

Mary Zerkel, *Coyuntural Analysis: Critical Thinking for Meaningful Action, A Manual for Facilitators* (Chicago: American Friends Service Committee, 1997):

Concepts



EDUCATION BEING WITH LOVE
BY TAKING COLLECTIVE ACTION
STRATEGIC FOR OUR CHILDREN WE
WORK WITH THE FAMILIES AND
COMMUNITY TO CREATE A FUN
ENVIRONMENT WHICH IS DIVERSE
MULTICULTURAL AND NONVIOLENT
WE GREATLY APPRECIATE THE COMMUNITY
OF COOPERATION THAT ENCOURAGES
SELF-KNOWLEDGE, INDEPENDENCE AND
PRIDE OF LEARNING CULTURE IN THIS
PLACE OF OPENNESS, CREATIVITY AND
DISCOVERY. WE GROW SUCCESSFULLY
TOWARD A FUTURE OF PEACE AND
UNITY.

Our School Vision



Identity

Who is in the room?

"When my parents came to this country from Croatia, they didn't speak any English — and yet they were able to make it here. I saw them work hard and they didn't take handouts from anyone. Why can't other people work hard like my parents and live without welfare?"

"Some people in my community truly need welfare to survive. How can women go out to work when they can't afford childcare? I've seen the many of the jobs in my neighborhood leave over the last several years — where are these people supposed to work?"

As you can see these are two different points of view about the same subject — welfare. The speakers' perspectives are informed by their own life experiences, and those of their family and friends. The way that they look at reality is influenced by who they are.

Similarly, the analysis that you are about to engage in will also be influenced by who makes up your group. If your group is trying to analyze disability rights in the United States and yet no one in your group is disabled, obviously, you'll be missing a crucial perspective. This doesn't mean you should find "token" representatives from different groups. One Asian woman cannot be expected to speak for all Asian women. Is she a new immigrant or someone whose family has lived here for generations and she considers herself "American"? Is her heritage Chinese, Japanese, Korean or something else? These and many other factors make her the unique individual she is — with her own unique perspective.



Who isn't in the room?

If you are an organizer, you have no doubt thought about these issues. The best advice we can give is that because this process should be used as a way for community or activist groups to look at the reality of each moment and find openings for action, try to include everyone you can who is directly involved in the situation or geographic region that you are analyzing.

When you can't include everyone — at least figure out who is missing and acknowledge that your analysis will be affected by their absence. When a group of activists analyzed Chicago, they didn't have the 3 million people living in Chicago involved — but they did have a good sampling of the many ethnic and cultural groups in Chicago, although no people with disabilities and no youth. This was recognized at the start of the analysis and the group tried to inject the viewpoints of youth and people with disabilities to the best of their ability.

Finding out who is and isn't in the room is a good way to start any workshop.

Exercise: Who is in the Room?



Objective:

to provide the group with an opportunity to learn some things about one another and identify the different perspectives present in the group; to give each person a chance to think about the subjectivity of his or her own position

Time Needed:

30 min.

Materials Needed:

tape for line on floor

Instructions:

- Make a tape line on the floor. Ask participants to stand on one side of the room. You will be calling out the various categories to the right (or you can make up your own).
- Tell the group that as each category is called out, they should consider whether or not they belong in that category and whether or not they feel comfortable sharing that information with the group. Those who do should cross over the line. After the group can see who is represented in that category, those who crossed the line should go back to the rest of the group and wait for the next category to be called.
- After this activity, have a discussion with the group about whose perspectives are missing that would be important for the particular subject you are analyzing.

- born before 1950
- born in Chicago
- born outside U.S.
- both parents living
- come from a single parent home
- have someone in your family who has been divorced
- have been discriminated against because of the color of your skin
- have been discriminated against because of your sexuality
- grew up poor
- grew up in a religious family
- have experienced the effects of alcoholism or substance abuse in your family
- have personally felt racist feelings
- have dependents
- would like more children
- have experienced mental illness in your family
- have dealt with someone close to you having AIDS
- have worked on a project with other people and have felt a real success in your efforts
- have been discriminated against because of a disability
- grew up with more than enough
- grew up in a rural area
- grew up in the suburbs
- grew up in an urban area
- have someone in your family who has received welfare
- first generation of your family born in the U.S.
- went to college



The Moment

Think of Your Life as a Timeline

As you look back over your experiences you can probably identify one or two moments in your life when forces and circumstances converged to create change in your life. Maybe these circumstances changed the way that you thought about the world — a political awakening — like the ex-nun who told of changing her life's work after being part of the protests in the 1968 Democratic Convention. Or sometimes events like a job loss, a move across the country, or coming out to your parents will create a turning point in your life and your consciousness. These moments are full of power and energy. If we look at history, we can see that this same principle of “the moment” is applicable. The forces and circumstances that converge at a moment can also be thought of as a conjuncture or *coyuntura*. For example, all over the world, 1968 was a significant historical moment for many reasons. In retrospect we can look at the *coyuntura*, identify the forces at play and by analyzing their relationships, recognize openings for change that were available at that moment.

Note:

We usually mention to participants that we recognize the difficulty of isolating one moment in your life, but that this act of pulling your life apart is analysis, and that is what we're here to learn. If you tell the rest of the group your life story as series of moments that culminate to the present, you are engaging in synthesis.

Reality Check

The real trick, and the point of coyuntural analysis, is to identify the moment that we are in right now, and analyze its elements. Finding the current moment can be thought of as identifying the reality that exists for your community right now. Remember, your personal identity and the collective identity of the group you are working with will influence this reading of reality. Remember also that the moment is always changing — you'll have to continue to engage in coyuntural analysis as the realities shift.

We often introduce the concept of the moment by having participants reflect upon their own lives and share stories of a significant moment.

Inez

Inez told a story about her early experiences with education:

“I didn't know English when I first came to this country. I had a hard time in school and teachers were often condescending to me. Finally, one teacher asked me what I wanted to do when I finished school. I said that I wanted to go to college and the teacher laughed and said that he didn't think I was college material. It made me so mad — from that point on I became completely determined to go to college and to become a teacher so that I could help bilingual students.”

Haneen

Haneen, a young Palestinian woman who was raised in the U.S., told her story:

“Although I am Palestinian, I never felt that it was part of my identity. I always felt that I was American. When I was 15 my father and I went to the Middle East. When we were trying to cross back over the Israeli border from Jordan, they would not let us enter because we were Palestinian. They took away some of our possessions. It was a very upsetting experience. But, because of that experience — for the first time in my life I felt connected to my Palestinian identity. I was able to take the negative experience of that moment and ultimately make it empowering.”

Exercise: Naming Your Moment



Objective:

to give participants an opportunity to get to know one another in a different way and to begin to understand the significance of the moment by using their own lives as a framework

Time needed:

roughly 1 1/2 hours for 15 people

Materials needed:

newsprint, markers

Instructions:

- Ask participants to look back into their personal history and think of one defining (politically or otherwise) moment in their lives. It's a good idea to let people know ahead of time that they will be asked this question. We usually send the question to people with a group of readings and an agenda a few weeks before the workshop, so they have time to think about it.
- Ask the group to consider the circumstances and events surrounding their moment, allowing them to be transformed.
- Each person should relate this information in 5-7 minutes.

Write down key points on newsprint for future reference.



Note:

We've found that it isn't so important to try to tie together everyone's stories at the end. Instead, as you are listening you can jot down points that illustrate concepts involved in the analysis.

"In Haneen's story it was at the moment that she was being held at the border that she realized a contradiction in her life, she did not consider herself to be Palestinian and yet others did and were willing to take her freedom away because of it. Haneen was able to recognize that contradiction and use it in a powerful way by reclaiming her Palestinian identity."



Analysis

Reading:

"Theory as Liberatory Practice"

pp. 59-75 in

Teaching to Transgress (Education as the Practice of Freedom)

by bell hooks

(see bibliography)

What is analysis?

Analysis is breaking up a whole into its component parts to discover their nature. Synthesis, on the other hand, is combining the parts or elements to form a whole.

"I don't have time to sit and do all of this analytical work — people in my community need action!" This is a common response heard when we ask people to spend 20 hours learning the concept and process of coyuntural analysis. It is a big commitment for anyone, let alone for most of the people who come to our workshops. All of them have jobs and families, on top of working for their communities. We agree that theory without practice is of little use to activists. But we would also argue that practice without theory isn't as effective and powerful as it could be. Coyuntural analysis is a process that intertwines both theory and practice — it is a reflective process that leads to action, then further reflection and more action, and on and on as the historical moment continues to change. We feel that analysis in general and coyuntural analysis in particular will enhance the work of any community organization.



The theory/practice split

In Latin America and other parts of the world, theory and practice have an easy alliance and coyuntural analysis is a way of life for many. However, in the U.S. we find that people often sit in one camp or the other. For this reason we often spend a little time analyzing analysis! This next exercise is designed to bring participants to the realization that they actually do analysis all the time, they just might not realize it — and that a richer analysis can be obtained with the proper tools.

Exercise: Apples and Oranges



Objective:

to introduce the elements of analysis

Time needed:

30-45 min.

Materials Needed:

a rotting apple, an orange, newsprint, markers, measuring tape, a scale, pH paper, knife

Instructions:

- Ask the group to break into two smaller groups. One group gets the apple and the other the orange. Each group must describe their piece of fruit. The group can list their description on large paper. (5 min.)
- Each small group presents their description to the large group. Then ask the large group to brainstorm what tools they used to generate the descriptions (observation, comparison, etc.) and put these up on paper.
- Then ask each group if they know what the pH content of the apple is or how much the orange weighs. Ask them what they would need to find this information. Then distribute the tools listed in the materials section and let them generate more detailed information.
- Have the small groups report back to the large group. Ask the large group to think about what tools they would have to use to come up with additional information.
- Have a discussion with the large group about analysis. What tools from the first step do they use in their work (observation, comparison, etc.)? What tools do they use to generate more detailed information in their work? Coyuntural analysis can be looked upon as another tool for activists to use.



Note:

If we remember, we bring a rotting apple to use for this exercise to once again introduce the element of time and the moment. Seeing the apple in a decaying state reminds everyone that the moment is changing all the time.

Contradictions



"Like saying one thing and doing another..."

Our lives are surrounded by and often made up of contradictions. They are an essential part of the social fabric. If left alone these contradictions are often the site of discord. However, when contradictions are isolated and analyzed they can provide fertile ground for social change. An essential part of coyuntural analysis is finding, investigating, and exploiting the contradictions that exist within a coyuntura.

Note:

We have the definitions to the right printed on large posters that can be seen throughout the room, so people can refer back to them during the session. However, we keep the poster with the definition of contradiction covered up until after this first part of the workshop because in this exercise participants and facilitators work together to define contradiction within a social arena.

A group of activists in Philadelphia came up with this definition:
"...opposing forces that exist within a whole."

Contradictions are only one element within coyuntural analysis; however we tend to spend a lot of time on them because in our experience it seems to be the hardest concept for North American groups to grasp. We have had some very interesting philosophical discussions in our workshops about how different cultures view contradictions. The people in our groups who are from Latin America usually already know the concept of contradiction because it has been part of their formal or informal understanding of analysis. People in our groups who have been raised in the United States usually have some notion of what contradiction means, but don't naturally link it to a social context. Asian participants have reminded us that in Eastern thought, contradictions are not always something that need to be "solved."

Most people probably have a working definition of "contradiction" in their heads. We found that the meaning of contradiction was often conflated with the meanings of issue and conflict. After the first few times of trying to make it through coyuntural analysis with this muddled understanding of contradiction, we realized we needed to clarify its meaning in order to use it as a tool. Therefore, we spend a lot of time in our workshops trying to understand the concept of contradiction. Look at the examples to the right.



Issue:

a significant social, political, or economic situation

Example 1: domestic violence

Example 2: falling wages



Conflict:

social, political, or economic forces in opposition

Example 1: women's rights vs. patriarchal culture

Example 2: multinational corporate interests vs. needs of the people



Contradiction:

a situation in which forces in opposition share a common element

Example 1: Women are cautioned to fear strangers on the street, yet they are more likely to be hurt by someone they know in the home.

Example 2: Despite continued growth in the U.S. economy, the average worker's weekly salary has fallen continuously since 1973.

Exercise: Liberty and Justice for All



Objective:

to clarify the meaning of contradiction in this context

Time Needed:

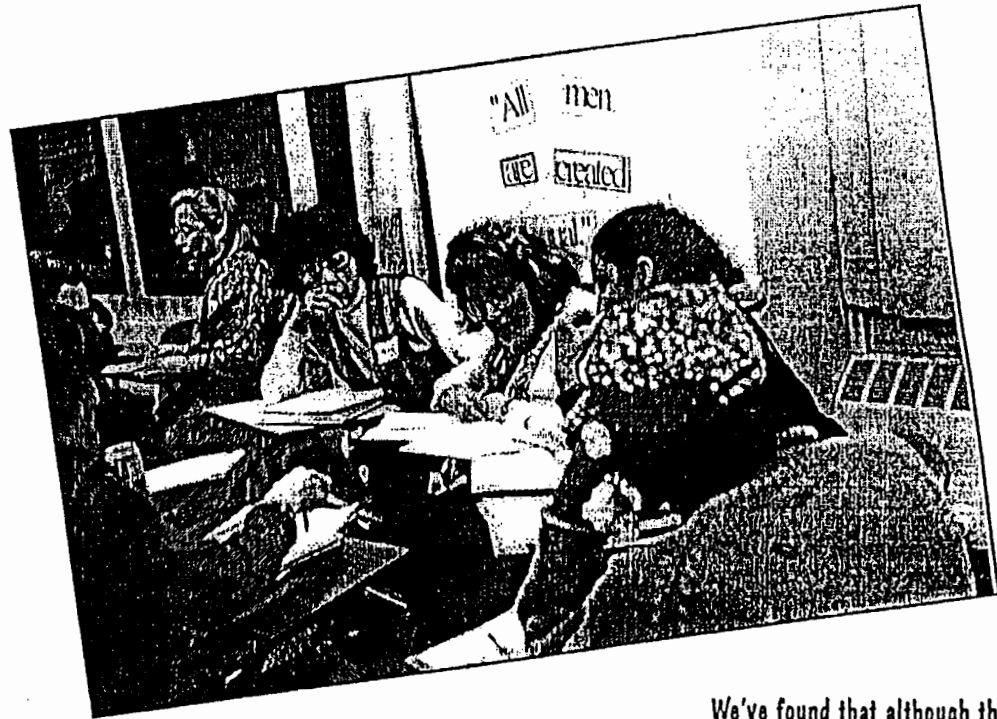
30 min.

Materials Needed:

large paper with statements written (see below), newsprint, markers, large posters with definitions and examples

Instructions:

- Ask the group to come up with their own definition of contradiction, and share with large group.
- Ask the group to come to consensus but realize that we are going to deepen our definition in this context.
- Present statements that are hung on the wall (Liberty and Justice for All, All Men are Created Equal, etc.) It will help if you can find a phrase that has particular relevance to the group, for example: with Chicago Public School Teachers we use the CPS motto "Our Children Our Future".)
- The group will be asked to choose a statement and articulate why that statement presents a contradiction within the context of social reality.
- Present the examples for issue, conflict, and contradiction. Discuss.
- Together, come to a consensus on a definition of contradiction.



Note:

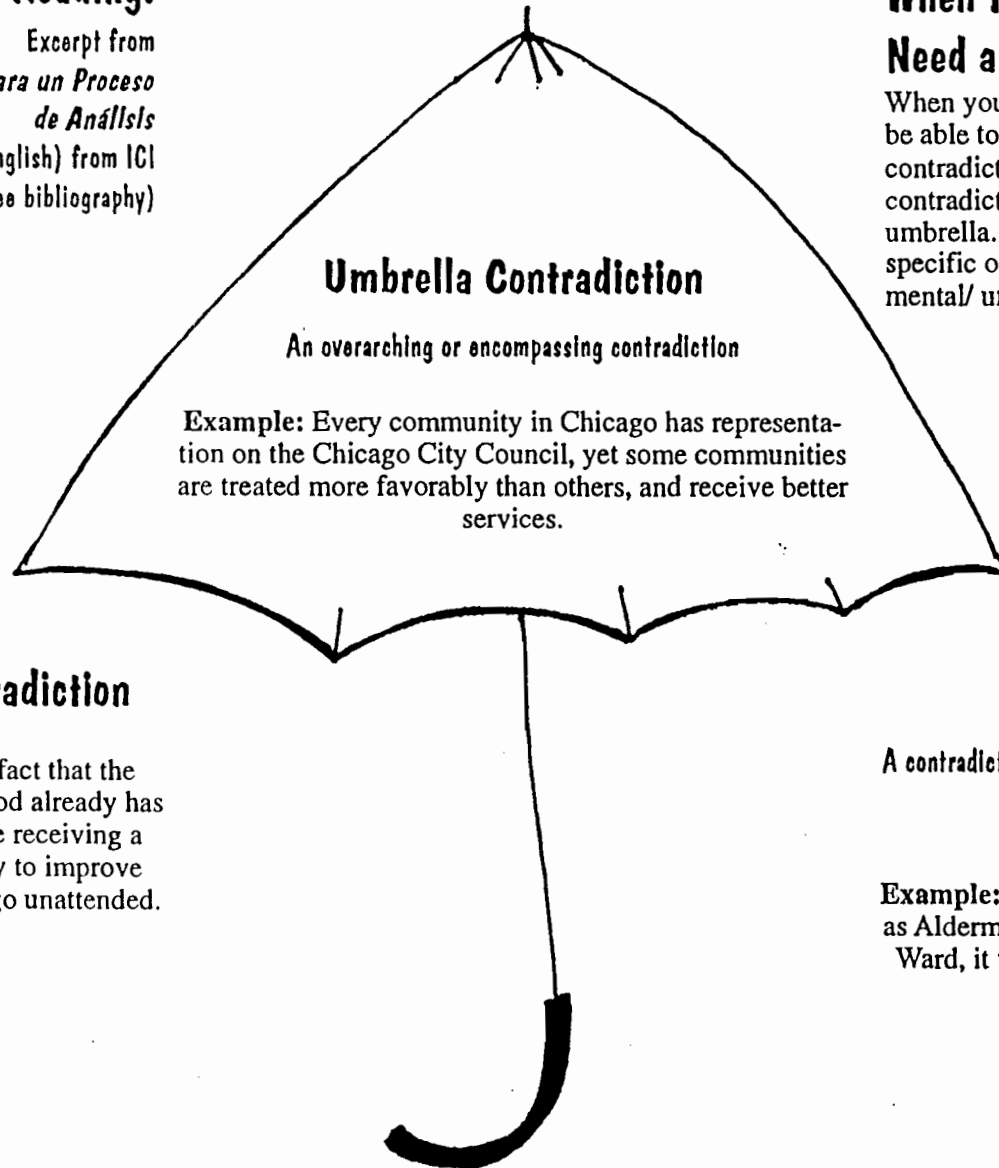
We've found that although this exercise might seem too elementary at times, the groups that develop their own definitions of contradiction always have a clearer concept of the term.



Umbrella Contradictions

Reading:

Excerpt from
*Apartes Metodologicos para un Proceso
de Análisis*
(in English) from ICI
(see bibliography)



Umbrella Contradiction

An overarching or encompassing contradiction

Example: Every community in Chicago has representation on the Chicago City Council, yet some communities are treated more favorably than others, and receive better services.

When It's Raining Contradictions, You Need an Umbrella

When you collect lots and lots of contradictions, it helps to be able to distinguish between fundamental or umbrella contradictions and secondary contradictions. Fundamental contradictions are overarching or encompassing, like an umbrella. Secondary contradictions tend to be more specific or might be examples or evidence of the fundamental/ umbrella contradiction.

Secondary Contradiction

Example: Despite the fact that the Lincoln Park neighborhood already has beautiful parks, they are receiving a large grant from the city to improve their parks while others go unattended.

Secondary Contradiction

A contradiction that might be more specific and fall under an umbrella contradiction

Example: Daniel Solis has been appointed to the 25th Ward as Alderman by the Mayor, yet since he does not live in this Ward, it will be hard for him to represent this community.

Exercise: Phrasing Contradictions



Despite the fact that this seems easy, it's not!

Once everyone understands the concept of contradiction, it's time to learn how to articulate one, or put it in a phrase. We've found that the best trick is to use "Despite" or "Yet" in the sentence. For example: "Despite the fact that this group's mission calls for democratic rule, one person really has all the power" or "This group's mission calls for democratic rule, yet one person really has all the power." This little trick will be very useful. It can help you sort out a complex idea and put it into contradiction form.

We've found that giving participants a situation and asking them to articulate the contradiction is useful. We often use a blurb from *Resist* that called for a boycott on the upscale Starbucks coffee bar chain. The story reveals that Starbucks treats their Guatemalan workers very poorly, which is in contradiction to their politically conscious image.

Objective:

to give participants practice articulating contradictions

Time Needed:

20 min.

Materials Needed:

a short story with an example of a contradiction

Instructions:

- Hand out an article that shows an example of a contradiction and ask the group to name the contradiction and then articulate it.

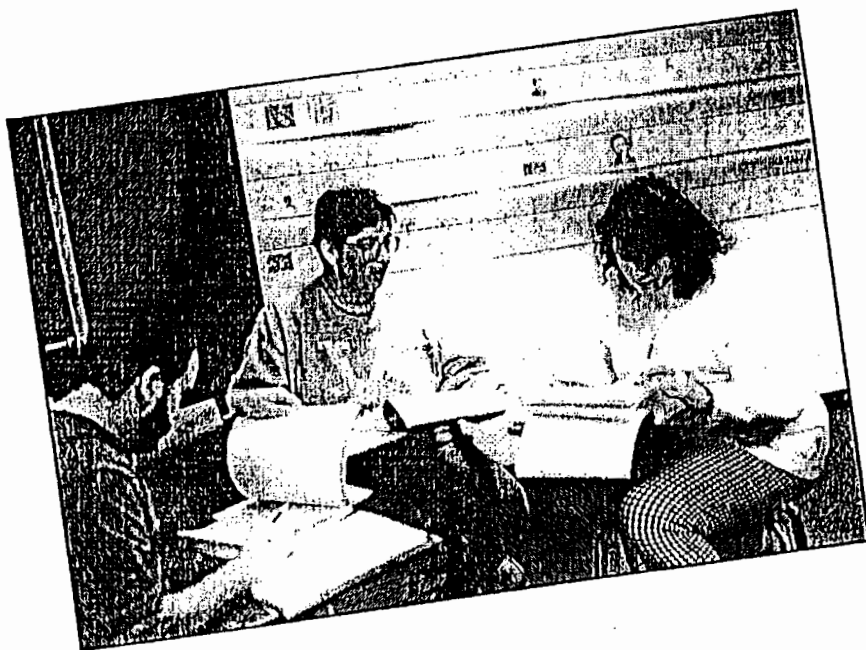


Yet
or
Despite the fact



Note:

In order to keep track of the many contradictions that will come up over the course of the workshop, we build what we call the Wall of Contradictions. This is simply a long piece of butcher block paper. We pass out small pieces of paper for people to write contradictions on as they come up, and continually tape them to the wall.



"Know the Past, Make the Path."

Reading:

pp. 215-226 of

We Make the Road by Walking (Conversations on Education and Social Change)

by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire
(see bibliography)

We have always loved the saying "There is no path, we make the path by walking" and the simple way it reminds us that action and reflection will lead us onward. But we also feel that knowing about our history will help us on our journey. Just as it is crucial to identify the reality that we are living in at this moment — we also need to look at the historical context of this reality. We integrate a historical timeline into every coytuntural analysis workshop because we know the importance of understanding the struggles of the past in order to assess the present and plan for the future.

The People's Historical Timeline of Chicago

Just as our analysis is affected by the way we see the world, history books that we read in school are written with a particular point of view. The dominant viewpoint expressed in many of these books excludes the perspectives of people of color, women, children, people with disabilities and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered people. We've tried to address that by creating our own history of Chicago in a timeline that was created by many of those excluded from mainstream history. The People's Historical Timeline of Chicago is an ongoing project — all participants in Praxis workshops contribute dates and information. The timeline has a section for events and trends specific to Chicago and Illinois and another section for national and international events and trends so that the Chicago history can be viewed in context. When we ask people to add dates, sometimes they research by looking in books, sometimes they talk to friends or relatives, sometimes they have general knowledge about their community. The timeline reflects the interests and knowledge of those who participated in creating it. Naturally, there are many holes in it that would probably upset a professional historian. But every time we do a workshop, someone fills in one of the gaps and we're confident that eventually they will all be filled.

Exercise: Know the Past, Make the Path



OPTION 1:

Historical Timeline of Chicago

Objective:

to give a context for our work in Chicago; to identify trends that may apply to our current situation; to point out the relations between apparently isolated events; to begin to think about contradictions

Time Needed:

one hour

Materials Needed:

Peoples' Historical Timeline of Chicago (contact AFSC Chicago), post-its, markers

Instructions:

We usually give copies of the timeline to participants a couple of weeks before the workshop. That way they have time to look at it and not only add new dates, but find events and trends in a category that they have been assigned. The categories that we usually use are: police/crime, resistance, immigration/migration, labor/industry.

- Ask the group to break up into 4 small groups according to the categories that they were assigned. Each group will have 15 minutes to:
 - discuss the trends they noticed in their category and choose 2 or 3 to write on post-its and present to group
 - discuss the dates significant to their community that they found and put on post-its to present to group
 - add any new events or trends to post-its
 - at the end of the 15 minutes, make a presentation of their findings to the group
- Ask the group to notice trends and events that relate to their community or focus specifically and discuss.

- Discuss the idea of contradiction with the group to review the concept. Ask for examples of contradiction from the timeline, then focus on one time-period as a moment. We find that 1968 works really well because most people have some knowledge of that era. Have the group make a list of events that occurred in that time and then ask the group to find contradictions in that moment.

OPTION 2:

Historical Timeline

If you don't have a copy of our timeline you can still do a form of this exercise. All you will need is a large piece of butcher block paper, markers, tape, and post-its.

Instructions:

- Break the large group into several small groups. Each group will be asked to think of historical events and trends in three areas: family, community, and global/national history. They will write these on post-its and put them up on the large butcher block paper. You might want to write in a few key events and dates such as WWII 1939-45, just to give people reference points.
- At the end of the hour, make a presentation of their findings.
- Discuss the concept of contradiction with the group. Ask for examples of contradiction from the timeline.
- Focus on one time-period (perhaps 1968). Have the group make a list of events that occurred in that time and then ask group to find contradictions in that moment.



Vision



Reading:

"The Welder" by Cherríe Moraga In
*This Bridge Called My Back (Writings by
Radical Women of Color)*
Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.)
(see bibliography)

Our Vision of the Future

In addition to understanding the past, we need to be able to envision the future to move forward. We always try to spend some time with groups to not only explore each participant's individual vision, but to bring the group to a collective vision. This will help the group in the long term as they analyze, develop actions, analyze again, and so on. When an organization or community has a common vision of where they need to go, then they have a reason for the ongoing analysis and action.

Our Ideal School

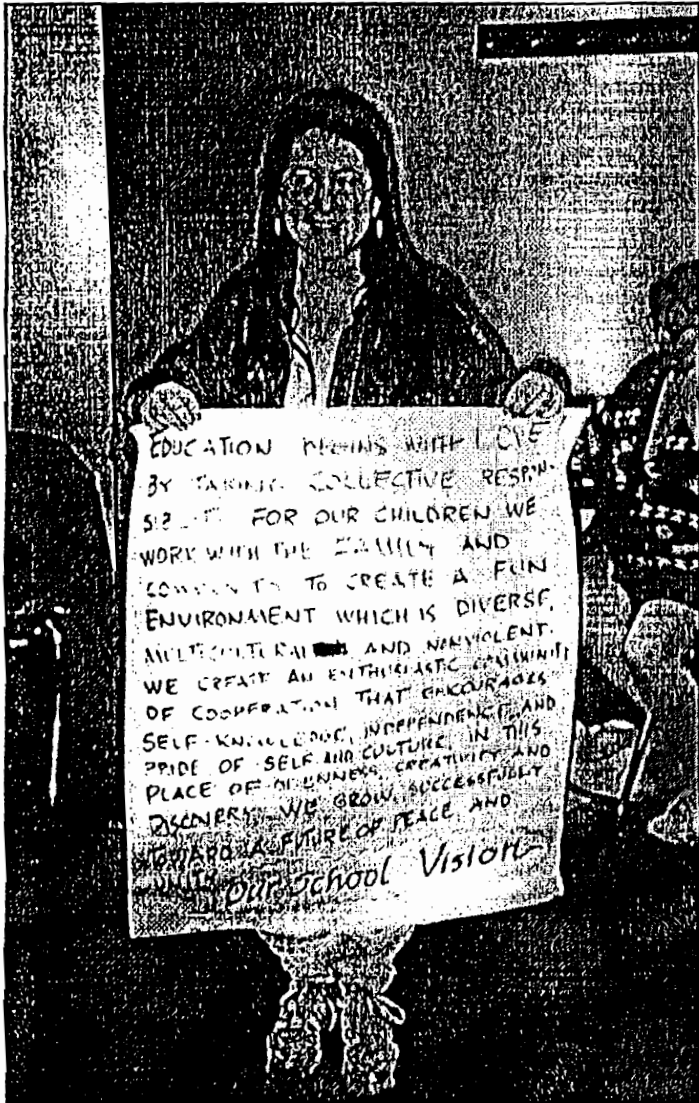
Chicago Public School teachers came up with this collective vision statement:

" Our ideal school will be an environment of teachers, parents, students, and community members working together. By integrating critical thinking, problem solving, and conflict resolution in an interdisciplinary, challenging, innovative, state-of-the-art curriculum. We will facilitate a multicultural consciousness, ecological connectiveness, illumination of self-awareness, and empowerment by collective actions that will contribute to a just, sound communal existence among peoples."

Photography as Metaphor

Often, when we're trying to come to a collective vision, we use drawings or photographs to spark everyone's creativity and imagination. In the exercise that follows, participants are asked to contribute images and respond to a series of photographs related to the focus of their analysis.

Exercise: Creating Collective Vision



Objective:

to generate discussion about individuals' visions and to help the group develop a collective vision

Time Needed:

one hour

Materials Needed:

collection of photos or xeroxes of photos, newsprint, markers

Instructions:

- Ask the group to bring to the workshop an image that inspires them or gives them hope. Ask the group to add their images to the collection if you have one, or just work with the images they bring in.
- Ask the group to consider these questions:
 - Which image represents what you believe in?
 - Which image represents what you want to avoid?
 - Which image reminds you of the ideal community?
 - Why does the image you brought in give you hope?
- (Optional)
 - Have the group use the images they brought in to create a collage that reflects elements of their collective vision.
- Ask group to formulate a collective vision statement for their community.

Note:

We usually get a rough statement down from suggestions of the large group. Then we ask for 1 or 2 volunteers who are willing to take the rough draft home and work on it a little more before the next meeting. Then we'll start off the next meeting by looking at these 1 or 2 more polished statements and change and combine them in the large group to create a more finished statement.

Concept Review

Identity



Spend some time looking at the make-up of your group and discussing how the composition of the group and their particular realities will affect the content of the analysis.

The Moment



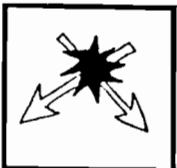
Finding the current moment can be thought of as identifying the reality that exists for your community right now. Finding this moment and analyzing its elements to lead your community toward social change is the point of coyuntural analysis.

Analysis



Analysis is the process of taking a whole and breaking down its component parts to discover their nature.

Contradictions



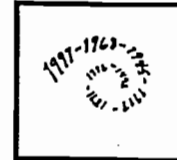
Opposing forces that share a common element. For example: *Starbucks projects a socially conscious image to the public, yet they pay their Guatemalan coffee pickers terrible wages.*

Umbrella Contradictions



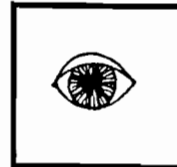
Fundamental contradictions are overarching or encompassing, like an umbrella. Secondary contradictions tend to be more specific or might be examples or evidence of the fundamental/ umbrella contradiction.

History



Just as it is crucial to identify the reality that we are living in at this moment — we need to look at the historical context of this reality.

Vision



Creating a common or shared vision within your group can help you stay on track as you continue the constant process of action and reflection.