Reading for Revolution

Do-It-Yourself Strategies for Revolutionary Study Groups

by Mamos Rotnelli

Mamos Rotnelli (pen name) teaches high school students in Seattle, where he organizes with students, families, and educators who want to learn for life, not labor. He blogs about education struggles at http://creativitynotcontrol.wordpress.com and is a member of the Black Orchid Collective http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com He has been active in various grassroots struggles for a decade.

This article is the third part of a series on revolutionary literacy called Reading for Revolution. Parts 1 and 2 can be found here: http:// blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/ 2013/05/27/reading-for-revolution-parts-1-and-2/

Published during the heyday of the Occupy Movement, as part of a three part series on Revolutionary Literacy, this piece was pulled out from it as a selection of tools for those wanting to think and read critically. The other two pieces are easily found online at the above web address or just by googling. Black Orchid Collective is now defunct but their website is accessible for other materials they produced.

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Before a new revolutionary strategy becomes a lived reality, it begins as an idea. Of course, ideas are not the driving force of history - human beings struggling for liberation make history through concrete, sensuous activity. Our creativity, life, labor, and struggle shape our social relationships and are shaped by them. But there are moments in history when we know we need to act and we are not yet able to, because we have not yet found comrades who want to act together. At these moments, the actions we imagine are held in reservoirs of thought sustained by a constellation of collectives, blogs, zines, hip hop cyphers, and stand-up comedy acts. Fresh revolutionary strategies percolate as "culture" and "theory," pushing their way up through the crust of capitalist hegemony like a ballooning volcano, until the point where they can finally erupt into lived experience, where they can be tested in practice, evaluated, and refined.

How do we nurture this process, so that it can happen as fast as possible, and so that as many people as possible can participate in it? That is the question this piece attempts to answer. In order to develop revolutionary strategies, we need to reflect on our practice. But it also helps to reflect on the practice of other revolutionaries throughout history, and that requires study. This article shares some concrete strategies for how we can study effectively, accessibly, and inclusively.

If revolutionary strategic thought becomes the exclusive domain of academics, or of a predominantly white male college-educated Left intelligentsia, then the process is already hijacked and co-opted. wrote "Between the Leninists and the Clowns"and "Reading for Revolution Parts 1 and 2", making a case for dedicated and sustained revolutionary study groups outside of academia, part of

living struggles of working class and oppressed people. I argued that these study groups can build collective capacity so that oppressed people can take up more space in strategic debates; so that people without degrees and formal education will have the confidence necessary to go head-to-head with the professors, politicians, nonprofit and union bureaucrats, etc. who try to hold back our communities' struggles. I see this as far more fruitful then trying to guilt trip the current college-educated Left intelligentsia to give this space and knowledge to those who can make the best use of it. This piece builds on these previous essays.

But the question remains: how do we do this in practice? How do we study in ways that break from academic culture and invigorate fresh, non-dogmatic strategizing? What do we do when people in our collectives or affinity groups have a wide range of literacy skills and (mis)education? When some of us have had bad experiences with reading and writing based on alienated education in our high schools or colleges? What do we do when some of us have been to graduate school and some of us have not graduated from high school? When some of us have been trained to write books and others have never gotten meaningful, accurate feedback to improve our writing?

These are questions that groups of revolutionaries across the country are wrestling with. Some of you might even be wrestling with them as you read the other strategic texts in this journal together.

Black Orchid Collective (BOC) has been attempting to answer some of these questions in practice, through the study groups we've conducted. We've integrated literacy skills with reading and strategizing, to try to level the playing field as much as possible within our collective, creating space where members can learn reading strategies that working class urban public schools in Seattle failed to teach.

We are certainly not the only ones trying to do this, and we don't have all of the answers, but I'd like to offer some of the insights

we've developed in this process, in the hope that it will prompt a wider process of collectives sharing our study strategies with each other. Out of this process, I hope we can develop a set of "best practices" - not a standardized curriculum, but a set of study strategies that prove themselves effective, that can be adapted and changed to fit the different circumstances we find ourselves in.

Melting Down the Master's Tools and Forging our Own

Before I share these strategies, I should disclose that I'm a public school teacher and that some of these strategies are ones that I've learned from experimenting in the classroom, and from formal study in a Masters in Teaching program. Classroom education is designed to produce a new generation of workers to be exploited; it is not designed to support people developing our capacities to make a revolution. As a teacher, I try to subvert that as much as possible, but I can't do it alone.

I'm aware that many of the reading strategies we learn to use in the classroom are not adaptable to contexts of revolutionary study. I took some of these strategies and introduced them to our collective, BOC, and we altered them to fit our needs, rejecting aspects we saw as oppressive, and adding our own. If, for some reason, we have not gone far enough in this process, I welcome critical feedback from readers in how we can continue it.

Secondly, I am wary of people who carry themselves as "revolutionary teachers" since this preserves an alienated professional role that needs to be overcome in the revolution. I am not trying to encourage that by writing this piece. On the contrary, I want to encourage a process through which everyone can become teachers AND learners, and hence the specialized role of "teacher" can eventually be abolished. I'm trying to share teachers' secrets so that we don't monopolize this knowledge.

Audrey Lorde said “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”, and she’s right. But when it comes to education today, the master’s house contains some back rooms in which there are piles of tools that are rusting. The master doesn’t know how to use them and hasn’t tried to because he’s afraid we’ll all use them to tear down his house. In other words, students, parents, teachers and educational researchers have discovered a range of learning strategies that we simply cannot implement in capitalist classrooms, where high stakes standardized testing and coercive, top-down, white-dominated curriculum is the norm.

For example, we all know that effective learning requires cooperative inquiry, not competition; there are journal articles, books, and conversations full of engaging ways to facilitate this so that students can empower themselves through learning together, without relying on the teacher as the sole dispenser of knowledge.

When it comes to education, it's the best of times and the worst of times. It will take a revolution to create the social context where we can consistently implement and improve some of the more liberating learning methods that we are discovering and creating. The contradiction between what is possible and what is required for the test inspires a subterranean, emerging rebellious consciousness among many teachers and students. This consciousness is constantly swallowed up by all the boredom, drama, and cynicism of classroom life.

One of the best places where we can develop these new learning methods is in the social freedom struggle itself - in the communities, networks, and organizations we are building as we transform ourselves in struggle. This might overlap with formal classrooms at moments when students and teachers struggle together, but it will not be contained there, and teachers should have no monopoly over the process - anyone can use these methods to learn together and to teach each other.

Metacognition: Mindful Critical Consciousness

One of those potentially subversive tools that classroom teachers are trained to use is metacognition, which I would describe as a cross between what Buddhists call "mindfulness" and Marxists call "consciousness." With a little adjustment, metacognitive reading strategies can be applied in revolutionary study groups. My comrade Jeremy is a teacher and a veteran anarchist in the Northwest, and he wrote an excellent description of what this could look like, which is worth quoting at length:

> *"A big thing in teaching these days is this idea of metacognition, or thinking about thinking. The idea is that helping students to explicitly think about and articulate how they think will help them think better. For example, it's not enough to know the answer to a math problem, it's potentially more important to be able to describe how one found the answer, and why the method worked. Teachers are also encouraged to identify the tricks that skilled readers/ writers/quantitative thinkers use and to explicitly teach those to students as learning strategies. Students learn how to infer meaning in texts, make predictions in stories, visualize numbers in a wide variety of ways, or break unknown words into their component parts."*

We need this in a big way in revolutionary work. Everything is so mystified and loaded with jargon, that especially new organizers feel like they have to read dozens of books before they can hold their own with veterans. This is a mistake. There are very real tricks to thinking systematically and strategically about political realities, and those tricks can be taught. Similarly, manipulative and abusive politics are rife in our movements because people are using techniques and tactics that most of us aren't metacognitively aware of. We need more awareness of when we are creating straw

positions, when we are using anecdotal evidence, when we are creating false dichotomies, imagining zero-sum situations, etc."

The best teachers encourage students to think out loud, in small groups, or with partners, about their reading, providing sentence starters or other tools to prompt students to engage in metacognition about their own reading process. The purpose of this is to teach students how to pose their own questions about the text. In most revolutionary study groups, however, this kind of explicit metacognitive processing is often lacking. Either the facilitators sum up the text and ask what people think about their analyses, or they bring pre-created study questions that people answer, or there is no structure and everyone just talks about whatever they want. In each of these scenarios, the danger is that the study group can end up mystifying the process by which texts are analyzed and revolutionary strategies are created. Those who know how to do these things end up doing them frequently, but they don't explain how, so it ends up being attributed to their individual intelligence, experience, etc. Those who don't know how to do them are either ignored or they are put on the spot and embarrassed or overwhelmed if they don't speak up as much. The processes that revolutionaries use to read to strategize should not be taken for granted; they should be named publicly, specified, shared, analyzed, assessed, and critiqued/ improved if necessary.

Metacognition can also be used to bridge the gap between daily life and the text, between street smarts and book smarts, and between the spoken and the written word. This can avoid creating the false assumption that strategic knowledge is found only in books. It can also challenge the assumption that many oppressed people end up internalizing from years of alienating education: the idea that their own way of speaking and thinking is somehow inadequate because it is not formal or "standard." For example, Carol Lee (1995) documents how teachers working with Black youth in Chicago began by doing exercises in which the students recognized the highly literary and intellectual character of their own day-to-day

language. Everyday, informal games like “the dozens” or what my students call “baggin’ on each other” use all sorts of figurative language, sarcasm, double meanings, personification, etc. Sometimes this is formalized into rap battles or cyphers. Students begin by identifying these as intellectual assets their communities already bring to the table. Then, they identify similar moves that are made by authors of classic works of written literature.

We adapted this approach in Black Orchid Collective when we began our study group with the exercise outlined in part two of Appendix A (Intro to Metacognitive Reading Strategies). We began by analyzing our own consciousness in various situations from daily life and from organizing scenarios (e.g. what to do when we’re singled out by a cop, or what to do when someone starts making vague passive aggressive accusations in a meeting). We talked about how we read these situations. We then compared and contrasted this to our consciousness when we read political texts.

This was a lot of fun; like stand up comedians, we were finally saying out loud what everyone had been thinking but never had a chance to say. We also realized we all had a lot of unspoken knowledge based on practice, which we hadn’t gotten a chance to share with each other. This kind of thinking often doesn’t come up naturally in meetings, hang outs, or study groups; it requires some kind of intentional prompting to bring forward. It requires intentionally recognizing that our own minds are teachers, and that we can learn from them.

The appendices and the rest of this article outline how a similar metacognitive process can be applied to reading texts in revolutionary study groups. The bookmark in Appendix B is something we have on hand whenever we’re reading or discussing a text. It includes sentence starters that prompt us to reflect on our own thought processes as we read, e.g. “I predict that...” or “ I think that _____ voices are being left out because _____.” We find that when we intentionally meditate on our own reading processes like

this, everyone is more prepared to start discussions and to analyze the text. The conversation becomes more complex, more engaging, and more connected to our own lives and to struggles today.

Practicing writing down our thoughts about the text before discussing them is also a form of writing practice. It breaks out of the schoolish idea of writing for a teacher or a grade, and encourages us to write in order to clarify our own thoughts. This is a crucial step in becoming comfortable writing for a public audience. Some revolutionaries might take this for granted, but not everyone has had such positive experiences or encouragement with finding their own voice as writers.

Scaffolding: When You Step Up, We Won't Just Step Back, We'll Get Your Back.

We've all had the experience of sitting in a study group where some people dominate the conversation, speaking so much that others don't have a chance to participate. This is a problem because it denies everyone else the chance to learn by thinking out loud and engaging in dialogue / debate. It also deprives the whole collective of the ability to draw from the knowledge and perspectives that everyone in the room could contribute. The most common response to this problem is for the facilitator to encourage those who have "stepped up" to speak to now "step back" to make room for others.

This works better when you have a situation where everyone is prepared to say something and most people simply can't get in a word because a few people are talking too much. But it doesn't work as well when the difference between who is talking and who isn't is primarily based on an imbalance in access to information, knowledge, skills, etc. In these kinds of situations, the facilitator might put people who haven't spoken on the spot, and might end up embarrassing or alienating them.

In these kinds of situations, I think it makes sense to encourage the most skilled participants to help support those who have not yet developed the skills they carry. Instead of asking them to step up and step back, the facilitator should prompt them to step up in ways that specifically help their comrades step up. This is called "scaffolding." It is based on the idea of the "zone of proximal development," developed by a communist educational theorist named Vygostky in the 1920s. This zone is the moment where real learning happens: it is the space between what each of us is able to do on our own and what we are able to do together. The theory is that people learn when we try something that is new and challenging for us, collaborating with others for whom it is not as new and challenging.

In this sense, learning / teaching is social because it is not monopolized by the teacher; everyone in the study group or classroom teaches each other. This works best in groups of people with a range of abilities, where people can complement each others' strengths: I might be strong in making predictions and you might need help with that, and I can help you; in return you might be strong in analyzing character traits, and you can help me.

We used scaffolding in the Black Orchid Collective reading workshop (Appendix 1). We started out practicing metacognitive reading strategies together, with a "scaffold," or structured support to make sure we teach each other how to do it. Then, gradually, the scaffold was removed, and the workshop moved toward the point where we could each practice metacognition on our own. Of course, the goal is for us each to then be prepared to teach someone else how to do this by doing it with them and providing scaffolding to make this possible.

Some teachers have criticized the idea of "scaffolding" as authoritarian, asking the question "who is building whose house?" This is a good question. Scaffolding might not be the best metaphor since it implies something rigid, rather than fluid, and fluidity is exactly what we need in revolutionary study groups. To ensure this,

the skills involved in setting up the scaffolding in the first place also need to be shared so that the same people aren't monopolizing the power inherently involved in that task. That's one of the reasons why I'm writing this piece - to share my own knowledge of how to do this so that others can critique and improve on it.

(Anti-)Disciplinary Literacy

You may have notice that this approach echoes how learning happens outside of formalized modern classroom settings. For centuries, people in communities have learned from each other by doing things together; those who have experience and skill in particular activity might take on a mentor role, and folks with less experience might become apprentices. In authoritarian societies, these roles become rigid and oppressive, and the mentor exercises coercion over the apprentice. But in more horizontal or egalitarian societies, these roles can be fluid, changing, and non-coercive.

A lot of cutting edge educational theory attempts to bring this kind of dynamic into the classroom by treating the teacher more as a practitioner of a certain skill (like reading, writing, or science), and less as a distributor of pre-prepared standardized knowledge.

The label educational theorists use for this is Disciplinary Literacy. In this case they don't mean "discipline" like the exercise of coercive authority over someone in order to "discipline them." Instead, they mean "discipline" as a set of activities that require skill and experience to accomplish. Disciplinary literacy theorists argue that there is not just one, universal "literacy;" in fact, there are specific discourses - or ways of reading, writing, and speaking - that exist in various communities.

Teachers use reading apprenticeship lessons to provide students access to these discourses so they can participate in these communities fully as equals. For example, students might practice reading like a poet; when they read, they might identify how the

author uses imagery, metaphors, similes, or rhyme. The goal is to be able to discuss this with other poets, and to learn to write like that. The end goal is not a test; it is a poetry performance or scrapbook shared with an authentic audience. Alternatively, students might read like a historian; when they read, they might identify the source of the text, and interpret this source in its historic context. They might ask whether the source has a perspective, a bias, or an ideology that causes it to elevate certain voices and leave out others.

The main critique of disciplinary literacy is that it tends to celebrate the discourses and disciplines of academia. It trains students to think in terms of existing scholarly "communities" that are professionalized and largely middle class. In response, scholars like Heller have argued "In defense of amateurism".

But what if we think of disciplinary communities in ways that go beyond academia? What if we challenge the ways in which academia tries to discipline our thinking by enclosing and dividing it into middle class dominated "fields of study." What if we recognize that there are a variety of intellectual communities with their own discourses that exist outside of academia? For example, many aspiring hip hop artists already have "disciplinary literacy" when it comes to hip hop - they listen to artists they like, they read their lyrics, and they watch their videos in the hope of learning the craft from them, so that they can develop themselves as artists.

Similarly, revolutionaries have our own communities with our own discourses, and when we're at our best, these are not the same as academic communities and discourses. The way we read history is different from how academic historians read history. We write for broad and multi-faceted working class communities, not for narrow academic journals; that affects our choices in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and cultural reference points.

Nevertheless, revolutionary politics does bring with it a set of practices of reading, writing, and speaking that have been honed

throughout centuries of struggle, often called “anarchism,” “communism,” “feminism,” “ecology,” “decolonization,” etc. Our goal should be to make these discourses more accessible to emerging revolutionaries, and to provide apprenticeship experiences where folks who are new to revolutionary politics can learn everything they need to participate equally in revolutionary struggle and community. We can start with metacognition - becoming aware of how we already read, discuss, and write as revolutionaries. By stating this explicitly, we can then share it with new folks, and provide contexts in which they can practice and develop these capacities.

However, an important caveat is in order here: our communities, and their discourses, are under construction. The learning process should not be one where new folks are indoctrinated to write, speak, and read exactly like members of existing radical circles. Many of the ways that US revolutionaries currently write, speak, and read, are horribly inadequate. Sometimes they are sectarian, elitist, or outright oppressive. This is a product of the isolated, fractured, and underdeveloped nature of most revolutionary activity in the US. So really, what we should be thinking about is what we all will need to do in order to read, write, and think over time as we grow together as revolutionaries. In other words, the current revolutionaries are not permanent teachers who take new revolutionaries under our wings as students. Instead, we are students ourselves who are sharing what we have already learned so that we can learn together with new comrades. New folks might bring to the table the experiences, questions, and insights we all need to move forward and grow out of the problems we are currently facing.

Next I’ll give an example of what “reading like a revolutionary” might look like when it comes to historical texts.

Historical Texts are Dynamite, Not Dust

The Afro-Caribbean and American Marxist CLR James once said that people retreat into classic texts to avoid the problems of the world today; what they don't understand is that those texts are now classic precisely because they were dynamite in their own times, people wrote them to blow apart the old ways of thinking to make room for something revolutionary.

Radicals today would benefit from heeding his warning. The goal of reading historical texts by past revolutionaries is not to recycle old slogans, principles, ideas, abstractions, etc., and then apply them today in a dogmatic way that makes no sense to people who are actually alive. It is also not so much about abstractly "comparing and contrasting" past revolutionary situations to today. That is a good preliminary step that helps us understand both the past and the present, but it doesn't go far enough.

Instead, we can read past revolutionary texts to see how oppressed peoples created ruptures from the status quo of their times. This helps us to understand how change happens. If we understand what goes into that, what it feels like, what pressures and contradictions and decisions you face when it's happening, then we can make changes in the present without getting swept away by the pressures of unknown situations.

In other words, reading these past texts is not about finding some theoretical magic wand that allows us to predict the future, or some strategy that can be dredged up like a buried treasure and applied to the present. That kind of thinking is what Marx criticized as "idealism."

Instead, reading about the past allows us to understand what revolution was like. And that's a precious experience, since most of us haven't gone through a revolution, and no matter how important

our immediate experiences are, none of us have much sense at all of what it feels like to be that free. At best, we can extrapolate from high points of struggle in our own time, those fleeting moments when we can glimpse the future, such as the Occupy camps, port shutdowns, and militant anti-police brutality actions. But reading about the experiences of people who created high points of freedom in the past can help us extrapolate and strategize about how to take it further the next time our own struggles reach these high water marks.

So we can approach these texts asking questions like "what did the people who made that revolution feel? What did they think? What did they do? How did they create together? How did they make choices when they were confronted with completely unknown situations?" This gives us a chance to prepare for those kinds of situations.

It's also worthwhile to think about what we need to know in order to exercise our imagination like that. Usually, we need at least some understanding of the historical context in which the text was written. We can't detect what was truly new if we don't understand what came right before it. For this reason, it's good to have someone in our study groups prepare a short presentation giving the context before we read. Texts that are well written should provide this in the intro or early chapters, and this is definitely something to prioritize reading slowly and taking notes on. Once we know the general state of the situation, it is easier to detect moments when events broke from that state, creating ruptures and openings into unknown forms of freedom.

Reading, Strategizing and Overcoming Dogmatism

Each time we see that happening, it's probably a good idea to stop and imagine what we would be feeling/ thinking/ doing if we were in that situation. Using a lot of sensory imagery is a good idea here

too, because it makes it more enjoyable and less boring. You could make a kind of "choose your own adventure" movie in your head, thinking about what the people would have looked like, sounded like, etc., and thinking about what you would have been thinking, feeling, and doing if you were there. I know this sounds cheesy or childish, but that's because capitalism drills into our head a divide between thought and emotion. Kids don't have as much of that yet, which is why sometimes they are more creative than adults. We need to overcome the stereotype of reading being something that is abstract, intellectual, divorced from our souls - which is exactly how it is often taught in schools, especially as we get older. It doesn't have to be that way.

When we ask ourselves "what would we have done," it's also a good idea to think "what would happen next if we did that?" That way, we can practice strategizing in unknown situations.

A comrade pointed out that I tend to think on my feet a lot in meetings and in crowd situations. She said I’m able to change my strategy very rapidly based on new information, without getting stuck in dogmatic ways of thinking. Personally, I was surprised to hear this since I think this is actually something I need to work on. But she asked how I do that, and asked if I could share it with her so she could do it more herself. I started trying to figure out where I had learned how to do this. I realized that there is really no substitute here for simply being in struggle with lots of people in uncontrolled, unscripted situations (like unpermitted marches). But reading about these kinds of situations can also be good, as long as you don't read looking for some pre-determined answer, and as long as you don't read in a study group that treats the text like a manual for constructing revolution.

For example, if people in the text make the decision to go out and engage in a riot that was breaking out, you might want to pause and ask, "okay, what could that lead to? What might happen next? If that happens, what would I do?" Since real life is not mechanical or

linear, it's always good to think about three or four or more possible outcomes. This really prepares you to strategize in fluid, non-dogmatic ways during real life situations. Eventually this kind of thinking becomes second nature and you just start running through a bunch of possible outcomes of situations you're in, and evaluating them. The only caution I'd add here is not to get cocky - even if you evaluate four or five situations, the real life outcome might still be a surprise.

Setting Goals

Some texts are so full of details that they can be overwhelming. So before you read, it's a good idea to write down one to three concrete goals that you want to accomplish by reading the texts. It's helpful to make these goals realistic and achievable.

If you are reading together as a collective, the goal might be to tackle issues that are coming up in your organizing, or to better understand a struggle emerging somewhere in the world, learning what we can from it to apply in our own situation. The goal might be to produce a text together on the topic at hand three months later. You might start by collectively brainstorming the questions you need to answer in order to write the text, and then develop a course of study together that will help you to explore these questions. You could then read the texts together, or individuals in the collective could each take a text, read it, and form a presentation on it to share with the group.

As Marx said, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, but the goal is to change it.” It's always good to try to link your goals back to something relevant to the actual struggle. This link is not always immediate. Sometimes we tend to get buried in the immediate tasks involved in local activism, and this can make it hard to see the big picture or prepare for unexpected future upsurges. So when we read to understand the struggle, it's often more about developing the

kinds of capacities, habits, and ways of thinking necessary to be flexible in real time, and to make decisions under pressure.

So for example, if you're reading the autobiography of Assata Shakur from the Black Panthers, you might develop goals like:

1. To understand what characteristics someone needs to be a revolutionary by looking at Assata's behavior as an example and role model or as a cautionary tale/example of what NOT to do, depending on your perspective.
2. To understand how to build a revolutionary organization where Black women can thrive as leaders by looking at what the Panthers did to support Assata's development, and what they did to prevent her development (for example, did she face sexism in the organization? If so, how did she and others respond to that? Compare and contrast her experiences in the Panthers with Huey Newton's, for example).
3. To answer the question: how does someone become a revolutionary; by looking at Assata's childhood and adolescence and thinking about what influenced her to make the decisions she made.

In contrast, these kinds of goals are probably not as useful, and are either boring, harmful, or both:

1) To learn historical trivia about the Black Power movement so that you can impress other people with your knowledge.

2.) To find ammunition to back up your organization, clique, scene, or tendency's "party line" on revolutionary organization and gender; to make other people look bad.

3.) To read something by a Black woman just so that you can't be accused of reading too many books by white men

Reading Comprehension

Some basic goals need to be tackled first before we can move onto more complex ones. Teachers sometimes call this "Bloom's taxonomy." Bloom was a psychologist and educational theorist. He

argued that you need to know the facts about something before you can understand it, you need to understand it before you apply it to a different situation, you need to be able to apply it before you analyze it, and you need to analyze it before you create something of your own based on it.

For anti-authoritarians who emphasize critical thinking and autonomy, we are all in a hurry to get to the point where we can create our own knowledge, strategies, texts, and ideas. And this is good. But to get there together, we need to make sure that everyone has access to the basic information, understanding, application, and analysis first, or else we'll be replicating inequalities in terms of who has the power to exercise this autonomy and who does not. When it comes to study groups, this means we need to start with reading comprehension first before we start analyzing the text or crafting our own strategies. Here are some suggestions for how to do that:

- At the bottom of each right hand page, you could pause and ask yourself "what did I just read?" Then try to summarize the key points in your head, verbally, or on a piece of paper. If you find you can't do this, you might want to go back and read it over again. This prevents going into "auto-pilot mode" and just reading on and on without getting much out of it.

- Building off this, you might want to keep a notebook as you read. See Appendix A for suggestions on how to do this. In BOC, we specifically taught each other how to do this and practiced it together. The method we used involved tracking our questions, predictions, and connections, not simply summarizing or listing information. This is not something we should assume people have learned how to do in school or on their own; unfortunately, school teaches many of us to focus on trivial details in preparation for tests; it does not train us to engage with the text at this level of depth.

- One of the things that drags a lot of readers down is lack of access to vocabulary. The best way to overcome this is through reading itself, but it can be a chicken or egg issue because reading becomes easier and more enjoyable the more vocabulary you know. In this sort of situation, it's helpful if comrades in a study group collectively generate a list of key vocabulary words related to the topic before reading the book. Or, if someone has already read the book, they can write out the crucial vocab words first, then everyone can have this at hand while they read. It's also often possible to figure out the vocabulary words based on context - how is the word being used? What comes right before and right after it? Finally, dictionary.com makes looking up words a lot faster, so if possible, it may be helpful to meet in a place with internet access.

A lot of revolutionary history and contemporary discussions among revolutionaries involve specialized jargon like "proletariat," "hegemony," "primitive accumulation," "patriarchy," "the gender binary," and so on. This can be difficult for folks who don't yet have access to all of these words. It's important for study groups to define these terms early on, and not just throw them around. New participants should not be mocked or "called out" if they don't understand the meanings of these terms. Asking "what does heteronormativity mean" is different from claiming it doesn't exist or that we shouldn't fight it! I know this might sound obvious, but I've seen radicals respond this way multiple times, and it really shuts down discussion.

Revolutionaries often use common words in distinct ways. For example, the word "liberal" commonly means something like "tolerant, accepting, or willing to use a large amount of something." For folks coming from some countries, liberal might mean free-market oriented (what the US left calls "neoliberal"). Ironically, in a US context, that's closer to the word "conservative." But US revolutionaries often use the word liberal to refer to specific political tendencies that tend to advocate reform instead of revolution, that

tend to emphasize the need to reach out to middle class white people and to avoid alienating them, people who think that change comes gradually and incrementally, people who work for the Democratic Party, union leaders, and nonprofits. It's important to specify what we mean by terms like this.

It is also important to give someone the benefit of the doubt when you first meet them. Someone might call themselves a "liberal" by which they mean to say “I’m a tolerant person” or “my conservative family calls me a liberal.” A dogmatic person might dismiss them right then, but if you ask them some questions and listen you might find out that they actually think we don't need bosses, or they might think the US military has no business being in other countries.

The same thing goes for new authors we pick up. We risk missing out if we reject them just because they use a few words that we find oppressive or flawed. Before rejecting these books, we should ask what the authors mean when they use these terms. It's helpful, again, to think about what the authors’ cultural and historical contexts were, and what political tendencies they might be coming from, because all of this influences how they might be using deceptively common words in specialized ways, or specialized words in ways that are different from how we use them.

Reading as a Social Dialogue

Sometimes we may find ourselves reading in order to “translate” out of date ideas into a contemporary context, or specialized ideas into a more accessible, general context. We might be drawing from one specific “discursive community,” trying to bring knowledge from that community into a different community. In fact, this kind of translation work is exactly what academia often fails at, and some revolutionaries are uniquely situated to do this well because of their combinations of broad working class life experience and specialized theoretical knowledge. Here are some suggestions for how to do this:

At the bottom of each right hand page, or at natural stopping points, you could pause and ask yourself "how would I explain this to my friend, comrade, coworker, or neighbor?" If you're reading collectively, you might organize this explicitly as a role playing exercise.

This is especially helpful when you're trying to figure out what's at stake in debates between different tendencies. It can be abstract and confusing to think, "how would a Christian respond to these debates about gender" or, "how would a Black Nationalist respond to this point about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers' interventions in Detroit automobile plants? In contrast, how would an anarchist respond?"

Instead of trying to do that, I'd suggest thinking about actual people you know who are Christians or Black nationalists or anarchists, and imagine having a conversation with them in your head about the book. What would they say? How would you respond? Then, later on, when you want to actually have that conversation with the person you'll be more prepared, and you'll also remember better what you wanted to raise with them. To avoid dogmatism, it's important to reflect on this after the conversation. Were your first hypotheses about how they were going to respond correct? Or did they prove you wrong? If so, does that change your interpretation of the text?

This makes reading less of an isolated, individualized, elitist practice - it reminds us that knowledge is social, and meant to be shared. In fact, it goes deeper than that - knowledge is really something we produce together - we are revolutionaries, so we don't believe in "intellectual property rights." Almost all of the good ideas I've ever had have come from conversations with people in person, or from sitting at home reading and writing thinking about how I can better communicate with other people. Keeping this social process in mind also keeps up our motivation to read, by reminding us why we are reading in the first place.

Conclusion

These are just a few suggestions for how we aim to read as revolutionaries. A lot more could be said. To continue the discussion, I'd love hear other folks' experiences with reading, and suggestions for how to read in revolutionary ways. Please feel free to adapt and print the study materials from the appendices, to use in your collective and individual study; if you do, please let us know how it goes so we can improve on these materials in our own study groups.

Appendix A: Black Orchid Study Group Curriculum Sample

Note: this is based on the text Night Vision by Butch Lee and Red Rover, which we were studying at the time. It could easily be adapted to other texts.

Goal: To use metacognition and reading strategies to read like a revolutionary

Metacognition: Thinking about your own thinking

Reading Strategies: Thought processes we use to make meaning out of a text. (For example, asking myself "what is the main point of this paragraph" or saying to myself "I predict that…")

1) **Open ended writing response / drawing from prior knowledge**

15 to 30 minutes (write then share) Free write/ warm up. Write for 15-25 minutes, don't worry about proper grammar, spelling, etc. This is more about practicing using writing to think and to communicate ideas. After we are done we'll share what we wrote. Feel free to draw from what we studied last week in Ch. 1 of Night Vision, from your own life experience, and from previous readings, discussions, forums, and debates.

If you get stuck, feel free to choose one or more of these questions as a prompt:
What is race?
What is gender?
What is class?
What is a nation?
How are all of these categories changing today?
----

2) Intro to Metacognitive Reading Strategies

We use strategies all the time for interpreting verbal language. This is half of what is often called “street smarts” and it is also half of what we do as revolutionaries. We’ll start by practicing that, and becoming aware of what strategies we’re using everyday. Then we’ll apply the same process to interpreting written language through reading.

Choose a scenario from the list below, and think about how you would “read” the situation. Write down what thoughts would go through your mind. What questions would you ask yourself about the situation? What questions would you ask the other person verbally? How would you assess the different information you receive in order to develop an accurate interpretation of the situation? How accurate would your interpretation need to be before you can make a decision?

Scenarios:
- You’re facilitating a public forum and someone gets up during the question and answer session and starts to rant angrily and loudly.

- It’s the beginning of a demonstration and a cop comes up to you and singles you out in the crowd and says “We want to make sure everyone is safe today, so you could please tell me the march route so that we can protect you while you’re marching?”

- You are in a large meeting and someone starts making passive aggressive criticisms that may be directed against someone else in the room but you're not sure.

Here are a few more general ones that I use with my students:

- Someone is clowning on you. You need to figure out if it's hostile or playful/friendly, and you need to figure out how to respond.

- You are talking to someone you are attracted to and you're trying to figure out if they're flirting with you or not, and how you want to respond

Please write out your thought processes using the following as a guide:

What the other person says or does:

____

What I think about when I see/ hear that:

____

What I say/ do in response:

____

How they respond to me:

____

What I think about when I see them respond:

____

Etc.... (keep going):

We will share these together and will discuss what thought processes we used to read and interpret the situation

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Reading scaffold 1:

I will read aloud a section from Ch. 2 of Night Vision. As I read, I will say out loud what I am thinking, to model for you some of the reading strategies I use as a reader and as a revolutionary. For example, I will ask myself questions about the text and will then try to answer them, and I will make predictions and inferences.

After I read, I'm going to ask you to tell me what strategies I used and we will make a list together.

Reading scaffold 2:

I will read aloud another section from Night Vision. This time as I ask questions, we will answer them together.

Reading scaffold 3:

In pairs, please read a 3rd section from the text. As you read, please think aloud and come up with your own questions and responses. You can start your sentences with "I wonder" or "I noticed that " or "this reminds me of" or "I think he might mean."

Reading scaffold 4:

Read a 4th section on your own. Write down what strategies you used (e.g. what questions you asked yourself, what predictions you made)

3) Reading Workshop part 2: Reading Log (print out as a handout)

Goals:
-to use metacognition reading strategies to help make sense of texts
-to practice developing our own interpretations of the texts we read together

Keep a reading log in response to the texts we are studying during this decolonization workshop the next few months, beginning with Night Vision. To keep your log, divide each page with a vertical line down the center.

On the left side of each page, record significant passages from the literature you read.

On the right side, across from each passage, write down a question you had about the passage, or a statement/ thought you had about it. You can use the metacognitive bookmark (Appendix B) as a guide.

If you are reading a photocopy or a book you can mark up, draw a star next to each passage in the book that you have recorded in your journal, or highlight the passage in your book so that you can find it easily. It is not necessary to copy the entire passage into your notebook, sometimes you can just copy the beginning few lines, then the page number so you can find your highlighted passage easily when we discuss the text in the workshop or the meeting.

Remember, your response log doesn't need to be textbook English. The purpose of this exercise is more to think about reading and writing without worrying about the form your thoughts take. This is preparation for eventually writing public responses to the texts we are reading. At that point, we will think more specifically about how to present our ideas publicly. But right now we are writing mostly to develop our own ideas, together.

Reading log scaffold 1:

Read another section of Night Vision out loud together. Then we pause and each of us will re-read and add an entry to our own log based on what we each find significant about the text. Then we will read our entries to each other and give each other feedback.

Feedback should focus not only on the content of the text but also the process. Are each of us using metacognition / reading strategies?

Are each of us approaching the text with a sense of inquiry, focused on creating our own interpretations of the text? This feedback can be awkward but it is key to un-learning bad habits we learned in school, like simply sounding out the words, focusing on irrelevant details to prepare for tests, or reading on "auto pilot," just skimming through even when we don't understand the meaning of the text.

Reading log scaffold 2:

Do the same process for another passage, this time reading on your own and writing an entry in your own log. When everyone is done reading that passage and writing about it, we will share and give feedback.

Reading log scaffold 3:

Please read the rest of the chapter on your own, and fill out your reading log as you read. Everyone should bring their logs to the BOC meeting. In the meeting, we will discuss the passages each of us found relevant, and the questions we posed about the text in our logs.

Appendix B: Metacognitive Reading Strategies Bookmark

Setting goals

The main question I want to answer today is.... I'm reading this in order to....

Predicting

In the next part I think...
My prediction was correct/incorrect because....

Visualizing

I picture in my mind....
I can organize the information by...
If I were in their shoes, I would....
If I were to do that, I think the outcome might be...

Questioning
A question I have is....
I wonder about...
Is that really what they mean.....

Making Connections and Inferring
This reminds me of...
Even though it's not explicit, I think the text is saying... I think what connects these ideas is...
I didn't expect ______ because the text........
I can / can't relate to this because....
I think if ______ read this, they would say....
In the historical context, this would have meant....
This was a breakthrough / rupture/ turning point because... This shapes the word today because...

Recognizing a problem
I got confused when.... I'm not sure of....

Fixing the problem
I'll reread this part....
I'll keep reading and check back on this....
This reading strategy isn't working so instead I'll try...

Summarizing
Up to this point, I think the big idea is... So what this passage is saying is....

Arguing with the ideas
I agree/ disagree with this part of the text because....
I think these ideas support the interests/power of....
I think that _________ voices are being left out because...

Evaluating the writing itself
I think this is good/bad writing because......
The writer does_________; I'd like to try that in my own writing by.... If I were to rewrite this passage, I'd write it this way:

Vocabulary

The word ______ means ______

I would use this word when I'm trying to ______

Endnotes

1 This article is the third part of a series on revolutionary literacy called Reading for Revolution. Parts 1 and 2 can be found here: http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2013/05/27/reading-for-revolution-parts-1-and-2/

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10 Karl Marx, "Theses On Feuerbach", Marx/Engels Internet Archive, 1845, available at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm (accessed Dec 8, 2013).

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