



Popular Education: Creating a Space Where We Can All Participate!



IMAGE: A student raises his hand in class.

Students learn in a lot of different ways. Every student has a style that works the best for him or her, but, unfortunately, there isn't a teacher or a classroom that fits every single student. Oftentimes, students with disabilities are called lazy, stupid, or careless because they have a hard time paying attention in class. Sometimes the student is blamed for not following along, but this isn't always because of choice. The student may not be following along because the teaching style being used simply doesn't work.

People mainly think of education as something that happens in classrooms, but we learn everywhere. We learn from reading magazines, talking in conversations, listening to experiences that our friends have, being involved with our families. One place we really learn is in community spaces.

There are many different ways to learn. NYLN has found that if we want to be truly inclusive to youth with disabilities, our workshops and our documents have to put our needs at the center. Putting people "at the center" means that a group is thinking about all members of a community and making sure the space around them is what that group needs.

One way we put youth with disabilities at the center of what we do is by using a teaching method called Popular Education. We love Popular Education and want to share what we know with you!



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Popular Education

Popular education is a way to teach and to learn. Rather than having an authority figure standing at the front of the room lecturing or giving information, everyone learns from each other. A facilitator [someone who makes it easier for a group to find common goals] uses different activities to help people talk and listen to each other.

Here are some key beliefs of Popular Education:

- Everyone's experiences are important.
- Everyone is both a teacher and a learner.
- Everything we need to know, we can learn from the people and world around us.



IMAGE: A coastal nation on a map.

When people hear the word “popular” they think of the word that means to be liked by a lot of people. For example, “That girl has a lot of friends. She is so popular!” However, when we say popular education, the word “popular” comes from the Spanish word “popular.” In Spanish, “popular” means “of the people.” Popular education started in Brazil. The best way to describe it is by discussing its Spanish definition: *la educación popular*. It literally means “the education of the people.”

Popular education has a history connected to many social-change movements. It was created because people needed to teach each other what was unfair about the way their community was being treated. It centered on people left out of the educational system, like migrants, women, and peasants. Pop Ed was really empowering to them because it put them in charge of their own learning. By working as a community, they could teach each other everything they needed to know. Now popular education is used around the world.

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IMAGE: People are holding hands in a circle. Some are on a cliff and others are in the sky.

People use popular education tools when they want a group to think critically about something. Critical thinking means looking at something, studying it, and seeing patterns. Popular education is used a lot in social change workshops so the group can see patterns in how people are treated. Since popular education is about people working together, the group can also decide together what to do about an issue. Popular education is a good fit for youth with disabilities because it uses many different learning styles. Instead of just reading from a book or hearing someone speak, it uses all kinds of tools to get discussion going.

Here are some examples of popular education tools:

- **Story Circles.** Tell a story to a small group about a certain experience (like a time when you were discriminated against). Then have a facilitator help a larger group show shared themes among the various stories.
- **Music.** Play a song that is relevant to the topic being “studied.” Discuss it. A twist might be having the group sing a song together or write a new one. Music can be a different way to learn something.
- **Writing.** Ask people to write poetry. Give them a set time to work on it. A twist might be providing them words (like on magnets or on a screen) that they have to use. Another twist might be using a copy machine to make a book as a group.
- **Body Movement.** This could involve role playing, dance, or group movement. Using our bodies is another good way to think about things. It helps us get in touch with our feelings in a new way.

Popular education is all about being creative with learning and thinking. If you have new ideas, try them out!



What Is “Safe Space”?

“Safe space” is an environment—both physical and mental—where you feel included and can contribute. It’s whatever space you need to be your whole, beautiful, best self. This is why it is important to think consciously about how to make space accessible.

Safe Space Begins with Accessibility

What do people usually think of when they hear the words “accessibility” and “disability”?

Accessibility is a way of measuring how easy it is to use a service or to go somewhere. If a wheelchair user can get in a building, it is “wheelchair accessible.”

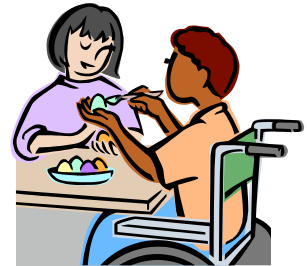


IMAGE: Friends are painting eggs. One is a wheelchair user.

Universal design is when the place or the service is made fully accessible for all people with disabilities. If something is not universally designed (and most places right now aren’t), people need accommodations to use these services.

Accommodations are things people need to participate. Some accommodations people think about for youth with disabilities are:

- Braille or large print
- Sign language interpreters
- Ramps and elevators
- Extra time

Here are some other accommodations that people usually don’t think about:

- Words and pictures that are easy to understand
- Scent-free spaces for people who are sensitive to chemicals
- Time alone/quiet space
- Different learning style methods
- Smaller classroom size
- Being careful about emotional “triggers”

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- Room for personal care attendants
- Attention to keeping walking distances short
- Mentorship for people who are new to a space or an activity

Accessibility Beyond Disability

Accessibility goes beyond ramps and signs. Accessibility goes beyond disability. Some things need to be provided out of respect for everyone, so that all people are in a position to fully participate. Everyone is valuable and has a voice that should be heard.

Here are some other things to consider providing to make learning more accessible:

- **Multi-lingual spaces.** Provide translators so people can speak in the language they know. Someone who only speaks Spanish or French wouldn't be able to participate in a space that only uses English.
- **Stipends [money].** Everyone's time is valuable, and it is common for people with disabilities not to have much money to spend. Value the contributions of people with disabilities enough to pay a fair price for their input/involvement.
- **Transportation.** People who don't have cars or access to public transportation will need a way to get to the event.
- **No-Hate/Safe Space.** Safe space is when people agree to think about what they say and how it affects people hearing it. For example, someone would pay extra attention to not saying things that are racist or violent.
- **Food.** If you are having a meeting during a mealtime, provide food so that everyone is fed equally.

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- **Trigger Warnings.** A lot of people experience violence in many ways. If you are going to show a picture or video with something violent in it, warn people. This allows people to step out of the room in case it might trigger a bad memory for them.
- **Childcare.** A lot of young parents have disabilities. Often times they are can only participate if their kids can be there.



IMAGE: A wheelchair user is hugging a child.

ALL people need things that help them participate. Thinking and talking about accessibility can make it so that everyone can take part. It shows that everyone is valuable and has a voice that should be heard.

Here are some sample questions to begin these conversations:

- What do you need to be physically in a space?
- What do you need to be internally in a space?
- What do you need to be included and feel as though you're fully contributing?
- How can we build a space where everyone has that together?

Safe space is an amazing way to create a new environment while people are there! This allows everyone to feel heard and represented. It will also allow for your efforts to be more well-received. You may even learn some things that you were never expecting! Enjoy!

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**This document was written by the
National Youth Leadership Network.**

This information was created for youth, by youth. The information is based primarily on first-hand life experiences. We value direct youth-to-youth communications. We wrote this document to be as inclusive as possible. However, we also know that there may be additional information or different perspectives to what is shared here. Let us know what you think.

The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) works to build power among young leaders with disabilities. We are a national non-profit organization led by and for youth with disabilities ages 16-28 years old. We live across the United States and its territories.

We believe that youth with disabilities can be great leaders. We work to promote youth leadership and education. Our goal is to make sure youth with disabilities have the chance to set and reach their own goals. Anyone can become a member of our organization for free. Please visit our website and register today!

**For more information:
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