collages, drawings, photo-stories, or cartoons.

After the students have studied the code, the teacher begins by asking questions, such as: *What do you see in the picture (photograph, drawing, etc)? What is happening in the picture (photograph, drawing, etc)?* or *What is this dialogue (story, article, message) about? What is happening in the dialogue (story, article, message)?*

2. Define the problem.

The students uncover the issue(s) or problem(s) in the code. Teachers may need to repeat the following questions: *What is happening in the picture (photograph, drawing, etc)? What is happening in the dialogue (story, article, message)?* Students may identify more than one problem. If this occurs, the teacher should ask the students to focus on just one problem (especially with beginning problem-posers), using the other problem(s) for a future problem-posing idea. Students may

identify two problems or issues that cannot be separated and must be dealt with together. This, too, is acceptable just as long as it is the students' decision to work with the two problems together.

3. Personalize the problem.
At this point, the teacher becomes the *facilitator* of the discussion, thus guiding the students to talk about *how* this problem makes them feel and *what* the problem makes them think about, so that they can *internalize* the problem. Through discussion, the students will relate the issue(s) or problem(s) to their own lives and cultures. The facilitator should assure that all students are given the chance to share their experiences, understanding as well that some may choose not to share. No one should be made to speak if she/he does not feel comfortable doing so. Learning that others have been in similar situations is very important; this experience will serve as an affirmation to their experiences, lives, and cultures; as an esteem builder; and as a means for bonding with other learners and the facilitator.

4. Discuss the problem.
The facilitator guides the students toward a discussion on the social/economic reasons for the problem by asking them to talk about *why* there is a problem and *how* it has affected them. During this step, it is critical for the facilitator to resist the impulse to expound upon personal and political beliefs. Students' beliefs may differ greatly from those of the facilitator's; therefore, it is absolutely vital that students feel they can openly share their beliefs with others in the group and discuss the problem at hand. This risk-free environment gives students the freedom to grow, thus granting them ownership in the dialogue process.

5. Discuss alternatives to the problem.
The facilitator should coach the students into suggesting possible solutions to the problem and discuss the consequences of the various courses of action. Through discussion, adult students become aware that they have the answers to their problems, especially when they approach their problems and concerns through a cooperative, group effort. Facilitators need to urge the students to search for several alternatives to the problem or issue at hand; the solutions need to be those that can be achieved.

Problem-posing delves deeply into any issue or problem, demonstrating the extent of its social and personal connections. Problem-posing "focuses on power relations in the classroom, in the institution, in the formation of standard canons of knowledge, and in society at large" (Shor, 1992, p. 31). It challenges the relationship between teacher and student and offers students a forum for validating their life experiences, their cultures, and their personal knowledge of how their world works. Problem-posing is dynamic, participatory, and empowering.

Problem-posing is more than a technique that teaches critical thinking; it is a philosophy, a way of thinking about students and their ability to think critically and to reflect analytically on their lives. Eduard Lindeman, one of America's founding fathers of adult education, firmly believed that the responsibility of adult education was to teach learners how to think analytically and critically; this, too, is the role of problem-posing.

PROBLEM-POSING IN ACTION: TWO CASE STUDIES

So what does this look like in an adult literacy education (ABE) program? Let's take a look at two examples from actual literacy programs.

Case 1: An ABE Literacy Class

As an ABE instructor, I was always on the look-out for methods that would promote critical thinking in my classes. The students in the program were bright and resourceful adults, and I felt the need to challenge their abilities and push them to question the surrounding world view. I spent many hours listening to my students talk about their lives, experiences, and cultures. Living in the Southwest and being an Anglo woman (many times the only Anglo) among the Latinas/ Latinos and Native Americans made me very aware of our differing cultures and lifestyles, but more importantly, it made me see the similar problems that all of us encountered and experienced as people and as women. This awareness made me seek out the problem-posing method.

In one class in particular, the subject of childcare was always on the women's minds; they discussed the topic before, during, and after class. I introduced this issue in "codes" for problem-posing. Because the topic was extremely relevant to their everyday lives and came from them, not me (as I informed them), it was emotionally charged and personal. They worked through the first three steps quickly and with ease. They related to the pictures I brought in, the short story and newspaper articles that we read, and the story that I shared about my divorced sister and her two children. They brought in relevant reading materials and shared their own stories on the problem of childcare--some of them funny and happy, most of them full of frustration and sadness. Their discussions on the reasons for this lack of good affordable childcare ranged from money issues, to unreliable (or no) transportation, to physical isolation from others, to cultural beliefs about who is qualified to care for someone else's children.

For weeks we worked on this topic. Writing assignments arose naturally as the women wrote their feelings about the discussions in dialogue journals, sharing these with others, and their oral histories became written testaments of their lives. They researched different laws on childcare facilities and they learned about co-operatives, thus reading materials on varying levels of difficulty. They answered their problem by taking this issue into their own hands--into their own control--and discussed reasonable alternatives to this overwhelming problem. Their solution was to organize a system for childcare on their own by sharing their resources. They planned schedules for taking care of each others' children, and those with reliable transportation arranged for carpools. They planned meals for their children and the care keeper(s) using arithmetic to figure amount of food and cost. They discussed discipline problems, and they organized a system for funding their project. They had a problem, and they found the solution for it.

This is problem-posing in action. It is exciting and educational; it is cross-cultural and multicultural because it draws from all of the students' cultures. Additionally, problem-posing builds confidence and community among learners. When I initiated problem-posing dialogue into my ABE class, I had no idea exactly where it would take us. But I believed that my students were able to work through this process and arrive at tangible solutions to their childcare dilemma. All of the basic skills were used: They read different types of materials on different reading levels; they wrote journal entries, oral histories, and letters; they planned schedules, organized carpools, and figured budgets. They learned that they had the answers to their problems, and they learned the steps to take in order to arrive at solutions.

Case 2: A GED Writing & Social Studies Class

In Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change, Ira Shor (1992) discusses different ways to tie problem-posing into all classes: science, health, computers, writing, literature, media, engineering, architecture, and sociology. He begins each class "in a participatory and critical way by posing the subject matter itself as a problem" (p. 37). He asks his students to investigate their knowledge about the subject matter and to think critically about it in an active and reflective way. So, how is this achieved?

I practiced this form of problem-posing in my GED classes. I began by asking the students to think about a specific issue (e.g., *What is correct writing? Who sets the standards for correct writing?* or *What is history? Why should history be studied?*). Then I would ask them to write their feelings about this issue, keeping in mind the following questions: What do you think about it? How does it make you feel? Why do you feel this way? What are your personal experiences with this? After the students had time to reflect, we began discussing the topic. If no one volunteered to be the first to share with the class, I would start by talking about my experiences. This would get the dialogue flowing, and others soon willingly volunteered to talk about their feelings and experiences.

Next, I asked small groups of students to compare their responses and explore the similarities or differences in each others' experiences. As a class, we talked about the differences or similarities, what we could learn from them, and how their beliefs could be applied to the class. We tried to figure out ways to make the class materials relevant and meaningful to their studies and their lives. We brought outside materials in to the class. We talked about how to make the class theirs-how the curriculum, materials, and instruction could reflect their interests and preferences.

PROBLEM-POSING AS A NEW CONCEPT

This was a new concept for most of my students. Some students had a difficult time with the non-traditional format of the class structure. Most were not used to being asked their opinions or beliefs. They did not believe in themselves; they did not believe that they *were capable* of helping to build the curriculum of a class, of *their* class. And of course, a few grasped this idea whole-heartedly and ran

with it from the beginning. They became leaders, and they accepted the challenge to change their education. They also helped the others to see the benefits of problem-posing dialogue and the importance of learning to think critically.

As the instructor, I had to learn the art of facilitating the discussions and the cooperative groups. I had to learn to let go of power and control and turn it over to my students, thus becoming a facilitator who guides, shares, and coaches. Problem-posing taught me to trust students, to trust in their abilities, to rely on their resourcefulness and experiences, and to make learning meaningful to them.

Problem-posing enables students to bring to the program their experiences, cultures, stories, and life lessons. Their lives are reflected in the thoughtful, determined, and purposeful action that defines problem-posing dialogue. Moreover, problem-posing is a dynamic, participatory, and empowering philosophy that teaches students how to critically think and analytically examine the world in which they live.

During the 1994 Family Literacy Summer Academy, Sarah Nixon-Ponder presented a workshop on "Using Problem-Posing Dialogue in Family Literacy Programs." This article is a follow-up on that presentation. For additional references or information on problem-posing, please contact Sarah at the OLRC. **We would also be interested in hearing from programs that try this method in their classrooms.**

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