

# Foreword

*How do you treat people with respect? How do you do a program that treats people with respect?*

Myles Horton in conversation with Paulo Freire,  
*We Make the Road by Walking*

Paulo Freire and Myles Horton met in December 1987 for an extended conversation on education and social change. At one point, they were asked to talk about their approach to literacy work—Freire, the Brazilian educator, on popular education in Recife, and Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School, on Highlander’s Citizenship Schools. Horton begins by describing Highlander’s work in the 1950s on racial justice in the South and the integrated workshops held at Highlander that brought people together to learn from each other’s experience. At one workshop, Esau Jenkins, a community leader who was trying to teach people to read while busing them to and from factory, mill, and domestic jobs in the city, asked for Highlander’s help to set up a literacy school so people could pass the voter registration exam, gain the vote, and exercise political power.

When Horton stays at Jenkins’ home on Johns Island so he can meet people who would attend the school, he discovers that literacy classes have been held on the island since before the Civil War up to the time of his visit. People start but never stay for long. Horton wants to know why and concludes that literacy workers did not treat people with respect. The two simple questions he asks himself—How do you treat people with respect? How do you do a program that treats people with respect?—guide planning for what will become a model for all Citizenship Schools. Horton and Jenkins, along with Septima Clark, a schoolteacher from Charleston, North Carolina, who once taught on Johns Island, draw up a few basic principles: black people should teach black people; the teachers should not be trained teachers who tend to treat adults like children; and, class materials should be challenging and closely resemble the difficult reading needed to pass the voter registration exam. Bernice Robinson, the first “teacher” chosen for her leadership qualities, wants people to learn to read things that will be inspiring to keep them motivated while they also learn desired skills such as writing their names and filling out money orders. She selects *The Declaration of Human Rights* and the Highlander mission statement to illustrate the theme of democracy and citizenship. To avoid the stigma of being in a literacy class, Robinson turns the class into a community organization—a Citizenship School—where people make plans for what they will do as a community when they get the vote. As Horton later remarks, “. . . reading and writing wasn’t the purpose. Being a citizen was the purpose” (Horton and Freire 1990, 83).

Four years after the first class met in January 1957, the Citizenship Schools had trained 400 volunteer teachers. More than 4,000 people who attended the schools had passed the Citizenship School’s final exam—to go down to the courthouse and register to vote. Andrew Young came to Highlander to coordinate the grassroots program and, in the early 1960s, it became the official program of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), its further expansion and integration into the civil rights movement coordinated by Young and Clark. By the 1970s, the SCLC estimated that around 100,000 people had learned to read and write at the Citizenship Schools. Later Horton would meet a woman who

told him about the schools she and others “invented for their community,” as indeed they had.

I like to think our best work in developmental education begins from this place of deep respect for learners, their learning and agency, and that this is true of our learning community work as well. The approach Horton describes, similar to the practice in other open education movements, does not rank learning from the least to the most prestigious. People value one another’s experience, expect to learn from everyone present, and develop a camaraderie that is a good foil against frustration. No mention is made of “deficits” or “skill deficiencies.” Why would people stigmatize others in this way?

When a group of fellows<sup>1</sup> from Washington Center’s National Learning Communities Project (NLCP) met to discuss a proposed monograph on learning communities and developmental education, the question of respect came to mind as the conversation took a surprising turn early on. Should we use words other than “developmental education”?

The reasoning behind the question covered well-trod territory. Colleagues worry that faculty they know, including those teaching in college-level learning communities, might balk at reading something with developmental education in the title. On many campuses, developmental education is a code for remedial education or re-teaching basic skills that high school graduates and some middle school students should already know, hence the view that students taking developmental courses are “not smart.” Colleagues report that where budget cuts force a rethinking of which programs and services should continue, heated exchanges tap into historically-persistent debates about developmental education: whether funds should be “diverted” from college-level programs to teaching (and learning) considered inappropriate for higher education; whether the influx of underprepared students dilutes academic expectations and lowers standards; and whether students in developmental education even belong in postsecondary education. As the conversation ran its course, it became clear that the proposed monograph could not address every perception about developmental education, however mistaken.

For readers interested in pursuing the above issues, there are several useful starting places. In *No One to Waste* (2000), Robert McCabe presents a data-rich defense of developmental education. In fact, developmental education turns out to be higher education’s most productive program. At a cost of 1 percent of all higher education spending and 4 percent of financial aid, one million students are served, and approximately half of these students successfully complete developmental classes. Those who continue their studies do as well in standard college classes as their better-prepared peers. One-sixth complete academic undergraduate and associate degrees and one-third complete vocational degrees and certificates. In *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education* (1999), Tom Fox examines fears about declining literacy standards in the historical context of the push for access. He argues that cultural and/or linguistic differences are more at issue, not student performance. Fox urges us to break with acontextual standards in favor of context-specific and even student-specific standards. And, in *Who Belongs in College: A Second Look* (1998),

Carlette Hardin classifies developmental students into seven groups to counter the view that students are mainly eighteen-year-olds who slept through high school and want a second chance to learn at taxpayers' expense. Most fit the profile of "poor choosers," people who made decisions between ages fourteen and eighteen that continue to restrict their education and employment possibilities. Hardin also notes that when she first wrote about who belongs in college in 1988, developmental education's role in higher education was very contentious. A decade later, she reports that thirty-one states are embroiled in debates about its value—today, a mere five years later, the situation is even more volatile.

The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education's commitment to developmental education is deep-rooted. Both learning communities and developmental education have been influenced by the educational philosophies of Alexander Meiklejohn and John Dewey, specifically their views on democracy, education for citizenship, and a pedagogy that promotes "critical intelligence" as well as a developmental perspective on learning (Shaw 2002; Smith and McCann 2001; Smith, et al. Forthcoming). Back in 1985 when the Center began, the founders embraced developmental education as an essential component of higher education. Early in the center's history, Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor organized a seminar, "Improving the Teaching of Basic Skills," where Roberta Matthews of LaGuardia Community College in New York City introduced "learning clusters" to Washington state educators. The example of LaGuardia's New Student House, a learning community model described later in this monograph, sparked people's interest. One of Washington Center's first curriculum planning retreats, "Creating Learning Communities for the Developmental Level Student," gave faculty teams from different campuses the time to plan integrated curriculum for underprepared students.

A modest seed grant program begun in the late 1980s helped good ideas sprout into practice. Early editions of the center newsletter report on emerging learning communities within developmental education, and among developmental education, English as a Second Language, and college-level courses. Some of these pioneering Washington state programs are featured in this monograph, not only for their commitment over the long haul, a key lesson in sustaining and leading organizational change, but also for another distinguishing hallmark—meaningful, engaged student learning. Other institutions featured in the monograph's case studies, such as De Anza, Grossmont, and LaGuardia community colleges, have equally long and distinguished learning community histories.

Opportunities to continue conversations with NLCP fellows helped clarify what two distinct and sometimes overlapping communities of reform-minded educators—faculty and academic staff involved in learning communities and faculty and academic staff involved in developmental education—do *not* know about one another's work and need to if we are to foster collaboration that will benefit underprepared students. The monograph's themes and topics reflect these exchanges.

Conversations with busy monograph contributors Pam Dusenberry, Ben Sloan, Jan Swinton, and Phyllis van Slyck turned into wonderful opportunities to explore the what, why, and how of working with students new to academic culture. Their accounts of learning community programs for developmental students, and the experience of others—drawn from National Learning Communities Project consultants’ site visit reports, from Jean MacGregor’s summaries of telephone interviews with developmental educators throughout the country, and from Washington Center’s work with campus teams especially at curriculum planning retreats—illustrate possibilities for practice.

Readers are also invited to visit the learning communities directory on the National Learning Communities Project website for more resources and to register their own campus learning communities so we can all learn from one another’s good work (<http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>).

### **Endnotes**

1. The “fellows” of the National Learning Communities Project are faculty, professional staff, and administrators from universities and community colleges across the country that are knowledgeable about learning community work and other educational reform efforts; they serve as consultants to the project and resource faculty for residential summer institutes.