

ARTICLE

“The Answers Come from The People”: The Highlander Folk School and the Pedagogies of the Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

Scholars have demonstrated that a range of institutions, organizations, and “social movement schools” aimed to advance the civil rights movement through education. What remains unclear is how those institutions balanced conversation, direct instruction, role-play, and other pedagogical methods. This article focuses on the Highlander Folk School, a radical, racially integrated institution located in the hills of Tennessee. Drawing upon audio tapes of civil rights workshops at Highlander, I argue that the folk school’s workshops blended a variety of pedagogical styles in a way that previous scholarship has failed to acknowledge, and that close attention to Highlander’s varied pedagogies can help us rethink the relationship between education and the civil rights movement.

Keywords: Highlander Folk School; civil rights movement; progressivism; constructivism; citizenship schools; social movement schools

By the time she was arrested on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks had spent more than a decade fighting racism and injustice. Despite her years of activism, she had no way of knowing that her solitary act would inspire some fifty thousand African American residents of Montgomery to boycott the buses, a protest that would become one of the defining episodes of the civil rights movement. Only four months earlier, Parks had predicted that Montgomery was not ready for a major protest. Given the hostility of the White community and the divisions within the African American community, she saw little hope for a direct challenge to Jim Crow. She offered this bleak assessment at the conclusion of a two-week workshop at the Highlander Folk School, a small, racially integrated institution perched in the hills of Tennessee. At the end of the workshop, each participant shared what they planned to do upon returning home. When it was her turn to speak, Parks expressed skepticism regarding the potential for progress in her city, the former capital of the Confederacy. In hindsight, what matters are not her doubts but her decision to act despite those doubts. She did not know that her

protest would matter, but what she did know gave her the courage to keep her seat on that bus.¹

Her story suggests an expansive understanding of the relationship between knowledge, education, and social change. Many histories of the civil rights movement discuss how activists practiced sit-ins by engaging in role-play or prepared for mob violence by learning how to curl into the fetal position to protect vital organs. Mastering the use of nonviolent civil disobedience entailed learning how to protect one's body from violence and how to avoid striking back.² As Parks demonstrated, learning how to resist oppression also involved finding the courage to take great risks without knowing the result. Parks exhibited that courage throughout her life, but years of setbacks and unchecked violence had left her skeptical of dramatic change—and of interracial cooperation—by the time she arrived at Highlander in the summer of 1955. Her time at the school helped her believe again in the potential of her own actions, a belief that was central to how Highlander approached education and social change.³

Highlander was founded in 1932. Its driving force, Myles Horton, was born in Tennessee in 1905. He studied with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary, learned from Jane Addams and the sociologist Robert Park in Chicago, and visited folk schools in Denmark before returning to his native state to help found Highlander. The school offered workshops for people from Appalachia and for labor unions before focusing in the early 1950s on the problem of segregation. Over the next few decades, Highlander hosted hundreds of civil rights activists, including Ella Baker, John Lewis, and Martin Luther King. Rosa Parks visited multiple times. Ties between the movement and Highlander were strengthened by Septima Clark, a veteran teacher who became the school's director of workshops after being fired by the state of South Carolina because of her support for the NAACP. Clark worked with Horton to make Highlander what sociologist Aldon Morris called a movement "halfway house," an organization without a mass base that generated "a battery of social change resources such as skilled activists, tactical knowledge, media contacts, workshops, knowledge of past movements, and a vision of a future society."⁴ Like Morris, several historians have described Highlander as one of the nerve centers of the movement, a place where activists grappled with ideas, strategies,

¹Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 35–43; Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 95–97; Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, *My Story* (New York: Dial Books, 1992), 124; and Septima Clark, *Ready from Within* (Navarro, CA: Wild Trees Press, 1986), 33–34.

²Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 16, 25, 68; and Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 68–69.

³Kim Ruehl, *A Singing Army: Zilphia Horton and the Highlander Folk School* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021); Stephen A. Schneider, *You Can't Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932–1961* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014); John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); and Frank Adams with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, NC: Blair, 1975).

⁴Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 139–40.

and tactics and, in the words of historian Wesley Hogan, “built the fortitude and interpersonal trust to sustain an ongoing challenge to segregation.”⁵

Scholars have linked Highlander’s impact to the school’s “progressive,” “constructivist,” “Deweyan” approach to education.⁶ Many Highlander workshops started with the problems and ideas students brought with them. One observer, writing in the *Journal of World Education* in 1971, praised Highlander’s staff for never having “told the people what to do.”⁷ According to another early commentary, “At a Highlander workshop, the poor talk; the consultants and staff talk when asked to by the poor.”⁸ Perhaps the most succinct statement of Highlander’s philosophy of education came from Myles Horton himself. “You don’t have to know the answers,” he declared. “The answers come from the people.”⁹

The rich archival sources that document Highlander’s history—including over a hundred hours of audio recordings of civil rights workshops—offer a unique perspective on the diversity, creativity, and impact of the pedagogies of resistance used in the struggle against American racism. These sources complicate the standard narrative of Highlander’s progressive approach to education, a narrative that was advanced by its leaders and has been accepted by most scholars. Although Horton and Clark encouraged workshop participants to trust themselves, they both believed that experts were necessary to help guide students toward effective forms of social change. Most Highlander workshops included “resource people” who could be called upon to provide expert advice, and Highlander staff often intervened in conversations. While Horton is often quoted as saying that “the answers come from the people,” his full sentence is less often reproduced: “You don’t have to know the answers. The answers come from the people, and when they don’t have any answers, then you have another

⁵Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 9, 57; Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁶“Like constructivism,” Daniel Perlstein has written, “progressivism has encompassed a broad range of theories and activities. Any use of either term or comparison of the two is therefore inevitably problematic.” The same point is true of the term “Deweyan,” although it should be noted that Myles Horton was directly inspired by John Dewey. See Daniel Perlstein, “Minds Stayed on Freedom: Politics and Pedagogy in the African-American Freedom Struggle,” *American Educational Research Journal* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 249–77. Also see K. M. Gemmill, “Living a Philosophical Contradiction?: Progressive Education in the Archdiocese of Vancouver’s Catholic Schools, 1936–1960,” *History of Education Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (August 2019), 351–78; Kathleen Weiler, “What Can We Learn from Progressive Education?,” *Radical Teacher*, no. 69 (May 2004), 4–9; Jeffrey Mirel, “Old Educational Ideas, New American Schools: Progressivism and the Rhetoric of Educational Revolution,” *Paedagogica Historica* 39, no. 4 (August 2003), 477–97; William J. Reese, “The Origins of Progressive Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 1–24; Arthur Zilversmit, *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).

⁷“Highlander: A People’s School Where the Teachers Learn from the Students,” *Journal of World Education* 2, no. 4 (December 1971), 4–5.

⁸Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 13.

⁹Myles Horton with Judith Kohl and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 23.

role, and you find resources.” The challenge was how to “find resources” in a way that did not undermine the initiative and agency of workshop participants.¹⁰

Tellingly, both Horton and Clark criticized each other for being too top-down and insufficiently attentive to student voices. According to Clark, Horton “couldn’t listen to people . . . he’d want you to get to the point right now.”¹¹ According to Horton, Clark “was less interested in asking questions” than he was, and overly reliant on prepared curricula. “I was trying to help people learn,” he stated, “and she was trying to teach people.”¹² It is revealing that both Clark and Horton positioned themselves on the side of what we might call “student-driven” pedagogy. Their criticisms of each other do not reveal hypocrisy as much as the profound challenges involved in employing any form of education in the struggle against American racism, as well as the flexibility and pedagogical variety with which Clark and Horton worked to overcome those challenges. Indeed, the two central arguments of this essay are that Highlander’s workshops blended a variety of pedagogical styles in a way that previous scholarship has failed to acknowledge, and that close attention to Highlander’s varied pedagogies can help us rethink the relationship between education and the civil rights movement.

Scholars have demonstrated that a range of institutions, organizations, and “social movement schools” aimed to advance the civil rights movement through education.¹³ What remains unclear is how those institutions balanced conversation, direct instruction, role-play, and other pedagogical methods. Of course, that balance varied between organizations and across time. In a seminal essay published in 2002, Daniel Perlstein argues that “support for progressive pedagogy depends on the expectation that students will be able to participate fully in the promise of civic life.” According to Perlstein, progressive pedagogy flourished in the early 1960s at a time when civil rights activists maintained hope in the potential of racial integration, but fell out of favor with the rise of Black Power as many African American activists came to see White America as fundamentally racist.¹⁴ While building on Perlstein’s link between politics and pedagogy, I argue that Highlander’s history suggests the importance of pedagogical heterogeneity even during those periods in which progressive methods were of greatest interest and even within organizations that centered the experiences students brought with them.

In the first section of this essay, I argue that Highlander’s educational impact depended on three factors that contradict a narrow understanding of the folk school’s

¹⁰Horton, *Long Haul*, 23.

¹¹Septima P. Clark, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, July 25, 1976, transcript, Southern Oral History Program, UNC Chapel Hill, 86–87.

¹²Horton, *Long Haul*, 105.

¹³Larry W. Isaac, Anna W. Jacobs, Jaime Kucinkas, and Allison R. McGrath, “Social Movement Schools: Sites for Consciousness Transformation, Training, and Prefigurative Social Development,” *Social Movement Studies* 19, no. 2 (2020), 160–82; Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Thomas L. Bynum, “‘We Must March Forward’: Juanita Jackson and the Origins of the NAACP Youth Movement,” *Journal of African American History* 94 (Fall 2009), 487–508; Charles M. Payne and Carol Sills Strickland, eds., *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008); and Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*.

¹⁴Perlstein, “Minds Stayed on Freedom.”

constructivist reputation: its racial integration, its transnational cosmopolitanism, and its reliance on “expert” visitors. While many scholars have noted Highlander’s integrated learning environment and its frequent international guests, previous scholarship has yet to recognize the ways in which racial and national border-crossing were combined with expert speakers to help students go beyond their past experiences. In the second section, I explore the variety of pedagogical methods used within one of Highlander’s most successful initiatives, the citizenship schools. I argue that the need to prepare students to pass voter registration tests led citizenship school teachers to use expert-driven pedagogies—including the Socratic method—to guide students toward the correct answers as defined by state authorities. In my conclusion, I offer a new model for how we might understand the commonalities that linked educational efforts across the civil rights movement. I use this model to suggest new directions for how scholars might explore the variety of pedagogical strategies that were deployed within the movement, as well as the conflicts and uncertainties that arose as civil rights activists confronted the challenge of using education in the struggle against racism.

Living Together, Learning Together

Of all the participants that attended Highlander’s workshop on public school desegregation in August 1955, Rosa Parks was among the quietest. According to Septima Clark, Parks took careful notes on what others said without sharing much from her own years of activism. That changed one night in the dormitory. “Everyone started singing and dancing, white kids and all,” Clark recalled, when someone asked Parks about a particular episode in her past. Only then, in that dorm room, did Parks begin to share.¹⁵ When asked what Parks took from her time at Highlander, Myles Horton recalled that Parks never said “a thing about anything factually that she learned.” Rather, “the reason Highlander meant something to her and emboldened her to act as she did was that at Highlander she found respect as a black person and found white people she could trust.”¹⁶ In late January 1956, two months after Parks was arrested, one of the few White supporters of the movement in Montgomery, an old friend of Parks named Virginia Durr, wrote to Horton and his wife and colleague, Zilphia Horton. Durr was a veteran activist who had long supported Highlander and other progressive causes.¹⁷ She celebrated the impact that Highlander had on Parks. “When she came back she was so happy and felt so liberated,” Durr wrote, “and then as time went on she said the discrimination got worse and worse to bear AFTER having, for the first time in her life, been free of it at Highlander.”¹⁸ What links Durr’s note to the memories of Clark and Horton is the profound impact on Parks of Highlander’s integrated residential experience. “At

¹⁵Clark, *Ready from Within*, 17–18 and 32–34.

¹⁶Myles Horton and Paolo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, ed. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 153.

¹⁷Patricia Sullivan, ed., *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr*, ed. Hollinger F. Barnard (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985).

¹⁸Sullivan, *Freedom Writer*, 104–5; Glen, *Highlander*, 136.

Highlander,” Parks herself explained, “I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a unified society, that there was such a thing as people of differing races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony. It was a place I was very reluctant to leave. I gained there strength to persevere in my work for freedom, not just for blacks but all oppressed groups.”¹⁹

To the extent that constructivism is grounded in the ability of students to learn from their own experiences, the learning that Parks experienced at Highlander embodied constructivism at its most powerful. But which experiences did Parks learn from at Highlander? She learned from the experience of living in an egalitarian, racially integrated community. She learned from eating, sleeping, singing, and laughing across the color line. But even as she experienced Highlander’s integrated community, she was simultaneously reassessing the experiences she had long had in Montgomery. Put differently, without the deep knowledge that Parks brought with her to Highlander, the impact of the folk school on her future activism would have been minimal. It was a blending of past and present experiences that proved so educational. In the notes she took at Highlander, Parks wrote, “Desegregation proves itself by being put in action. Not changing attitudes, attitudes will change.”²⁰ It is unclear if that idea—that activists should push for desegregation as a way of changing attitudes rather than waiting for attitudes to change before desegregation—was something she heard at Highlander or something she herself gleaned from the experience of living in such an integrated space. What is clear is that her understanding of that idea depended not just on the experience of transgressing the color line at Highlander but also on her long experience with the intransigence of White racism in Montgomery and elsewhere. As the experience of Parks demonstrates, it was in the middle ground created by transgressing two kinds of borders—racial and geographic—that Highlander offered activists an opportunity to learn. Scholars have recognized the power of the egalitarian, racially integrated community that Highlander offered its visitors. What has remained unexamined is the way in which the racial and geographic integration of Highlander—the way it brought together people across the color line *and* across the world—dovetailed with the use of experts and guest speakers in a way that contradicts the standard narrative of the school’s progressive pedagogy. I argue that Highlander crafted a hybrid constructivist pedagogy in which respect for the agency and experiences of its students was combined with a respect for the ability of all students to learn from a variety of people, ideas, and pedagogical styles.

The power of residential education had long been at the heart of Highlander’s approach to social change. The school was designed as a temporary retreat that would empower students to reengage with the problems facing their own communities. “We must try to give the students an understanding of the world in which we live,” Myles Horton wrote near the inception of the school, “and an idea of the kind of world we would like to have.” In order to expose students to the reality of

¹⁹Theoharis, *Rebellious Life*, 35–43; Parks, *My Story*, 124; and Parks interview by Cynthia Stokes Brown, November 1980, published in *Southern Exposure* (Spring 1981), 7, and excerpted in Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom: A History of the Civil Rights Movement in Songs and Pictures* (New York: Norton, 1989), 25.

²⁰Handwritten Notes from Highlander, Folder 18, Box 2, Series II, Organizations and Activities, 1955–1976, Rosa Parks Papers, UP000775_002_018, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

the world as it was, the school would “throw them into conflict situations where the real nature of our society is projected in all its ugliness.” At the same time, students needed “to be given an inkling of the new society.” Otherwise the harsh realities of the world would be crushing. “By having a type of life that approaches as nearly as possible the desired state,” Horton wrote, “our communal living at the school comes into the picture as an important educational factor.” Highlander would only succeed if the students and staff members could together “live out [their] ideals.” Of the many ways that Horton strove to “live out” the ideals of the school, the most important proved to be his decision to make Highlander one of the few places in the South where people lived, ate, and learned across the color line.²¹

The racial integration of the school was connected to its geographic integration—the way it brought people together from across the United States and abroad. Despite Highlander’s emphasis on the value of local experience, the folk school was a remarkably international gathering place. The staff held a series of workshops on the United Nations, challenged students to see the global context of their problems, and hosted dozens of foreign visitors. Asha Devi Aryanayakam, a Gandhian educator, was “deeply inspired” by Highlander’s approach to education. The firebrand Indian socialist Ram Manohar Lohia visited Highlander in 1951 and later celebrated the school for empowering oppressed people. In an article published in India, he lauded Highlander for “training leaders drawn directly from the people” and for using “discussions” and “field work” to take the school “out to the people.” International visitors did more than praise Highlander; they contributed to the school’s curriculum. During his visit, Lohia talked about his experience using Gandhian nonviolent civil disobedience, and encouraged Highlander staff to make nonviolence more central to the school’s approach to social change.²²

The cosmopolitan variety of Highlander’s speakers might be understood to conflict with the school’s emphasis on student’s discovering their own answers to their own problems; indeed, any “expert” visitor risked downgrading student input and initiative. Many Highlander workshops could more properly be called lectures. Of course, some subjects required expert insight. It made sense to have an experienced lawyer like Kenneth Kemper discuss the “role of the state legislature in Mississippi.”²³ But how could Highlander’s staff balance the benefits of such lectures with those of the student-driven discussions that were at the heart of the Highlander experience? The active intervention of Highlander staff proved key. According to one observer, Myles Horton would routinely ask two questions: “What is the individual going to do about solving these problems?” and “How is that individual going to involve others in the community?” By empowering students regardless of “level of education or skill,” Horton reinforced “the dignity of each individual” and generated “a feeling that there is something that a person can do about community problems . . . rather than imposing ideas and

²¹Aimee Isrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Programs, 1932–1961* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 39; Glen, *Highlander*, 28; and Horton, *Long Haul*, 35–36.

²²“Quotes from Foreigners,” Folder 9, Box 6, Highlander Folk School Manuscript Records Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives (hereafter HFS-MC-TSLA); and Ram Manohar Lohia, *Mankind*, Folder 5, Box 16, HFS-MC-TSLA.

²³“Voter Education Workshop,” July 2, 1962, 57a, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives (hereafter HFS-AC-TSLA).

solutions from above.” The frequent interventions of Horton, Clark, and other Highlander staff members might have risked marginalizing the voices of workshop participants if not for those interventions’ blending of pedagogical styles in order to empower students to bring their learning into the ongoing struggle against racism.²⁴

At a workshop on the United Nations in August 1954, Myles Horton asked participants to consider the purpose of the workshop itself—and to link everything they learned back to their own efforts to confront injustice and inequity at the local level. He explained that he understood himself as a middleman between people “who have ideas but don’t have roots in the community and people who have roots in the community but who don’t have these big ideas.” Such a conception assumed that certain ideas needed to be brought into communities to generate the most effective forms of social change. As he put it, “You do need to use Charles Gomillion, you do need to use ideas, you do need to have information.” A frequent guest and “resource person” at Highlander, Gomillion was a professor at the Tuskegee Institute and the president of the Tuskegee Civic Association. To Horton, it would be foolish to ignore the many insights and ideas generated by leaders like Gomillion. On the other hand, an idea was “only good if it works,” and many of the most dynamic thinkers were too distant from local struggles to properly “test their ideas.” To bridge the gap, Horton envisioned Highlander working within what he called “the percolator system.” Rather than ideas dripping down from above, Horton argued, ideas start at the bottom and rise to the top. But the process did not stop there. To achieve the greatest results, “the people at the top formulate” additional ideas and communicate them down to the grassroots “and new ideas grow out of that.” By explaining his thinking to the workshop participants, Horton demonstrated that self-reflection was key to Highlander’s inclusive constructivism—as was including students in the process of such critical introspection.²⁵

Highlander’s students did not always embrace the open-ended conversation format associated with the folk school’s philosophy of education. That same summer of 1954, a conversation on segregation shifted toward pedagogical concerns after one workshop participant stated that others were talking too much. “I could have been sleeping,” she complained, “because everything that was said had been said before.” Sternly, she told the other participants, “Unless you have something new to add don’t say nothing.” She also blamed the discussion leaders for not judging properly “when to cut it off and when not to.” In response, one of the discussion leaders, Julie Mabel, attempted to expand the conversation by asking participants to imagine “the ideal workshop.” One man suggested that in the ideal workshop “you would feel that the people who you have invited have some problem in common.” The workshop would help to “formulate this problem” so that everyone felt that “this problem can be solved” and had a sense for “how you can get the problem solved.” Mabel agreed and added that a workshop was a “democratic” process of “engaging many minds,” a process that was about “creating” rather than just “learning.” Not everyone

²⁴J. Herman Blake, “Citizen Participation, Democracy, and Social Change: A Report to the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation,” Dec. 1, 1969, 13–15, Box 4, Schwarzhaupt Foundation Papers, University of Chicago (hereafter SFP).

²⁵“United Nations Workshop,” Aug. 6, 1954, and Aug. 7, 1954, 8e and 8f, HFS-AC-TSLA.

was convinced of the pedagogical power of the workshop model. One of the participants questioned how much could be learned in a workshop. He suggested that participants could gain “principles” and certain “formulaic things” but that ultimately “the techniques or the skills are what we acquire when we go back to our communities.” He admitted that workshops taught “discussion skills” but suggested that more important lessons would have to be learned in the struggle itself. Thus, in the same workshop, students suggested that Highlander staff provide more structure to the conversations and that the most impactful locus of learning would be within the struggle itself. Neither suggestion conflicted with Highlander’s approach to education; indeed, Highlander staff often intervened in conversations precisely to help workshop participants learn from their past experiences of struggle.²⁶

A rich example of Highlander’s inclusive constructivist pedagogy occurred on July 25, 1955, at a workshop focused on segregation on Johns Island, South Carolina. Myles Horton asked a farmer, Buddy Freeman, how the teachers on Johns Island felt about segregation. Freeman replied that the local teacher supported integration but feared for her job if she spoke out. Horton then asked if that was the general attitude, and Septima Clark replied yes. Clark was, in this context, both an expert and a local, having taught for many years on Johns Island. Another local expert and community leader, Esau Jenkins, added that the teachers had “been conditioned a long time to segregation.” Horton echoed Jenkins and then reached for a larger point: “As Esau says, they’ve been conditioned over so long a period to feel that it won’t work. It’s hard for people to learn from other people’s experiences.” Horton then asked if the teachers were interested in registering to vote. Jenkins replied that most were already registered but were too afraid to attend political meetings. Jenkins had himself worked hard to free people from such fears, and understood that work as, in his words, “a long educational process.” The interchange between Horton, Clark, and Jenkins was an exchange between three master teachers—all of whom blurred the boundary between education and nonviolent social change. But the conversation was not entirely dominated by such prominent leaders.²⁷

The star of the workshop was a high school student named Florence Singleton. Horton asked Singleton, “Do you learn anything in school about the things we’re talking about here? About integrating the schools, getting rid of segregation?” “No,” she replied, “that is one thing that our teachers don’t ever talk about.” Their exchange put Singleton in the position of expert and teacher:

HORTON: Is there any talk about these things outside of classes?

SINGLETON: Oh no, but I talked with them after I visited the meeting once.

HORTON: This is very interesting. . . . Florence said there’s no talk about voting or integration in the school, but she goes to this Civic Club that Esau organized, and takes ideas back to school.²⁸

²⁶“Segregation Workshop, 1955,” July 25, 1955, Folder 1, Box 3, HFS-MC-TSLA.

²⁷“Segregation Workshop, 1955.”

²⁸“Segregation Workshop, 1955.”

Thus, Horton again used repetition to clarify a point and to reinforce what others knew already. At this point, it seemed as though Horton was in charge of the direction of the conversation, and that Singleton's experience was merely raw material from which Horton—the educated expert—could draw lessons on nonviolent social change. Yet the dynamic shifted when Singleton related a conversation she had shared with a boy at her school who had asked her how she would like “to go to school with the white people.” Her response is worth quoting in full:

I said sure I'd like it. I said how would you like it? He said aw, I wouldn't want to go to school with white people. I said why? He said well, since you're segregated so long, said, I wouldn't ever get used to it. I said you'd get used to it. I said after all, the colored folks supposed to be just like the white. . . . And so I keep on talking to this boy—and talked and talked—until he said, well, why don't Mr. Davis ever talk about it? He said why he isn't interested? I said that's how you talk just now, you said you don't want to go to the white school, why should he be so interested? If the children don't want to go then he shouldn't. . . . If you don't do it, there's no one else to do it.²⁹

Singleton connected the desegregation of schools to other forms of integration. She reminded her friend that he had to sit at the back of the bus in Charleston, and encouraged him to imagine a world in which all forms of segregation were abolished. “The whites will be just as good as the colored,” she declared, “and the colored will be just as good as the whites.” “Florence,” the boy replied, “you got a good idea.” But he wasn't totally convinced. He added that “the white people are walking over me because they rule everything.” Singleton refused to let her friend submit to such oppression.

SINGLETON: Do you want them to rule all the time?

THE BOY: Well, if they rule they just rule, that's all.

SINGLETON: One of these days you're going to change the idea that you have.

THE BOY: How do you think I'm going to change? By you talking to me?

SINGLETON: Sure. . . I'm not going to tell you what to do, or what not to do, because after all I could tell you, but if you do not take it in, there's nothing for me to do.³⁰

Thus, Singleton demonstrated that student-driven constructivism need not preclude encouragement from other activists. Talking to her friend helped him learn, but not because she told him what to do. He had to “take it in” himself. Such a blend of instruction and self-discovery had long been part of what historian Charles Payne

²⁹“Segregation Workshop, 1955.”

³⁰“Segregation Workshop, 1955.”

has called the “organizing tradition” within the African American freedom struggle. Still, it was remarkable for a high school student to describe how she had employed such a powerful blend of educational strategies, and to offer that description within a workshop that was designed to itself cultivate such transformative learning. Clearly impressed, Horton concluded, “We seldom get an opportunity to hear somebody who knows so much so young.”³¹

After she returned home, Singleton gave a speech to over a hundred residents of her community. “It was our first rewarding experience in true democracy,” she reported of her time at Highlander. “There were fifty-three whites and twenty Negroes, eating, sleeping, dancing and working together every day.” At Highlander, Singleton told her audience, she listened to a pediatrician from Little Rock explain a plan he had helped devise to integrate the schools in his city. Singleton also recalled a discussion that concluded with “the idea that the United States has as much to learn from India and other countries as they have to learn from us.” But it wasn’t the speakers or the content of the discussions that mattered the most to her. It was the interracial community, and the opportunity to be respected and appreciated despite her youth, her gender, and her race. Like Rosa Parks’s experience, Singleton’s time at Highlander demonstrated how the school’s pedagogy served as a nexus linking people, organizations, and ideas across both racial and spatial borders. Singleton embodied the blend of pedagogical styles with which Horton and Clark aimed to empower community leaders at the grassroots level—and her community, Johns Island, would become the birthplace of Highlander’s most ambitious educational endeavor.³²

The Citizenship Schools

Esau Jenkins owned and operated a bus that took African American workers from Johns Island to Charleston, South Carolina. When Jenkins heard that one of his passengers wanted to learn how to read in order to pass the literacy test requirement to vote, he began offering lessons on board his bus. Ambitious and determined, Jenkins was aware that he could not accomplish much in such difficult circumstances. What he needed was a school that could teach literacy and citizenship to adults. To build such a school, he turned to his former teacher, Septima Clark, and to Highlander.³³ A narrow conception of “constructivism,” in which students learn only from their past and present experiences, fails to capture the way Jenkins worked with Clark and with Highlander to inspire students to learn new ways of being in and for the struggle against Jim Crow. It was through an expansive conception of citizenship as struggle that Highlander fostered an education that entailed, in the words of

³¹“Segregation Workshop, 1955”; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*.

³²Florence Singleton (speech, Johns Island, SC, 1955), Folder 5, Box 3, HFS-MC-TSLA; and Septima Clark, “Report of Civic Club, Johns Island, South Carolina, September 6, 1955,” cited in Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation’s Experience* (Santa Cruz, CA: Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, 1980), chap. 4, <https://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2003/tjerandsen/Chapter4.htm>.

³³David P. Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004), 388–414; and R. Scott Baker, *Paradoxes of Desegregation: African American Struggles for Educational Equity in Charleston, South Carolina, 1926–1972* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

scholars Robert McCormick and Patricia Murphy, “a transformation of identity and enculturation into communities of practice.” The citizenship schools were rooted in local communities, but the range of pedagogical methods deployed at the schools fostered “communities of practice” that crossed racial borders without eliminating the divide between student and teacher.³⁴

Education on Johns Island had long been segregated and unequal, as Septima Clark detailed in a letter to Myles Horton written in March 1955. “On rainy days when no work could be done in the fields,” Clark wrote, Black children would be allowed to attend school. But if the sun came out, “the plantation overseers would ride up to the school house,” and the children would have to go out to the fields to work. White teachers received nearly three times the salary of Black teachers.³⁵ As a teacher on Johns Island, Clark had found ways to help her students thrive despite such profound inequalities. Now, she was working with Jenkins, her former student, to use education to fight for equality.³⁶

Jenkins learned from Clark and from Highlander that he could not create change without empowering others. In a letter he sent to Myles Horton in April 1955, Jenkins wrote that his time at Highlander had changed his “ideas of community leadership.” He learned the importance of “giving others something to do” rather than trying to take on everything himself. This was a process. In September 1955, Clark attended a gathering of the civic club that Jenkins had organized. She found a troubling “lack of participation by the group.” “Esau will talk too long,” she wrote, and “some of the people got angry and walked out.” In January 1956, Clark wrote that “Esau still has to do all the planning and all the talking.” She was not entirely critical, however. “The people have faith in him,” she wrote, “and I feel that is more than half the battle.” As the history of the citizenship schools would demonstrate, such faith in community leaders and teachers need not conflict with efforts to empower students as agents of change.³⁷

Consider the dynamic role played by Bernice Robinson, a successful beautician and community activist who was hired to teach the first group of citizenship school

³⁴Robert McCormick and Patricia Murphy, “Curriculum: The Case for a Focus on Learning,” in *Learning and Practice: Agency and Identities*, ed. Patricia Murphy and Kathy Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 2008), 6; and Deanna M. Gillespie, “‘First-Class’ Citizenship Education in the Mississippi Delta, 1961–1965,” *Journal of Southern History* 80, no. 1 (Feb. 2014), 109–42.

³⁵Septima Clark to Myles Horton, March 29, 1955, Folder 4, Box 22, SFP.

³⁶On the contributions of African American teachers to the long civil rights movement, see Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Derrick P. Alridge, “Teachers in the Movement: Pedagogy, Activism, and Freedom,” *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (February 2020), 1–23; Vanessa Siddle Walker, “School ‘Outer-gration’ and ‘Tokenism’: Segregated Black Educators Critique the Promise of Education Reform in the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” *Journal of Negro Education* 84, no. 2 (Spring 2015), 111–24; Tondra Loder-Jackson, *Schoolhouse Activists: African American Educators and the Long Birmingham Civil Rights Movement* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015); and Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

³⁷Esau Jenkins to Myles Horton, April 28, 1955, Folder 4, Box 22, SFP; and Septima Clark, “Report of Civic Club, Johns Island, South Carolina, September 6, 1955,” and Septima Clark, “Comments on Esau Jenkins’ Civic Club Meeting, January 2, 1956, Johns Island, South Carolina,” both in Folder 5, Box 3, HFS-MC-TSLA.

students. Robinson had accompanied Clark to a workshop at Highlander in the summer of 1955, and later told the Hortons that it was “one of the most wonderful experiences of my life.” “Never before have I met so many people, at any one time, with so much information to impart,” she wrote. In many other educational settings, Robinson explained, “much of the information is lost because of the tenseness of the group as a whole and you cannot relax and receive what is being offered. This is not true there at Highlander for there is no tension at all and one can absorb more easily.” Robinson’s emphasis on the emotional dimensions of learning was fitting, given that she was hired to teach the first citizenship school precisely because Clark, Jenkins, and Horton worried that someone trained as a teacher would talk down to the adult students and would use rigid, authoritarian pedagogical methods. Most histories of the citizenship schools link the decision to hire Robinson to Highlander’s student-driven pedagogy. Yet the emphasis on Robinson’s lack of training as a teacher should not distract from the fact that she was a highly educated woman who did not hesitate to introduce novel ideas and topics in her classes. For example, when she asked students to link the UN Declaration of Human Rights to their own experience, she was respecting their knowledge of their own communities but also challenging them to think in new ways about themselves and the world more broadly. It matters that she did not “talk down” to the adult students, but it also matters that she used a range of pedagogical methods to challenge them to reach beyond their experience.³⁸

Robinson and Clark helped design a “Reading Booklet” for the citizenship school students, which demonstrates Highlander’s pedagogical inclusivity. The booklet taught literacy by discussing electoral laws, social security regulations, and public health services. A twenty-page document, it covered everything from “making words from the alphabet” to “writing a friendly letter” to “how to fill in a money order blank.” The introduction explained that the citizenship schools aimed not just to help “students to pass literacy tests for voting” but also to provide “an all-around education in community development which includes housing, recreation, health and improved home life.” The content of the booklet made clear that students were not just expected to learn from their past experiences but also to imagine themselves participating in struggles against injustice. One exercise involved making “little words from registration,” words like “register,” “station,” “rotten,” and “treat.” Once the student identified such words, the next task was to make a story with these words. The sample story ended, “It was such a treat to look into the eyes of each stranger and see the satisfaction each had as the testing period ended. The great strain was over. Now they could wear a tag which reads, ‘I have registered, have you?’” The booklet taught math with questions such as, “Ten students were arrested in the sit-in movement and were fined \$75.00 a piece. How much fine was paid?” The workbook aimed to make literacy education relevant by connecting it to the movement. Students were

³⁸Septima Clark to Myles Horton, Jan. 18, 1956, Folder 3, Box 1, Addition to Highlander Folk School Papers, HFS-MC-TSLA; Bernice Robinson to Myles and Zilphia Horton, July 19, 1955, Folder 5, Box 5, HFS-MC-TSLA; Clare Russell, “A Beautician without Teacher Training: Bernice Robinson, Citizenship Schools and Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2011), 31–50; and “Interview with Bernice Robinson,” Sue Thrasher and Elliot Wiggington, Charleston, SC, Nov. 9, 1980, Folder 5, Box 1, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC.

asked to learn from their own experience in a way that challenged them to go beyond that experience in pursuit of radical social change.³⁹

The citizenship school teachers were instructed to use a Socratic method that sometimes empowered students to provide their own answers, but often involved directing students to a predetermined answer. Such an approach was necessary given the importance of preparing students to pass voter registration tests. In an article on the citizenship schools, Septima Clark described one of the sessions:

The teacher wrote “Citizen” on the blackboard. Then she wrote “Constitution” and “Amendment.” Then she turned to her class of 30 adult students. “*What do these mean, students?*” The teacher received a variety of answers, and when the discussion died down, she was able to make a generalization. “*This is the reason we know we are citizens: Because it’s written in an amendment to the Constitution.*”⁴⁰

Was this an example of students discovering their own answers? On the one hand, the teacher asked the students an open question and did not dismiss their answers. On the other hand, the teacher had her own answer that she wanted the students to learn. In August 1961, Clark trained a group of citizenship teachers by asking them questions like, “What is a republican form of government?” When a participant did not know the correct answer, Clark used follow-up questions that led them toward that answer. In most cases, the goal was to prepare students to pass the exam, which meant training them to provide the answers offered by the state. When asked what the poll tax was “used for,” one student answered “infrastructure,” an answer that fit the official line, rather than explaining that the poll tax was also used to prevent African Americans from voting.⁴¹

Yet even while preparing students to pass the registration test, the citizenship schools empowered them to resist narrow conceptions of citizenship. An audio recording of a citizenship class held in January 1960 begins with Septima Clark positioning herself on par with the students in a common struggle for justice. “I’m so happy to know that you are taking advantage of this,” she said, “and that we’re all working to become first-class citizens.”⁴² Echoing this democratic vision of learning, a recording of a different training session—a session held for aspiring citizenship school teachers—reveals a dynamic learning environment in which laughter was common and in which the kind of student-driven pedagogies associated with Highlander coexisted with more “traditional” methods of content delivery. The veteran Southern Christian Leadership Conference activist Dorothy Cotton began the

³⁹“My Reading Booklet” and “My Citizenship Booklet,” Folder 13, Box 2, HFS-MC-TSLA.

⁴⁰Septima P. Clark, “Literacy and Liberation,” *Freedomways* (1st Quarter, 1964), <http://www.crmvet.org/info/cs.htm>.

⁴¹Clark, “Literacy and Liberation”; “Septima Clark Gives Instructions,” Aug. 8, 1961, 515A/50, Highlander Folk School Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; and “Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson Lead a Discussion on Setting Up a Citizenship School,” Aug. 9, 1961, U515a51, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴²“Literacy School Class Meeting (Sea Islands),” Jan. 7, 1960, 515A/47, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

session by stating: “I want somebody to tell us what citizen is, c-i-t-i-z-e-n.” One woman suggested that a citizen “becomes accustomed to the laws and regulations” of the land. Cotton challenged her. In Selma, she stated, “we were not able to abide by the laws of that community. Does this nullify our citizenship?” “For example,” she continued, “they told us that we could not march and we marched anyway.”

Thus, from the question of citizenship, Cotton steered the conversation toward civil disobedience. Would a good citizen obey a bad law? After debating the ethics of disobeying unjust laws, the conversation turned to a different complication of the definition of citizenship when one participant stated that “until you become a registered voter, you are not a citizen.” “Citizens have rights,” he said. “We don’t have rights.” Cotton replied with a question, “Have you marched?” He said he had marched. She replied with two more questions: “Why did you march?” “Were you doing something wrong when you marched?” “No,” he replied. She challenged him again: “Why were you not doing anything wrong?” He explained that in his community there were no Black policemen, no paved streets, and the quality of the housing was terrible. She did not disagree with his assessment of such racial inequities, but again pressed, “Why do you have a right to march?” The answer she seemed to be seeking finally emerged: “We have constitutional rights to march,” and “the Constitution of the United States gives you the right to petition. A march is a form of petitioning.” Thus, Cotton aimed to help the students see both the rights they had as citizens and the way those rights were constrained. “This is citizenship training” she explained, not just to have students define the word “citizen” but to dig deep into what it meant to claim their rights as citizens.⁴³

Cotton’s exchange with those aspiring teachers demonstrated the radical definition of citizenship at the heart of the citizenship schools, while also revealing the importance of the teacher as an authority figure and a Socratic guide. While the conception of citizenship was radically democratic, the citizenship schools reveal, like the workshops held at Highlander, a blending of pedagogical methods. In 1965, Clark estimated that the citizenship schools had enrolled more than twenty-five thousand people and led to at least double that number of registered voters. Many citizenship school students went on to become teachers. Highlander had long aimed to blur the divide between student and teacher by asking students to reflect upon the goals and methods of the workshops in which they were participating. Such a pedagogical strategy, while aligning with the standard narrative of Highlander’s approach to education, also reveals the heterogenous and dynamic nature of that approach, driven as it was by continual introspection and critical reflection.⁴⁴

In January 1961, Highlander held an “Experimental Workshop on Adult Education” that drew Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, Septima Clark, and Dorothy Cotton, along with a range of teachers. Septima Clark told the gathering that “the people gonna have to say, the leaders can’t say, you can’t say.” But she did not

⁴³“Citizenship School Training Session,” undated, 515A/58, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁴“Southern Christian Leadership Conference Citizenship Education Program, from a Taped Report by Mrs. Septima Clark, SCLC Training Supervisor at the Highlander Board of Directors’ Meeting, May 14, 1965,” Folder 10, Box 22, SFP; and Horton, *The Long Haul*, 115.

give up on the role of the teacher. “The purpose is to take the people where they are,” she said, “and bring them up to where they should be.” She asked the participants how they could know if “this citizenship school idea” had “become effective.” One participant replied that the key was the level of action taken. Of the students who completed the course, “how many have registered to vote, how many have gone out into the community and became leaders”? Myles Horton agreed with this vision of the schools as beginning a long process of social change. “I like to think of these schools as opening the door to people who’ve been closed in,” he explained. Many people felt that “the truth will make us free,” but to Horton, it was the “struggle for truth” that would “make us free.” It was the struggle that mattered. One participant said that everyone was talking about “when we get there.” But, he asked, “where is there?” The room erupted in laughter, before a reflective mood settled on the gathering, and the participants returned to discussing the many questions that remained unanswered.⁴⁵

In June 1962, Highlander hosted a group of young activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at a workshop focused on voter registration. Bernice Robinson introduced the workshop by encouraging participants to draw on their “past experience” to plan their future actions. Robinson’s role in the workshop revealed the continuity between the citizenship schools and other efforts to use education to increase African American voter registration, as well as the blend of pedagogical methods that I have argued was characteristic of Highlander’s approach to education. In addition to “past experience,” students learned from experienced activists like Robinson and in turn conveyed their learning to others. A student activist named Charles Sherrod asked a foundational question: “What’s the movement about?” He then answered his own question: “It’s an education movement.” According to Sherrod, Jim Crow rested on a foundation of “psychological enslavement,” and the civil rights movement was a “battle of the mind.” Importantly, that battle was not to be waged only by educated theorists. “When we lift the veil, the veil of fear, from the eyes of the people,” Sherrod declared, then even the poorest, least “educated” people would themselves become leaders. Decisions “should be made by leading persons in the community,” not activists “telling them what they need.” For Sherrod, lifting the veil of fear was an educational process designed for continual growth, in which movement activists helped local people to become leaders, and those local leaders in turn helped others to escape “psychological enslavement.”⁴⁶

Sherrod’s vision of the movement as a democratic educational endeavor was reflected in the very workshop in which he offered his vision. Myles Horton asked Sherrod to talk about how a voter registration campaign could be tied into a massive civil disobedience campaign. Sherrod replied by citing the protests in Albany, Georgia, explaining they had revealed the power of solidarity within the African American community—and that such solidarity could be cultivated through nonviolent protest. Horton responded by clarifying: “Your theory is that this should lead to

⁴⁵“Experimental Workshop on Adult Education,” Jan. 21, 1961, 48b, HFS-AC-TSLA; and “Training Leaders for Citizenship Schools,” Jan. 19–21, 1961, Folder 15, Box 4, HFS-AC-TSLA.

⁴⁶“Voter Education Workshop,” June 8, 1962, Tape 55d, HFS-AC-TSLA.

more effective voter registration?" He framed Sherrod's statement as a theory, as something that could and should be tested, and then asked, "Do you have proof that this is true or do you just think it should be true?" Sherrod responded confidently, "Number one, we think it should be true. Number two, we know that it has been true." Horton interrupted, "When has it been true?" He continued to challenge Sherrod and the other workshop participants to be clear about how they would "help a mass protest . . . succeed at getting voter registration." He offered a hypothetical situation in which one group pursued a voter registration campaign without mass protests and the second group used mass protests. How did they know which group would be more successful? "Keep your minds open," he concluded. "Keep your imagination open, and don't be afraid to try to come up with something nobody ever heard of if it works." As in many workshops, Horton's questions guided the conversation in a way that risked limiting the independence of the workshop participants. Yet the questions he asked made clear that he was not pushing any particular strategy or ideology. The aim of the workshop was to empower SNCC activists to clarify their own commitments, and to forge connections across movement centers and generations of struggle.⁴⁷

In the spring of 1965, Highlander hosted a two-week "freedom workshop" that brought together some forty people, Black and White, to talk about the ongoing struggle in Mississippi. It was organized by a team including the longtime activist and philanthropist Lucy Montgomery and a range of SNCC veterans including Prathia Hall, Bob Moses, Maria Varela, Jane Stembridge, and Charlie Cobb. Participants learned how to make audio tapes they could use to help communicate new ideas. They heard the renowned historian John Hope Franklin give a lecture on "The Civil Rights Revolution in Historical Perspective." And they talked with each other about their struggles, achievements, and setbacks. As with many of Highlander's workshops, part of the goal was to help participants recognize and embrace what they already knew. According to Dorothy Mae Rodgers from Rosedale, Mississippi, the workshop "made me to know that I can know what I can do when I go back home." Several participants expressed the desire to share such self-knowledge with others. Beulah Mae Ayers of Holly Springs wrote, "I can go home with a vivid mind of how to set up a Freedom School and what should be taught in the school." Importantly, it was not a particular set of knowledge and skills Ayers gained at the workshop, but the confidence to believe in her own knowledge and abilities.

Not all the reports on the workshop were so glowing. According to Donna Leslie of Gulfport, "The betted educated people tended to take over the discussion and intimidate the other people." Even at a Highlander workshop infused with the democratic ethos of SNCC, a hierarchical conception of education remained an obstacle. Yet most participants found the environment to be refreshingly democratic and inclusive, despite lectures by experts like Franklin. For Eleanor Aragon, the workshop provided a vital release from the tension of working in Mississippi. "It took me 3 days to unwind," she wrote. "Now I can go back and stay for a while instead of cracking up and leaving." For Aragon, the real benefit of the workshop was not "learning

⁴⁷"Voter Education Workshop."

specifics” but “being in a house with people I loved and I could talk and not be afraid.” This echoed what Rosa Parks had gained at Highlander some ten years earlier—the experience of living in an inclusive, racially integrated community. Most citizenship schools were, in general, racially homogenous. Yet like the workshops held at Highlander, they still cultivated a learning space in which people could meet each other across the divides of race, region, and knowledge itself.⁴⁸

Conclusion

On August 22, 1956, Myles Horton and Septima Clark gathered a small group of advisers at Highlander to discuss how best to structure future workshops. Horton suggested that all educators had “to make a choice” between having experts give information or having more time for discussion. Clark agreed and suggested having “shorter lectures.” The group decided, in Horton’s words, to “spend less time on subject matter presentation” and to focus the workshops even more deliberately “around problems” that the students would bring to Highlander for discussion.⁴⁹ As this essay has argued, Highlander’s workshops would continue to include lectures by visiting experts. Yet what is most important about that meeting of advisers in August 1956 is not the degree to which they were able to put their decisions into action. What is most important is that Horton and Clark, both of whom were veteran educators, remained committed to continually refining their pedagogy. They knew that striking the right balance between the presentation of material and student-driven discussion was a profound challenge—especially when the goal was to empower students to confront an oppressive social order. Horton and Clark agreed that Highlander’s purpose was to link education to the struggle for justice. In the words of Clark, “Literacy is liberation.”⁵⁰ But like Rosa Parks, they did not know what would come of their efforts to link literacy and liberation, and their courage in taking action was matched by the humility with which they kept learning and changing. To be clear, their example provides more than a banal lesson about the importance of pedagogical innovation. Rather, what the history of Highlander offers is the opportunity to see educators like Horton and Clark craft pedagogies of resistance that were, like the civil rights movement itself, flexible, dynamic, and inclusive—pedagogies that were grounded in what the scholar Charles Payne has called “a visceral humanism, a dearly bought, broad perspective on human behavior that militated against thinking about people in one-dimensional terms.”⁵¹

Taken out of context, the idea that “the answers come from the people” flattens the depth and richness of Highlander’s pedagogical innovations. If severed from the “humanism” that guided Highlander workshops, the very idea of “the people” obscures the respect for human diversity and imagination that was at the heart of

⁴⁸“Freedom Workshop News,” April 1965, “Highlander Folk School, 1957–1975,” Folder 17, Box 2, Rosa Parks Papers, UP000775_002_017, Wayne State University.

⁴⁹“Evaluations of Workshop and Plans for Future Workshops,” Aug. 22, 1956, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection (12h), HFS-AC-TSLA.

⁵⁰Septima P. Clark, “Literacy and Liberation,” *Freedomways* (1st Quarter, 1964), <http://www.crmvet.org/info/cs.htm>.

⁵¹Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 314.

Highlander's mission and that long defined the educational dimensions of the long African American freedom struggle.⁵² In this essay, I have argued that Highlander embodied a pedagogical middle ground that empowered workshop participants to learn from their own past experiences as well as from a range of new ideas. Building on Lev Vygotsky's conception of the "zone of proximal development," we might understand Highlander's varied pedagogies as together creating a liminal space in which students learned across a variety of borders—racial, geographic, and ideological. Vygotsky defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers."⁵³ It was in such a space that Highlander brought people together so that they might learn from each other as well as from more experienced activists. Yet whereas Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" has often been interpreted psychologically, with the emphasis on the individual learner, Horton and Clark both understood education as a profoundly social endeavor, inseparable from larger movements against inequity and oppression. Put differently, we should not understand the pedagogical heterogeneity of Highlander as primarily a response to individual learning needs; rather, the pedagogies examined in this essay were fundamentally an effort to remake the social order.⁵⁴

Scholars have largely overlooked the range of educational methods employed at Highlander—a pedagogical diversity that marked the larger relationship between education and the civil rights movement. In many of the spaces in which the movement was thought and debated, from classrooms and churches to hotel rooms and bars, the transmission of knowledge from experts to beginners coincided with student-driven approaches to education. Highlander thus offers a window on educational efforts that occurred in a variety of other locations. Yet, as this essay has noted, Highlander was also unique in several ways—most notably, in the degree to which its integrated living environment embodied the "beloved community" many civil rights activists aimed to

⁵²Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Heather A. Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

⁵³Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 86.

⁵⁴In the words of Daniel Perlstein, "educating African American children required inoculating them against a brutalizing environment as much as fostering their capacity for meaning-making within it." In the face of such a challenge, "Black progressive educators simultaneously built upon the capacity of Black children to construct their own understanding of the world and instilled a humanity that enduring structures of oppression sought to deny." Daniel Perlstein, "Schooling the New Negro: Progressive Education, Black Modernity, and the Long Harlem Renaissance," in *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community*, ed. Ansley T. Erickson and Ernest Morrell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 35, 40.

achieve.⁵⁵ It is both because of its uniqueness and because of its connections to and similarities with other efforts that an examination of Highlander's pedagogy can offer useful insights for future scholarship on the history of education within the civil rights movement, whether within "social movement schools" or in regard to the "situated learning" that occurred within a protest setting or a voter registration campaign.⁵⁶

Rather than drawing sharp boundaries between progressive and "traditional" approaches, I suggest a new hybrid model for the pedagogies of resistance within many civil rights organizations, a model that can be visualized as an hourglass. Like the top of an hourglass, the learning process began with a wide range of sources—the ideas and experiences students brought with them, as well as ideas, strategies, and traditions of resistance passed down by more experienced activists and other kinds of "experts." The goal of the learning process was to empower the individual learner to make sense of these various sources of knowledge in a way that focused—like the center of an hourglass—on a single point: how that individual could contribute to the struggle for racial justice. Such a focus on individual action should not obscure the importance of collective struggle. Indeed, the ultimate goal was to empower each student to contribute to the larger movement and thus, as an hourglass broadens at its base, to create widespread social change. As Daniel Perlstein wrote, "The movement and its schools serve as a reminder that no curricular project can fundamentally transform knowledge and its distribution if it is not part of a process of transforming social relations as well."⁵⁷ Put differently, the answers did not always come from the people but, if they were to be successful, they had to empower the people. Whatever knowledge was generated at Highlander or in a citizenship school mattered to the degree that it was transferred into a protest march, a voter registration drive, or a crowded bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

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⁵⁵Victoria Wolcott, "Radical Nonviolence, Interracial Utopias, and the Congress of Racial Equality in the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 4, (Fall/Winter 2018), 31–61.

⁵⁶Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Etienne Wenger-Trayner et al., eds., *Learning in Landscapes of Practice: Boundaries, Identity, and Knowledgeability in Practice-Based Learning* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁵⁷Perlstein, "Minds Stayed on Freedom," 110.