GTP ORGANIZER TRAINING

Training Guide #29
Introduction to Organizing

General

Whenever a teacher and a student come together, the teacher must make a number of basic decisions.

The first decision is about how much of the subject matter should be structured. Some students thrive on an absence of structure; given the opportunity they need only be pointed in the general direction of the subject heading. From there they quickly and happily determine their own prioritized outline of study, relating the material to their interests and plans. When forced into a pre-structured study plan, these individuals often experience frustration and anger. On the other hand, students who thrive on subject matter that is structured for them, which is their right since they're paying for the instruction, when forced to create their own structure will also experience frustration and anger. Withal, this course is deigned with an effort to both structure the material and, within that structure, provide opportunities for the individual student to determine direction and emphasis.

The second basic decision that the instructor must make is whether to focus on conceptual or practical matters first. Some of us, for instance, given a new camera, wouldn't think of using it before reading the instruction manual; others wouldn't dream of bothering with the manual until becoming fully familiar with the camera from practical use. In effect, some of us learn more efficiently by starting with hands-on experience, while others excel by starting with a conceptual overview. This course aims to compromise by starting with organizing forerunners and precursors, a brief *historical introduction* to the *practice* of community organizing, then to examine a *theory* for practice, and after that move on to the bulk of the subject matter, which is overwhelmingly practice-oriented.

The third fundamental decision that an instructor must make arises from a situation that occurs repeatedly. Insofar as organizers are teachers, especially when working to mentor leaders, they too are continually faced with this decision. Whatever their formal titles, to teach a particular lesson to a particular individual, a teacher must choose repeatedly whether to ask a questions of students, offer alternatives, or make a statement—depending on the resources the student brings to the situation. Needless to say, the decision becomes much more complicated when an instructor is teaching many individuals at the same time. In this course we'll use all three approaches, hopefully tailoring them whenever possible to the intellectual, emotional, and experiential resources that individual students bring to the class.

Basic Assumptions

1. Community organizing assumes that relations of power are inescapable—that social action is inexplicable without insight into power—and that building power is the main task of organizers.

2. Organizing divides into four primary tasks:

    —Building community, i.e., developing relationships and networks that are fundamental to social life and that form organizational foundation;
    —Building organization, i.e., developing the structure and culture, and the purposive action of relationships that are formalized, typically in written documents (e.g., constitutions and bylaws);
    —Building mobilization, i.e., developing the capacity for organized turnouts of large numbers of citizens that re directed toward the resolution of a particular issue; and
    —Building institutions, i.e., developing permanent organizations that successfully contend for state or other institutionalized powers that enable their long-term survival and achievement of objectives.

3. Sponsorship is the critical variable in practice—whoever pays the piper calls the tune.

4. Organizers *don't create* social action, but they model and shape the direction of incipient or pre-existing action or movement.

5. Organizing seeks to discover or enable articulation of demand, not determination of need (which reinforces dependency).

6. Purpose of practice learning is living, which is gained by praxis.

7. Organizer training focuses on *how* rather than *why*, *what*, or for *whom*; organizer education emphasizes the why and what.

8. All of you undoubtedly will not become professional organizers, but in your careers as social workers and citizens, the organizing knowledge and skill you develop may be very useful to you nonetheless.

Definitions
New terminology means more than memorization of new words. The terms themselves incorporate new concepts and ways of thinking about the work.

1. Community organiza*tion* vs. community organiz*ing*

2. Practice

3. Theory (unified, normative, prescriptive)

4. *Professional* praxis (leads to strategy)

5.   Technology (dialogue vs. discovery traditions of knowledge)

6.   Action field

7.   Contingencies or learning and exchange

8.   Ideological realities

9.   Infrastructure

10.   Base-building

11.   Grassroots

12.   Training versus education

13.   Organizational mileage

14.   Wins

Structure of Training

1.   Student's role

      —not sponges waiting to be entertained or directed
      —identify own interests
      —be prepared with questions at class sessions
      —question others in class
      —share experiences, successes and mistakes
      —lead and carry discussion
      —prepare to be part of an organizing team

2.   Instructor's role

      —structure the knowledge base
      —identify access routes
      —serve as a resource in specific areas
      —generally structure the learning experience
      —provide challenging learning opportunities
      —offer critical and complementary feedback

3.   Outline of sessions

4.   Reading

5.   Handouts

Instructor's Personal Demands

1.   Demands that students act responsibly

      —be partners in the education and training process

—take initiative in class sessions
—be committed to preparation for professional practice

2.   Makes challenges that some will resent

3.   Willing to work through problems

Approach to the Course

1.   Like all of life, before you get to dessert you have to eat your vegetables—so before we get to the how-to-do-it readings, we'll look at a practice theory, which is probably the most difficult but maybe, ultimately, the most useful part of the course.

2.   At the beginning of our careers as students of community organizing, most of us want, first of all, to gain practical information and knowledge about how to change things. But ultimately we find that *how to ask and think about questions* is much more valuable than learning a set of answers. Can you imagine why that's likely to be true?

3.   When I began to learn about organizing, I implicitly had in mind a rather simplistic idea of how it worked. I imagined that it was something like stacking up a set of building blocks—the blocks being strategy and tactics—until one had built a powerful organization.

4.   I learned to my dismay that it is much more akin to being at the beach and trying to fill up a hole in the sand with water. First you take your pail down to the surf to get some water. For starters, a big wave knocks you over and you swallow a bunch of salt water. Then you get up, fill your pail, and run back up the beach to fill your hole in the sand. By the time you get there, your bucket has leaked out or spilled most of the water, and as you pour it into the hole you watch it disappear into the sand.

6.   The man who taught me community organizing, Warren Haggstrom, used to say that organizing is like being handed a baton, but no music, to conduct an orchestra that was already playing before you arrived and will continue to play after you are worn out and leave.

5.   In any event, theory provides the basis for asking *and* answering questions about practice to help you avoid these pitfalls when what you were taught in the way of answers simply doesn't apply to the situation you find yourself in.

Assignments

1.   College classes often require that, in order to receive a passing grade, students memorize material so that later they can be tested on their comprehension of it. This class has no such requirement.

2.   Instead, what will be tested is your capacity to *integrate* the material. That is, assignments will be designed to determine whether and how

well you are able to use the subject matter in *practical applications*. Thus the final exam and any other tests will be "open book"—you will be free to use any and all materials that you have.

3. In general, to do well on this kind of examination requires two things: (1) that you stay up with the, and (2) that you read the assigned materials having in mind a practical application.

Weekly Reading Assignments

This course requires a significant amount of reading. Why a lot of reading? Community organizing is a *practice* profession. What organizers do affects many lives, potentially with both constructive *and* destructive consequences. It's essential you know what you're doing, as well as know what you don't know, once you begin organizing.

Keep in mind when considering the weekly reading assignments that not all books are meant to be read page by page. Some of the assigned books are essentially reference works, such as those on fundraising. It's enough that you have a good idea of their contents, so that, when the time comes and you need the information, you know where to find it.

The reading workload is based on the assumption of a normal curve. That is, it's assumed that outstanding students, those that get an "A+" in the course, will probably read all or most of the assigned material. Those who read lesser amounts of the material, presumably, will be less prepared and thus get correspondingly lower grades in the course.

Finally, the readings were not selected because they all reflect the thinking of brilliant theorists or the work of outstanding organizers. In fact, it's likely that as you read some of this stuff—including mine, certainly—you'll say to yourself: Why did he assign this junk?—even *I* could do better than this! The objective was to put before you the full range of thinking and practice, to encourage you to think critically and ask questions.

Asking Questions in Class

1. There are questions that reflect *stupidity*, i.e., questions that are asked because someone is slow to learn, has low intelligence, or is in a daze. There is no shame in such questions, but whenever possible they should be avoided by college and university students. The worst of such questions is asking one's instructor, "May I ask a question?" In a higher educational setting, asking permission to ask a question reflects *stupidity*. (My reply to all such questions is a facetious "No, you may not!" in the hope that the student will ignore my answer and proceed to the real question.)

2. On the other hand, questions that arise from ignorance—literally a lack of wisdom, knowledge, or information—may be a source of shame but should be asked at all costs! Almost nothing is more important in one's education than getting answers to these questions. In a manner of speaking, we might say: "There's no such thing as an ignorant question that combats ignorance, only an ignorant person who remains ignorant because he or she failed to ask a question."