

Tools for Activists:

Rethinking the Relationship between Awareness and Action

By Glenn Omatsu

Ask activists in the U.S. how they see the process of social change, and most will describe a linear relationship: i.e., social change occurs when people become aware of important issues and then act upon this awareness to change society. Thus, working from this assumption, activists first focus on education, so that people armed with new knowledge can act to transform society.

The above relationship between awareness and action is deeply ingrained in our thinking.

However, in many ways, this approach to the process of social change is promoted by a distinctly Western view of our world — i.e., conceptualizing awareness and action as distinct steps rather than as part of a single process, seeing social change as a rigid linear procedure (i.e., awareness leads to action but not vice-versa), defining social change as largely dependent on thinking and cognition, seeing human beings as naturally passive and needing to be acted upon by something outside of them (i.e., education) in order to gain awareness, and focusing on the individual human being as the center of social change. In other words, a Western worldview sees social change as beginning with individuals who become politically conscious through education and then acting on this awareness to change society.

Is there a different way to conceptualize the process of social change? Is there a different way to see the process involving awareness and action that can better enable us to educate, mobilize, organize, and transform society and ourselves?

Perhaps the best starting point is to reexamine our fundamental assumptions by creating a vision of social change around all the points that are missing from the Western viewpoint. Specifically:

- Awareness and action are not two distinct and separate stages but integrally related and part of the same process;
- Social change is not a rigid linear relationship between awareness and action but a dialectical process in which awareness and action constantly interact;
- Awareness and action are not simply cognitive processes but also involve values and emotions; moreover, emotions related to awareness and action are not simply anger and fear but “higher” emotions such as love and compassion; values associated with awareness and action include the commitment to social justice, equality, and fairness;
- People are naturally active and constantly searching for meaning, and the most effective forms of education tap into this aspect of human nature
- Education is not a process of “putting ideas into people” but rather a process of “drawing ideas of out them”;

- Social change is by its very definition social, not individual; thus, the focal point of social change is social interaction and not the individual human being;
- An individual human being becomes aware through social interactions and through the process of self-reflection based on these interactions; in the words of sociologist C. Wright Mills, individuals become conscious when they are able to connect their autobiographies with history and to see themselves as historical agents able to change the present and future.

Based on these points, we can begin to reconceptualize the process of social change, not simply as a linear, one-way relationship between awareness and action but as a dynamic interrelationship revolving around social interactions. Of course, there is nothing new about this approach; it has long characterized the thinking of indigenous peoples worldwide and many past civilizations before the advent of colonialism and imperialism. It is also similar to the understanding of the learning and teaching process developed by educators who use the latest findings from brain-compatible learning and critical pedagogy.

But how can we depict this alternative approach to social change, so that activists raised under the legacy of Western colonialism can understand it and use it in their organizing work? Below is a quick and crude diagram; I invite others who are more creative and artistic than me to develop a better diagram. The diagram shows the process of social change as not a single straight line linking awareness and action but rather as a circle — or a rolling wheel — revolving around social interactions (at the center of the circle). Spokes on the wheel represent awareness,

action, self-reflection, and values and emotions — and all are interconnected. Thus, the process of social change can begin anywhere on the wheel. Moreover, as the wheel “rolls,” it is transformed and constantly becomes a “new” wheel, in much the same way that social change transform both social structure and individual lives simultaneously.

