

[Teacher Training: Freedom Summer - Style]

By Mark Levy

For the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, often called “Freedom Summer,” SNCC and CORE proposed having “Freedom Schools” as part of the Civil Rights movement’s activities. For that unique assignment, teachers had to be selected and trained, but it was more than that. Understanding and appreciating the community’s role was our first lesson. In a matter of months, organizing work had to be done by the local people and civil rights groups to prepare for and find locations for the schools, recruit students, provide lunches, solicit books and materials, discuss goals and curriculum, arrange security, and plan to house, train, and direct the volunteers who would teach in those schools.

As one of those Northern “volunteers” who served in one of the largest of the state’s freedom schools in Meridian, Mississippi, I strongly believe what so many of us concluded by the end of the summer: “I learned more than I ever taught.” What SNCC trained us to do during orientation in Ohio influenced me then, and has remained with me throughout all my subsequent teaching years.

Attached are notes I took at orientation, which I believe are still relevant and worth reflecting on today. As a short introduction to those freedom school teacher-training lessons, I think it is important noting that the main purposes of the summer’s schools were not academic (or remedial) but the encouragement and development of future young leaders. Ten years after the Brown decision, the Mississippi’s public school system remained defiantly segregated. The “Freedom Schools” were supported by local communities as an integral part of the Movement’s voter registration and empowerment struggles. They were inspired by and grew out of activist’s experiences at Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk School, in Rev. James

Lawson’s workshops on nonviolence and direct action, and Ella Baker’s “group-centered” organizing approach, as well as several years of SNCC’s work with engaged high school students.

While several committees contributed curriculum materials, Noel Day’s set of questions from Boston’s school boycott and its freedom schools set the basic framework around our curriculum for Mississippi:

- WHY are we here today? What would a new, integrated, and better world be for everyone?
- What do THEY (i.e., white culture and society) have that is good that WE (i.e., black culture and society) would want to include? Flip that question to also ask: But what do THEY have that is *not* good that WE would *not* want for the future?
- In a similar way, what do WE (i.e., in black culture and society) have that is good that we would want to include and share? Similarly, flip that question to ask: What do WE have that is *not* good and that we would *not* want for the future?
- What can we imagine (or learn about) that does not exist in either white or black society and that we would want in the future for EVERYONE?
- How do we move from the way things are now to make a better world? What is nonviolent direct action and its role in our Movement? What is the meaning of a Freedom Movement?

I remember during our teacher training sessions being advised: “Once a student learns to ask ‘Why?’ the system is starting to change.” Our orientation also impressed upon us that the students did not come as blank slates; they knew things we could learn from them. I think those two core concepts were perfect guides for our journey towards new kinds of teaching and learning. I did not record who the speaker was that I took the notes from, but recent discussions with others who were at Western College for Women in June 1964 suggest it was the

Staughton Lynd, historian and director of the Freedom Schools. Vincent Harding said that each of us (e.g., classroom teachers, community activists, students, bus drivers, parents, preachers, etc.) is a teacher — in one way or another — and has a responsibility for keeping the story of the Movement alive. The lessons of Mississippi's Freedom Schools are especially worth retelling for hope, guidance, and inspiration today.

Mark Levy's Notes on Freedom School Teacher Training: Oxford, OH – June '64

- Freedom school not to educate to move north and get job – but to form and motivate leadership.
- Most important thing to teach is that students must think, ask questions, respect themselves.
- Not impose [the] way we have been taught, but way we would have liked to have been taught. Also, Mississippi students will be coming expecting something different.
- We will start building schools from the moment we get off the bus and get into the homes and meet the families.
- There are a lot of people in the community who want the freedom schools. Get them to help recruit.
- You will often be the first white person the students know well. Must be honest – explain why there. Watch out for “Yes sirs.” Students must question and talk back to teachers.
- Learn “un-freedom” before you can teach “freedom.” Learn from students how to survive in a totalitarian state.
- Don't teach what's in your mind – but find out what is in student's.
- Certain basic shared emotion is “FEAR.” Good starting point.
- Develop on-going programs. (Find and) train people who can take over later.
- Once a student learns to ask “Why?” – the system is starting to change.

- Must encounter people as people – not as “students” and “teachers.”
- Get an understanding of the students' own schools.
- Compile history of Negro in the county and on the history of the Civil Rights movement in the area.
- Not black and white but “people” coming down. No insider and outsider. Eastland makes laws for all.
- Dual responsibility of teachers to prepare for school – but also to be close to students and their activities.
- If afraid of the unknown, should back out now – can't predict. Can't play game by their rules.
- Everything going on in the community is a subject for discussion.
- Curriculum becomes a crutch for a frightened teacher who runs out of words – but (aim is to) deal with students' desires.
- Examine words often used: “The system” “The man” “Mr. Charlie”
- Get to know the needs of the community: Its general issues and the function of the freedom school in relation to those issues (and the ability of people to attend).
- Handicraft co-ops growing out of community centers.
- Medger [Evers] was not killed just because he was leader of NAACP – what he was doing was the challenge.
- Let teachers teach out of own strengths – both in content and in style.
- When the press does a story, the story is not about you but about the community, the project, and the local people.
- Far easier for northern whites to work in Negro community where we feel accepted -- than to step out of shell and go where we are also needed.
- Q: “Would you marry a Negro?” A: “Which one?”
- The most important experience this summer for the students will be their relationships with their teachers.