

Affecting Solidarity

Buenos Aires Teachers Countering Professional Alienation & Exploitation Through *Mate* & New Media

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Introduction

This article discusses one social movement in Buenos Aires—*Frente Popular Darío Fernández* (FPDF)¹—whose goal was to assist public school teachers in becoming leaders of their communities by providing them an opportunity to learn about social mobilizing and popular education through a series of Freirean-based workshops. Guided by affect theorists influenced by the writings of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (Ahmed, 2010; Braun & Whatmore, 2010; Deleuze, 1998; Featherstone, 2010; Goodwin, James, & Polletta, 2001; Gould, 2009; Seyfert, 2012; Sharp, 2007), I explore what motivated these teachers in Argentina to seek out popular education, a mode of critical learning, as an alternative to the traditional public-school curriculum, and their desire to build solidarity among themselves and their activism-centered projects.

I likewise investigate how the workshop organizers utilized an affect-based approach to pedagogy designed to engineer an environment conducive to building group solidarity among participants through the use of two distinct camaraderie-building practices. The first practice is *mate*, a traditional South American beverage, often shared among participants, with roots in pre-Columbian Indigenous cultures. The second practice is the use of 21st century learning and technology strategies incorporating video production and social media.

To establish a context for viewing

these social movement teaching strategies through an affective lens, the following section addresses the social and historical context in Argentina that gave rise to teachers' participation in popular education projects. I then introduce FPDF and the teachers in this study. Following that, I provide a theoretical understanding of affects in the social collective, showcasing findings that reveal how affects functioned in building solidarity through *mate* and new media.

Neoliberalism and the Rise of Popular Movements

Popular education in Argentina has a history of contestation. The late 1980s marked a turning point in Argentina's history, as the country struggled to heal itself from the aftermath of a military dictatorship and human rights abuses that had devastated its social, economic, and political foundation during previous decades (Lewis, 2002). Neoliberal policy-makers affiliated with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund extended the distressed nation's financial patronage by way of a nation-based model designed to alter the role of the welfare state. Transnational backing resulted in new government policies that privatized public institutions—bringing about economic tumult, deindustrialization, joblessness, and the eradication of federal programs serving poor and working-class communities (Ball, Fischman, & Gvirtz, 2003).

While public funding was besieged by banks and austerity measures, and local Ministry boards uttered consumer-based platitudes of accountability and quality to vindicate salary cuts, condense expendi-

tures, and privatize the education system (Schugurensky, 2003), Argentine educators actively resisted on the streets and in schools. With market logic overshadowing the social realities of students' and teachers' needs, teachers mobilized community members hit hardest by oppressions that would hinder their participation in the public sector.

These grassroots resistance efforts emerged on the streets, in community centers, in factories, and on sidewalks in front of city municipality buildings, where local stakeholders demanded better-quality education for all. Springing from these efforts, Argentina currently hosts hundreds of community K-12 and adult education schools that utilize an activist-based, popular education curriculum (Jaramillo, McLaren, & Lazaro, 2011), reimagining education as an encounter of contestation.

Introducing FPDF and the Teachers in the Study

Research into the ways social activism and education communities intersect is important for expanding pedagogy that promotes civil discourse and participatory democracy in today's political climate. With the intent to collect ethnographic data for a larger study on women teaching in the popular education sector in Argentina, I attended a series of six popular educator-training workshops with the social movement FPDF.²

Founded in 2004, FPDF organized to find disadvantaged community members employment, decent living conditions, and encourage poor and working-class neighborhoods to be free of drug dealers and political pundits. Likewise, FPDF carried

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out educational and recreational projects to meet the needs of young people and adults residing in villas, or shantytowns, by providing them space for learning, self-management, and solidarity.

FPDF decided to sponsor these workshops to enact popular education strategies they saw as absent in traditional teacher training programs. As such, the workshops were organized to provide public school teachers with quality teaching tools to bring to their classrooms and places of learning.

Participants

Affecting solidarity starts with participants. Study participants included facilitators and public-school teachers from the workshops, chosen because of personal interest in contributing to the research I was conducting. My choices of study participants were also based on the experiences they shared in the workshops that were in line with ongoing theories and data codes. I received initial interest to participate from two of the group facilitators, Camila and Ana, as well as workshop attendees Florencia and Rubia.

Camila studied language pedagogy at Normal School Joaquín. She was not teaching at the time of this study because she decided to concentrate on popular education and running the workshops, and because she was having difficulty finding steady employment in a public school.

Ana was studying elementary education at Normal School 4. She was also a popular educator with a project involving recreational activities in schools in the working-class neighborhood of Sarmiento.

Florencia was teaching math at a popular school in the factory-centered neighborhood of General Rodríguez. Rubia was a kindergarten teacher in a traditional public school in the city.

To uncover a fuller assortment of perspectives and trajectories on why teachers came to the popular education workshops, I became judicious in seeking participants who closely matched the criteria of the developing study. Based on comments made in the workshops, personal interactions, and their history with social movements or education, I eventually asked Paula, Barbara, Maria, and Galinda to also participate.

Paula first had studied to be an engineer but switched to teaching. She taught theater workshops at Normal School 7. Barbara was studying law but switched to teaching as well. She was studying to be an art teacher. Maria worked in a poorly-funded public elementary school in General Rodríguez where she taught English. Galinda

was an artist who held art and technology workshops in schools that provided kids with government-issued laptops.

Through small group discussions³ and participating in and observing workshops, data⁴ revealed that for these teachers and teachers-in-training, joining the workshops came to fulfill a desire not only for improving their classroom practices, but also for building the kinds of relationships they felt lacking in their personal and professional lives.

Two feelings were shared by participants who attended the workshops—exploitation and alienation. These depoliticizing affects, which I discuss in the following subsection, stemmed from teachers' isolation from their vocation, other teachers, and other residents in their community.

Public Educator Exploitation and Alienation

In one small group discussion held during the workshop, participants agreed that teachers were being exploited and students were being hounded over ranking and test scores, while policymakers instilled top-down mandates and obstinate curricula that did not fulfill the needs of the community.

Our class sizes are huge. I work in three schools, two middle schools, and a technical school. In each I have a minimum of 40 kids. (Galinda, Small Group Discussion, May 11, 2013)

And to earn a decent salary, we need to teach more hours of classes. This makes teachers have less time for each class we do teach and it diminishes our ability to provide good quality teaching. (Camila, Small Group Discussion, May 11, 2013)

And if we complain, who do we turn to—above us are the directors and administrators and then there are those above the directors who manipulate them. From the time tests and curriculum are designed until they get to the classroom, those in power make it known that it's the teachers who are below them. (Rubia, Small Group Discussion, May 11, 2013)

These top-down, bureaucratic chains of command within the education system alienated those who wanted to transform public education. This was the result of an environment in which teachers were kept at a distance from one another and from their students, and where the school itself became removed from the actual lives of those in the communities who filled the classrooms.

Those working in the public school are very lonely people. (Barbara, Small Group Discussion, May 11, 2013)

And even though education is fertile ground for promoting groupality, we aren't used to thinking this way. Our goal shouldn't be to capture the flag—it should be let's build something together. (Camila, Small Group Discussion, May 11, 2013)

Educators reported that their teaching led to social isolation. They agreed that there was very little time given to integration with the community, and schools often closed themselves off to urban problems at the request of government authorities, once again reinforcing this sense of alienation separating them from the community and the larger world.

Florencia, for example, who grew up in General Rodríguez in the years following the dictatorship, a time when many Argentines were laid off from work, remembered going through secondary school not being taught about the social conditions impacting their community.

Our teachers should have taken us out into the streets and explained the reality to us that this is a factory that's closing because there is a system in place that's making the work run out. We studied the world wars as if they were more important than our own factories closing just two blocks away. I lived three blocks from the Serenisima Milk Factory and we never talked about the hardships the workers faced there, the hardships many of our parents who worked there faced. Unless we break with the standards of traditional education we will continue to ignore these injustices. (Florencia, Small Group Discussion, May 11, 2013)

As the above comments suggest, alienation and exploitation were evident on the city streets as well as inside classrooms and schools. Such conditions were a catalyst in participants' search for public space to connect with one another professionally and politically on issues pertinent to education. Feelings of alienation and exploitation motivated teachers to seek out popular education as an alternative paradigm to the traditional public-school curriculum, and to build solidarity among themselves and the popular education project.

As such, the following section situates these teachers' desires for community in the literature on affect theory, offering insights into the ways in which feeling states in social collectives influence solidarity and social action.

Affects in the Social Collective

Many teachers came to the FPDF workshops because they felt disconnected from their vocation and the education

community. Though educators reiterated that public education is for everyone, that it is a way to form oneself and to think about one's relationship with the world, the more time passed in the workshops, the more the conversations veered off prescribed utopian talk of schooling to instead reveal the alienating barriers that made it impossible to build the pedagogical community they envisioned.

Alienation impacts human and material facets of teachers' lives. Ahmed (2010) writes that sensations experienced by alienation take . . .

. . . place before others, those from whom one is alienated, and can feel like a weight that both holds you down and keeps you apart. You shift, drop your head, sweat, feel edgy and uncertain. Everything presses against you; you feel against the world and the world feels against you. (p. 168-169)

Teachers in this study would agree that such a state conjures few sentiments essential for people to develop themselves professionally, to organize, discuss, and improve upon public education. Rather, the material they desired to bring to life in their classrooms was dominated by the neoliberal agenda. In the workshops, this continuing struggle for public education provided educators with an embodied counterbalance to alienation and exploitation.⁵

Building Solidarity Through the Human and the Material

Theoretically, affects between humans, non-humans, and matter emerge through regular encounter. As bodies convene in affected spaces, the human as well as non-human matter involved in encounters is transformed in individual and collective ways (Gould, 2009). Affect theorists have long turned to the writings of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (2000) to understand the nature of collaboration, which, for him, arose from a desire to reproduce affects of joy, which can then enhance human capacity to act.

Spinoza believed the fundamental desire of all humans was to exist as vigorously and joyfully as possible in the company of natural beauty, enjoyable smells, decoration, and a diversity of food and drink. He saw such ways of being "as instrumental for the education of the body and its mind" (Sharp, 2007, p. 751), believing joy is meaningful, joy keeps on, and joy transports us to act and to feel fulfillment in such action.

As Deleuze (1988) explains, when affected bodies come across one another, sometimes they combine and form a more powerful union (what he refers to as form-

ing *composition*), while at other times one molders the other, wiping out any solidity of its parts (what he refers to as *decomposition*). When we meet a body that is not in composition with ours, we feel our power reduced or blocked, and we correspond with sadness and our ability to act is decreased.

When the opposite occurs, and we feel in composition with another body, our power is heightened and our ability to act is increased. In other words, fulfillment depends upon whether we enter into composition or decomposition with different affected subjects, objects, and spaces we bump into.

Individual and collective bodies are in constant states of mutability in their relation to objects, other bodies, and other bodies upon them (Seyfert, 2012). As such, Spinoza saw affect as constitutive of a type of political practice, believing bodies living among one another possessed greater potential and power to act when in collaboration—the greater we are affected via mind and body, the more power we have to act through actions caused by our internal and external sensitivity to that which surrounds us.

The Matter and Material Objects of Politics

Affect theorists look to the multiplicity of ways we are motivated to question, challenge, and take part in the public realm (Braun & Whatmore, 2010), and believe both human and non-human energies should be considered in our analysis of understanding collectivity and what it is that can help us break with negative sensations of alienation and exploitation.

Imploring us to look not only to what binds individuals to one another through mind and body alone, but to the non-human resources or tools, to the *matter* and *material* objects of politics, Braun and Whatmore (2010) explore the transformative power of objects and things, believing objects are not merely extensions of our bodies, but rather "actively give shape to bodies and their capacities" (p. xviii).

Humans and things came into this world together, and therefore it is impossible to classify them as something apart or separate from the technical aspects of existence, be it language, machinery, or other devices. Non-human and technological objects are inseparable elements to our becoming stories as individuals and social collectives (Braun & Whatmore, 2010).

With that in mind, the following section details how workshop organizers utilized an affect-based approach to pedagogy designed to engineer an environment conducive to building group solidarity among

participants through the material use a traditional South American beverage with roots in pre-Columbian Indigenous cultures combined with 21st century learning and technology strategies.

Engineering Solidarity Through Mate, Video Production, and Social Media

Invoking Feelings of Friendship Through Mate Ritual

We hold close to us the "happy objects" we treasure most (Ahmed, 2010). In Argentina, this involves the joys of sharing *mate*, one of many affective objects present during the workshops. A drink originally of the Guaraní people, *mate* is a traditional South American tea-like beverage widely drunk in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivian, Chile, and parts of Brazil.

The Guaraní have a legend that says the Goddesses of the Moon and the Cloud came to the Earth one day to visit it, but found a jaguar that was going to attack them. An old man saved them and, in return, the goddesses gave him a new kind of plant from which he could prepare a drink of friendship. The preparation and symbolic meaning behind its social intricacies is evident in the manner of its preparation for the familial, welcoming occasions where it is present.

To say *mate* was a popular drink in the workshops would be an understatement. At each workshop the movement organizers arranged a food table of homemade empanadas, veggie pies, and beverages. *Mate* and hot water were provided free of charge via the quintessential Argentine electric water heaters plugged into various wall sockets. From the food table to the *mate* being drunk by the teachers, the nutrition engineered through these affected material objects registered feelings of sustenance, home, and friendship within the body.

A simple explanation would suggest *mate* is prepared by steeping dried leaves of yerba mate in hot water, then serving it with a *bombilla* or metal straw from a shared hollow gourd. But this explanation neglects the precision that goes into a brew, as well as the disciplined choreography involved in its shared service. I will not go into further explanation of the rich care that goes toward protecting the drinker from scalding their tongue or the chemical breakdown of some of its undesirable nutrients. I will, however, discuss how *mate* is traditionally drunk in particular social settings, such as family gatherings or with friends, in order to show how it is affective in producing friendship and camaraderie.

When drinking *mate*, the same gourd and *bombilla* are used by everyone drinking. One person assumes the task of server. Typically, the server fills the gourd and drinks the *mate* completely to ensure its good quality. The server subsequently refills the gourd and passes it to the drinker to his or her right. The ritual proceeds around the circle in this fashion until the *mate* becomes washed out or bland, typically after the gourd has been filled about 10 times.

Drinking *mate*, a drink of friendship, is affective in its ability to conger nostalgic, familiar sentiments among drinkers of all social classes. In Argentina, *mate* can be found in almost every home. As an object with affective properties, it unifies by creating an awareness of the drinkers' surroundings—drinkers are aware of the hot water slightly burning their lips from the metal straw, the warmth of the gourd in the palm of their hands.

Likewise, those in the *mate* circle may be held in awareness of the group, questioning themselves—am I next, who do I pass it to, am I talking and not passing it? *Mate* has communal properties steeped in nostalgia of home (drinking *mate* with your family and conversing is a typical way to spend an evening), patriotism and camaraderie (as mentioned, *mate* is the drink of the southern cone with precolonial ties), as well as the body's need for nourishment, stimulation, nutrition (it is a stimulant and drunk amongst those driving long distances, for example, and may conjure memories of the often-undergone teenage road trip). It is also a diuretic and too much of this drink of friendship makes the drinker aware of their swollen bladder, the body's need to relieve itself.

It stands, then, that sharing *mate* would form a part of popular, public pedagogies. Rituals, songs, folk tales, heroes, denunciation of enemies, and so on are often the tools movements utilize to strengthen commitments, vision, and make clear ideas, ideologies, and initiatives. Through observing the *mate* ritual present in the workshops, it was evident that affects manifest not solely as feelings, but hold the potential to direct the group toward objects and to whatever or whoever surrounds those objects (Ahmed, 2010).

Movement organizers used such joyful rituals to build solidarity, fidelity, and love among members, to encourage them to act and to feel fulfillment in the act of social action (Spinoza, 2000). Participation in a *mate* circle offers an enjoyable experience whereby involvement itself offers pleasures. As Goodwin, James, and Polletta

(2001) believe, affective states in social collectives offer . . .

...the pleasures of being with people one likes, in any number of ways. Other pleasures arise from the joys of collective activities, such as losing oneself in collective motion or song. This can be satisfying even when done with strangers – who no longer feel like strangers. (p. 20)

The teachers found as much. Instead of feeling isolated in their individual classrooms, teachers partaking in the *mate* ritual could join with others, debate and discuss issues—and see themselves and others as cultural workers and public educators, as subjects who could transform social, cultural, and pedagogic spaces.

In the next section I will bring to discussion 21st Century learning and technology strategies, and how workshop organizers similarly engineered joyful experiences, and with that solidarity, through video and social media. These videos, presented to participants each month after a workshop, acquired pleasant qualities, insofar as they were positioned in the direction of happiness.

Nurturing Team Spirit Through Video Production and Social Media

As mentioned in the previous section, workshop participants were able to stimulate positive affects gathered over food, drink, and ritual to commemorate, inaugurate, and celebrate their solidarity, thus inspiring acts of friendship and joy that gave way to further states of solidarity. In addition to drinking *mate* together, group games and team-building exercises captured on video were a way that workshop coordinators mobilized teachers by utilizing affects of fun among other efforts made to engineer a more organized union of educators.

Featherstone's (2010) consideration of new media investigates the potential to experience new intensities through the moving body via cinema, television, or other digital technologies. Such media has the potential to capture and manipulate images so that we are able to view affects as they register through gestures and movements that may normally go undetected in face-to-face interactions. Workshop facilitators similarly utilized video media in interesting ways.

During each workshop facilitators would walk around with cameras in order to record participation in various activities that included drawing, dialoguing, acting, singing, and performance. During the days after each workshop the group facilitators would

compile footage into five-minute videos utilizing edits, cuts, framing, and energetic and culturally relevant cumbia music, and then post these to FPDF's Facebook page.

Based on the comments each video received, participants were energized by the compiled progress made in each workshop and, as Featherstone (2010) says, were motivated by the affective responses registered on the bodies participating in each activity.

Great first meeting! Can't wait for the second! (Maria, Facebook Comment, May 15, 2013)

I'm so proud of my group, genius! (Paula, Facebook Comment, July 8, 2013)

What a team! (Galinda, Facebook Comment, July 8, 2013)

Tremendous team! (Florencia, Facebook Comment, July 10, 2013)

Looking forward to continuing our workshops with a critical eye and to continue dreaming again. Big hugs. (Camila, Facebook Comment, August 20, 2013)

What beautiful moments! See you all in the struggle! (Ana, Facebook Comment, September 14, 2013)

As apparent, new media technologies are beneficial in revealing elements of affect that viewers are on the whole not accustomed to seeing, and thus have the potential to alter our understanding of the range of affective structures that operate in everyday life. The Facebook page itself was a way to maintain communication through the lag time between monthly workshops, whereby members could talk with one another, comment on photos, and learn of activities hosted by the movement.

Their comments on the videos revealed the ways in which viewing the work they had done in previous workshops, with the altered help of upbeat music and clips cut between idle time, enhanced the communal moments of each meeting, fostered team-like dynamics, and encouraged participants to return to the next gathering.

Engineering affects of happiness, joy, and fun through videos made it possible for workshop coordinators and participants to sustain links among thoughts, ideas, and objects, as well as bring about positive group feeling. This work coincides with Ahmed's (2010) work on happiness, which supports the idea that objects also affect us and cause us to make evaluations of things, and those evaluations respond based on how our body interacts or not with those things.

In viewing some of the participants' responses quoted above, the idea that they were not merely participants, or public

school teachers, but becoming part of the same team, was one of the ways in which educators' vision for building a coalition of educators was realized.

Teachers have always been part of a network that disseminates information by word of mouth, little by little, from one student or class to another. Workshop coordinators used video to do a similar job—to diffuse information with the purpose of building a more unified group of educators. Whether connecting students, teachers, or citizens, digital video and social media technologies were able to more easily circulate content and coordinate action, and thereby made building political and social movements possible. These technologies opened opportunities for teachers to communicate across borders of space and time, allowing them to blur the boundaries of their personal lives, civil society, activism, and the fight for public education.

Incorporating *mate*, as well as video production and social media, formed a compact network of teachers who shared the same ideas, objectives, and moral values. With that, they became part of a larger network of educator activists ready to demand that the government grant them the fundamentals of public education like fair salaries, improved facilities, and basic materials like books and chalk. At the same time, they were actively transforming the alienating and exploitive state of education throughout Buenos Aires.

The Relevance of Constructing Solidarity Through *Mate* and New Media

This article offers insights into how teachers may gain community support for the social, political, and cultural issues affecting the continuity of their work in public schools. Through the use of the body in communion with other bodies over brews of *mate*, and the use of video and social media portraying happiness, joy, and fun, workshop practices made it possible for teachers to manifest politics of good feeling and belonging, all the while constructing solidarity and commitment to their educational projects.

Affective pedagogy is neither based on the superior knowledge of an educator telling others how to act and how to be, nor does it put education methods under a regime of learning. Instead, affective pedagogy enacts a concern for human togetherness. As evident, rallying affects over *mate* and video technology fosters politicized social relations vital to a democratic education.

Social movement-based popular education projects, such as the one highlighted here, utilize various objects, ideologies, and activities to mobilize teachers in order to give them a common space in the public realm to combat neoliberal reform efforts. Studying the motives and affective practices of teachers participating in the popular education sector is relevant to understanding how heterogeneous groups of actors can take root within education communities and magnify their potential.

Notes

¹ For anonymity, pseudonyms have replaced the proper names of the social movement and all participants in this study.

² Teacher workshops ran from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in May, June, July, August, September, and October of 2013, with approximately 100 public educators in attendance. For more on this study, please see O'Donnell (2014), O'Donnell & Sadler (2017), and O'Donnell (Online First).

³ Workshop facilitators frequently had teachers break into small groups to do activities and discuss the thematic topic of the day. Topics under discussion included: The Theory and Practice of Popular Education; Popular Education in Public Schools; Public Schools and the Community; Popular Education and Group Dynamics; Popular Organizing; Popular Education and Social Movements. As such, questions that came up during the discussions were organic rather than pre-determined.

⁴ Data were analyzed using Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995) procedures for ethnographic inquiry. This involved open-coding for things like (1) Information that connected education movements to Argentina's neoliberal history; (2) Educators' backgrounds; (3) Educators' views of public education; and (4) Affect triggers (happy, sad, angry, as well as affects registered in the body such as instances of laughter, tears, rage). These broad categories were subcoded as deeper analyses ensued. Subcodes included keywords like (1) Alienation; (2) Exploitation; (3) Community; (4) Joy.

⁵ Workshop coordinators, many who were public school educators, knew of these feelings of alienation and exploitation shared amongst their teaching peers. As such, through coordinated activities, projects, and dialogues, effort was made to counter these negative sensations to instead invoke camaraderie through affective, human, and material-based strategies that invoked happiness, nostalgia, and home amongst teachers in the collective space.

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