Tracing the Trail of Tomasita the Tomato

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Popular Education around Globalization

DEBORAH BARNDT

How does a tomato get from a Mexican plantation to a hamburger in a Toronto fast food restaurant?

ITH THE CANADA-US "free trade" deal of the late 1980s and its more recent extension in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), community educators have been challenged to help people make sense of the phenomenon of "globalization". How do we understand the impact of global economic restructuring on our daily lives? This article explores the theory and practice of popular education responses to such questions.

During the first round of free trade talks, I worked with other social activists through The Moment Project in Toronto to demystify what then Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney claimed was "merely a commercial document." Our goal was to show how it would dramatically change not only the economic landscape, but also Canada's political dependency, cultural sovereignty, and social and education programmes. We confronted people's sense of powerlessness in the face of a public debate obscured by economic jargon and major decisions being made far from our daily lives.

Now, under NAFTA, Canadian, Mexican and American activists are developing lively strategies for teaching and learning about globalization. In the process, we are countering a fragmentation in our thinking that underlies Western culture and disciplinebound approaches to education. The challenge is to show the interrelationships of global and local processes, of the North and the South, of production and consumption, and of shifting economic and political structures and the conditions and practices of our daily lives. The goal is to educate in a way that empowers and mobilizes people into action, rather than resigning them to passivity. Unfortunately, increasingly market-driven policies in Ottawa have recently resulted in the cutting of all Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funding for over 20 community-based global education centres.

One tool to explain the impact of NAFTA is a story

entitled "A Whirlwind Tour of Economic Integration with Your Guide Tomasita the Tomato." I have adapted it in the sidebar (page 25) from its original version in a kit on "Economic Integration in the Americas" produced by the Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice. This seemingly simple tale illustrates the complexity of globalization in a way that connects people and processes across borders.

The weaving of the "story of globalization" around the "tale" of a personified tomato is a device which promotes a more integrated understanding of interrelated social and economic forces, using something everyone can relate to: food. In this case the tomato (though it could apply to other products) serves as an axis for interdisciplinary investigation and more holistic understanding.

POPULAR EDUCATION VS. OPPRESSION

Before discussing how I have used this story as a learning tool, I want to briefly outline the popular education theory underlying this approach. Popular education has its roots in Latin American social movements against economic exploitation, political domination and cultural dependency. It is a process in which people "collectively develop the critical awareness of their social situation and strengthen their ability to organize to change it. It integrates research, learning and action."

The movement of popular educators is perhaps strongest in countries of the so-called Third World, where it has been part of resistance to both national dictatorships and foreign interventions. Its best known proponent is Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who in the 1960s developed his notions of "pedagogy of the oppressed." This involves a process of "conscientization", a dialectic of action and reflection that is both social and individual.

Popular education in North America fits within a growing school of "transformative" approaches to

education, variously called "anti-oppression education," "liberatory or emancipatory education" and "education for social change." It shares some common ground with critical pedagogy, but locates its practice more in communities struggling for social justice than in university classrooms.

A common theme among "streams" of anti-oppression education is the unveiling of power relations that are structured into all social institutions, and manifested in classism, sexism, racism, etc. "Labour education" asks questions around class.7 "Feminist pedagogy" addresses the gendered nature of unjust structures and practices.8 "Anti-racism education" challenges both institutional racism and internalized racist attitudes.9 The NGO-initiated "development education"10 (and the related "global education" developed in public schools) has historically made links between the systemic causes of injustice in the North and the South, promoting local initiatives related to global processes. 11 And finally, "environmental education" has emerged within both schools and social movements in response to the domination of nature by human societies, the deepening alienation between human and non-human nature, and the environmental crisis that demands both critical analysis and commitment to action.12

While each stream of education has its own focus, many educators recognize that such fragmented approaches can limit both our understanding of how power functions and the possibilities for effecting change. A new "coalition politics" has been nurtured by the free trade battles, resulting in local, regional and national multisectoral coalitions for social justice, such as in the Action Canada Network. The result has been more integrative analyses and educational practices. For example, environmental educators have drawn on popular education and development/global education, resulting in a "transformative environmental education" which addresses both equity and sustainability. ¹³

Popular education offers a framework that can address all forms of oppression and has developed methods for critiquing existing structures and for empowering people to create alternatives. I propose that central to the evolving theory and practice of popular education are at least five creative tensions which are also reflected in the tale of Tomasita.

Personal/social-political. Popular education starts with the experiences of the learners, and, in problematizing their everyday lives, shows how they reflect the social and political structures of society. It critiques the individualist focus of much liberal education that "blames the victim," while also pushing structuralists to acknowledge the personal. So, the tale of Tomasita starts with the stories of women's daily lives and shows how their personal work experiences (both productive and reproductive) reflect the broader process of economic restructuring.

Critical/creative. Popular education encourages the development of critical consciousness, an analysis of unequal power relations, and the nurturing of creative ways of naming and changing the inequalities. This involves deconstruction and reconstruction of the

ways we live and educate. The creative tale of Tomasita's journey is built around a critical story line which questions the underlying system that threatens the health of both women and the environment.

Nature/culture. Environmental education offers this tension to popular education, which has been charged (often justifiably) as being anthropocentric. A popular environmental education challenges the power relations underlying the dominant system of development and seeks to reframe and reestablish the nature-

Tomasita the Tomato

The story of Tomasita begins in Mexico on land acquired by US-based agribusinesses when structural adjustment reforms facilitated the take-over of indigenous land by multinational corporations. Indigenous women who once worked the land communally for subsistence are now salaried workers in cash crop production for an agro-export economy.²

In globalized food production, the production process jumps back and forth across the borders. This story perhaps more accurately begins in Davis, California, where the transnational corporation Calgene has developed a hybrid seed from a Mexican strain of tomato. Biogenetic intervention has brought us the more packable square tomato, one that will travel over time and space, and ripen after arrival at markets. 5

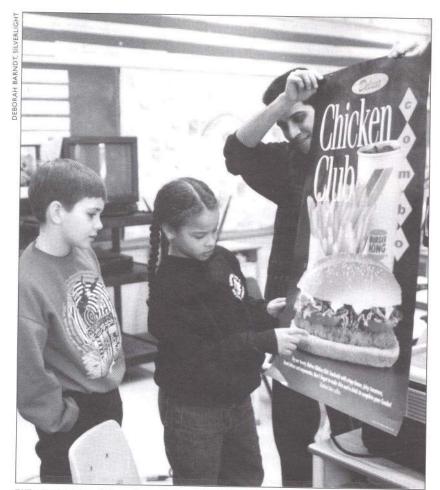
Then the story moves to St. Louis, Missouri, where the Monsanto Corporation produces the pesticides used to fumigate the Mexican plantations. And finally, the hazardous waste from the pesticide production is dumped in the world's largest landfill in Emelle, Alabama, an African American community facing environmental racism. Not coincidentally, women workers in these same regions of the United States have lost their jobs due to plants closing and moving to Mexico. At the same time there has been a burgeoning influx of Mexican migrant workers who have come north to work as seasonal labourers harvesting tomatoes.

Back in Mexico, farm workers are paid \$2.40 a day to work the fields. With no gloves or masks, and no access to health care, they have little protection from the pesticides. When the tomatoes are harvested, they're packaged in plastic and cardboard, and transported to northern markets. It is unlikely that women who have produced these tomatoes will consume them, for they are produced to sustain an agro-export economy, critical for generating foreign exchange to pay off debts. Most tomatoes leave the country before they ripen in northern markets, or are pureed and canned in the maquilas, or free trade zones, by a primarily female labour force, with consistently low wages and poor working conditions.⁶

Whether shipped in cans or packed in refrigerated trucks, Mexican tomatoes make their way to the markets of Toronto, where they are sold through wholesalers to supermarkets and restaurants. Tomasita may end up in a fast food burger, squashed between a hamburger produced with Central American beef and lettuce imported from California. Women, especially young women, make up the greatest portion of the workforce in fast food restaurants. And as mothers and consumers, women also find themselves buying fast food (and thus imported tomatoes) for themselves and their children, in response to a variety of pressures including time, cost and advertising.

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What do you like about the ad? What does it say about food? Who's making the message? What do they get from it? These school kids are decoding fast food ads.

culture connection in the way we think and act with each other and the planet. The globalized production of Tomasita involves biogenetic intervention in the tomato seed and environmental degradation by pesticide sprays, hazardous landfills, overpackaging and the use of fossil fuels. The story causes us to rethink our relation to the land and the fruit it produces.

Local/global. Popular education also seeks to understand the broader structures (economic, political and cultural) that shape what is historically possible in our communities. While education and action are grounded in local realities, they both take into account and respond to the macro processes of globalization. The popular slogan "Think globally, act locally" reflects this tension. In the case of Tomasita, the story connects the food we consume to a production process that has become increasingly distanced and decentralized.

Reflection/action. Central to popular education is the dialectic between analysis and action. Freire calls this theory-practice dynamic "praxis". Neither is sufficient alone. Without careful analysis, there can be no strategic action, and unless it leads to more effective action, social analysis is of limited value. Popular education values people's everyday practice as a source of knowledge, when it is reflected upon critically. In the telling of the Tomasita story, there is reflection on

people's practice, but little sense of alternatives. We are left more critical perhaps, but not necessarily mobilized to do something.

By integrating issues of land and labour, health and environment, gender, race and class through the production of food, the story of Tomasita inspires educators who struggle to counter the fragmentation in our discipline-bound thinking. However, it remains for us to make the connections between Tomasita's journey and our own experience, and to consider the alternatives to this globalized production. For popular education to touch not only the minds but also the hearts (and stomachs) of the learners, it must create spaces for reflection on their own stories and for exploration of actions communities can take in response to the massive forces of globalization.

I have used this story as a catalyst in two different educational contexts, one with adults in non-formal community-based education and the other with kids in a neighbourhood elementary school.

ADULT EDUCATORS ON TOMASITA'S TRAIL

The founding assembly of the North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education held in Alberta in 1994 was the ideal gathering for exchanging and developing strategies that cross borders. I offered Tomasita's tale as a catalyst for telling our own stories. Participants chose one stop in the tomato's journey that they could connect with and shared stories of those connections in small groups. Two stories in particular deepened our understanding of globalization.

In the group connecting to indigenous women workers on large Mexican plantations, Canadians talked about the loss or transformation of their own families' farms as agribusinesses increasingly came to control food production. This history illustrated how the new economic order has affected people in the North and the South in similar ways. In current analyses of globalization these stories are often buried or forgotten. Another profound connection was made by a Salvadoran refugee woman living in Canada. She identified with Tomasita's experience, having been forced to leave her homeland for an alien climate and culture where she often felt treated more like a commodity than a person.

Based on their personal stories, workshop participants then produced murals and plays to make the connections clear. One group recreated Tomasita's story in a popular theatre performance entitled "True Confessions of Tomasita, the Abused Tomato." Dressed in a stuffed red sweatshirt, Tomasita told her story, comparing her past, when the campesinos took special care of her and "each tomato had its own personality," to her present, where she is injected with chemicals and sprayed with pesticides, so that now "we're all the same." There are echoes of the refugee's tale here: "With the development of the large plantations, we've lost our sense of community...." And when she arrives on the Toronto supermarket shelf, she says: "Now they don't even speak my language."

The final piece of theatre raised in a playful way questions of the real costs of the globalized produc-

tion of food. When the Toronto shopper takes Tomasita, her chosen tomato, to the supermarket cashier, she finds herself in the "Total Cost Accounting" lane. Item by item, the hidden costs of producing this tomato are calculated: appropriation of indigenous lands, degradation of the environment by pesticides and fossil fuels, damage to the health and dignity of the farm workers, etc. At \$4,673,000 Tomasita is expensive indeed! The frustrated shopper bemoans: "I can't afford this tomato; I can't handle the responsibility.... [But] I really want a tomato in my salad!" She turns to the audience and asks them: "Do you know what to do?" And they reply: "Buy locally! Grow your own!"

This recreation of the story illustrates well the tensions that popular education embraces. It links the personal stories of both local northern consumers and faraway southern producers to the broader process of globalized food production. It incorporates an historical perspective on farming practices that were previously more respectful of the natural world, and clearly names the environmental costs of current agribusiness practices which attempt to control and often disregard nature. Both critical and creative elements of popular education are woven together in the imaginative retelling of the story. Finally, while the play itself emphasizes an analysis of the dominant system of food production, it hints at alternatives by asking its audience to suggest possible local actions. The ultimate use of any popular education tool, in fact, is to be decoded by each new group, recreated, and applied to the specific situation of the people using it.

SCHOOL KIDS FOLLOW TOMASITA TO BURGER KING

It is a different challenge to educate children within the public school system around issues such as globalized food production. Yet kids are key targets of fast food producers and the advertisers they hire to lure them into restaurants with the offer of toys and movies. For this reason, we chose fast food as a catalyst in a pilot project with my son's grade 3-4 class in downtown Toronto. ¹⁴ This six-week "participatory research" process started with the children decoding fast food ads and ended with their doing field research at a local Burger King restaurant. Within the project there were also lessons on nutrition, environmental issues and picture taking. From the many activities, I'd like to highlight four.

Decoding ads. The questions we asked the kids were: What do you like about the ad? What does it say about food? Who's making the message? What do they get from it? In decoding fast food ads (one offering a Halloween pail as a treat, another a discount on a Flintstones video), the children were wise to the corporate ploy: "They try to attract you to buy food by offering a free prize and a cheap price." The kids' interest in the restaurant thus shifted from month to month, depending on the treats (but little to do with the food!). In terms of globalization, this exploration revealed the intimate links between food chains, toy companies and film distributors. Such collaboration among multinationals, deepened by free trade, pro-

motes worldwide homogeneity in diets, games, entertainment and cultural icons. Fast food production threatens both biodiversity and cultural diversity. In a recent visit to Mexico, I found Power Rangers and Pocahantas were the current rage at fast food outlets, both unconnected to Mexican children's cultural histories.

Mapping the food's journey. Children chose one ingredient of a Whopper and drew a map tracing its journey from its origins to a local restaurant. Most maps revealed the persistence of the myth of Farmer Brown bringing fresh produce to town. The kids had little idea of how distant the production process had become. Though they included many stops in the journey from farm to table, most were in fact at other fast food joints for a snack on the road!

Tomasita theatre. Dramatizing their own variation on Tomasita's story, two girls asked each other where tomatoes come from, while others re-enacted their different answers. One recounted a long trip, the globalized version. The second girl proposed a shorter journey: from her own backyard. She proudly described how she and her mother prepared the seeds, planted the tomatoes, and ate their own produce, thereby promoting local growing. The children's adaptation of Tomasita's tale thus engaged directly the tension in popular education between critical analysis and creative action.

Field research at Burger King. The school project culminated with a visit to the local Burger King. Based on the month's study, kids developed questions in four different teams: the "Adbusters" photographed and analyzed the ads; the "Menu Detectives" investigated the food's nutritional value; the "Whopper

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RÉSUMÉ

DE QUELLE MANIÈRE une tomate qui a poussé sur une ferme mexicaine se retrouve-t-elle dans un hamburger offert à un comptoir de restauration rapide à Toronto? Quels sont les impacts dans notre vie quotidienne de ce type de parcours ainsi que ceux de la restructuration de l'économie mondiale? L'éducation populaire (l'une des approches «transformatrices» de l'éducation dont l'importance est grandissante) propose des stratégies qui établissent des liens entre privé et politique, critique et créativité, nature et culture, local et global, réflexion et action.

Cette article donne en exemple quelques stratégies d'éducation populaire en utilisant pour point de départ l'histoire de Tomasito la tomate, qui débute dans une entreprise agro-alimentaire mexicaine (avec l'aide d'entreprises américaines qui font des manipulations bio-génétique et utilisent des pesticides) pour se retrouver dans un hamburger de "fast-food" canadien. L'histoire de Tomasita est racontée dans deux contextes différents et sous deux formes. Une pièce de théâtre jouée par des éducateurs adultes provenant des trois pays de l'ALÉNA, et un roman-photos fait à partir d'une recherche effectuée par les enfants d'une école élémentaire sur leur Burger King local.

En terminant, l'auteur suggère que l'«intégration des Amériques», qui a des effets négatifs sur notre santé et notre environnement, pourrait permettre, ironiquement, d'offrir aux éducateurs et aux militants de chaque côté des frontières l'occasion d'échanger du matériel et des idées, ce qui créerait ainsi

une globalisation des mouvements sociaux.

Production Line" interviewed and photographed a worker putting together a Whopper; and the "Behind the Scenes" group interviewed the manager about where the food comes from and where the waste goes to. Stuffed with snacks and armed with free gifts, they returned to their classroom to produce four photostories summarizing their research.

This small pilot project reflects the tremendous challenge of educating our children about globalization. There are few resources available that help children understand, for example, the factory farm production of most of the food they eat, or the chemical interventions in the processed food they crave. 15 Parents, too, are caught as both consumers and potential producers with the tremendous pressures of a frantic lifestyle that often makes changing these patterns difficult. The actual connections between reflection and action are not always easy to gauge, and perhaps less so among school kids. In postproject video interviews, the kids indicated that they now enter a supermarket or restaurant with new eyes. Though deeper structural impediments to change must be tackled by organizations outside of schools, there is surely a place for formal education in this process.

POPULAR EDUCATORS CAN CROSS BORDERS TOO

I have adapted this story as a thread around which to shape a cross-border research project with popular educators in Mexico, the United States and Canada. Our collaboration has two prongs: to gather life stories of women who are directly affected by the globalized production of food, and to exchange and co-produce materials to educate our communities about globalization. Tomasita's story, then, is just one example of a popular education tool, but it is also a departure point for creating others. The ongoing exchange or "free trade" of educational strategies is



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perhaps one of the benefits of the new "integration of the Americas." North American educators can learn a lot from each other and from the creative practice of Latin American popular educators.

The Resource Center for the Americas in Minnesota recently produced a video/workshop kit called *The New Global Economy: The View from the Bottom Up.* Divided into three segments, the video introduces the three kingpins of globalization: multinational corporations, structural adjustment programmes, and free trade. After each segment, workshop participants simulate discussions and actions they might take in response to these developments.

Another educational strategy links people in the three NAFTA countries through actual exchanges. The Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee has taken Appalachian women workers laid off by plants moving south to the maquilas zones to meet the Mexican women workers who have been hired to do the same work at much lower wages. This linkage strategy asserts that when people experience the conditions of each others' lives, they understand more deeply the

same global processes that impact on them wherever they live, and they are more likely to act in solidarity.

In Canada there are many projects that critique globalized food production and develop local alternatives. Toronto's FoodShare, a group developing alternatives for low-income communities, has recently launched a 12-month training programme for 25 women. Formerly social assistance recipients, they will be trained, using integrative popular education principles, in food production and service skills. Other examples include community shared agricultural projects and the movement for more community gardens, which is perhaps the strongest in Montreal.

In Mexico, NAFTA has accelerated the process of coalition building and materials production in response to the economic crisis. Servicios Informativos Procesados (SIPRO)¹⁶ and the Mexican Network around Free Trade (RMALC) have produced a highly graphic booklet, *Asymmetries*, illustrating the unequal partnership between the three NAFTA "partners." The Mexican Institute for Community Development (IMDEC) recently released a video, *Los Platos Rotos* (Broken Dishes), on the current economic crisis. IMDEC, which trains Mexican activists in popular education communications, is producing a wealth of print, radio and video materials on the impact of globalization on marginalized communities.

These are just a few examples of responses to the forces of globalization and free trade that have made borders increasingly meaningless. While we may question the impact of these forces on our own health and environment, we might also join Tomasita on this journey to learn from those most affected by global economic restructuring. Through this rich inter-

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