Posing Problems, Creating Solutions
How our class combined ESL learning, health literacy, and community gardening!

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At English For Action (EFA) in Providence, RI, we often use a tree as a metaphor for the problems our students are facing. With the roots feeding the large trunk, which in turn supports branches, leaves, and fruit, the tree provides a wonderful visual for seeing the larger context for individual problems. In one ESL class with a focus on health literacy, the teacher asked the learners to sketch all the health problems that came to mind. The learners described what they had drawn: “sick, tired, and hungry people walking in trash-filled streets.” The problem, as the students had posed it, is represented by the trunk of the tree.

It’s easy to see that a tree trunk doesn’t live in isolation. By asking what feeds the trunk, the teacher can prompt students to explore the “roots” of the problem they have identified. Next, the class can reflect on what type of leaves and fruit this tree will likely have. The leaves and fruit are the consequences of the original problem.

EFA also encourages learners to create final projects as a way of using their newly acquired English skills to bring change to their personal lives or to their community as a whole. These projects are often the results of weeks of exploring root causes to problems that learners see in their community, as well as identifying possible solutions.

The process of problem-posing and taking action on solutions stems from Paulo Freire’s Popular Education principles, which emphasize that education should be guided by the needs and interests of the learners. Freire believed that education should be a process of dialogue, reflection, action, and transformation. Examples of EFA final projects that have improved the health of our communities include: collective neighborhood clean-ups, letters to local government requesting more trash cans for the neighborhood (and successfully receiving them!), and the creation of a community garden for learners and other community members to grow their own organic vegetables.

A final project takes a few weeks to envision and complete. On the next few pages, you will find a series of cartoons that tell the story of how an EFA class created a community garden in Olneyville, Providence’s poorest neighborhood. The garden still thrives and supports the health of many families. It is an example of how our adult education classrooms can be the starting place for community transformation.

Alicia Pantoja has spent almost six years exploring and loving popular education through English For Action in Providence, RI, where she was Education Director. She is committed to continuing to support adults as they learn and develop their communities and themselves. The image above is from “Community Caring, Community Healing,” a mural by David Fichter at the Martha Eliot Health Center in Boston, MA. See also the front cover.

For Discussion

After reading and discussing the story on pp. 4-7, try making your own “problem tree” in class. Consider possible solutions and final projects that might make those solutions a reality. Imagine the opposite of the problem: make a vision tree! (See p. 7.)

Use this technique for other sets of problems (and visions) related to health that you’ll read about in this issue.