**Citizenship Education Program (Background)**

***Citizenship as a Verb:***

Citizenship is not only a legal status; “citizenship” is just as much a verb, that is, a mindset, an attitude that implies action, like participating, assisting, speaking out, resisting, influencing, leading, organizing, cooperating, collaborating, dissenting, rejoicing.

Dorothy Cotton's work encouraged people to understand that as citizens, born or naturalized in the US, they had constitutional rights. But beyond citizenship as a legal status, Dorothy Cotton Institute views citizenship as a verb, engaging and influencing your society. Democracy is the right of all people living here to insist on government of, by and for the people. That requires the will and courage to get involved, speak out, influence policy, expand rights and protections, and change situations. For more about the Applied Civics Lab, click here.

**The Citizenship Education Program (CEP**) was the flagship program of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It employed the principles of nonviolence and the methodology of popular education, a highly effective, “learner-centered” participatory process developed by Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark with Myles Horton at the Highlander Folk School, and later adopted by the SCLC and led by Dorothy Cotton, Andrew Young and Septima Clark.

CEP participants were living and working under the daily threat of violence and retaliation for attempting to register to vote. The education staff of the SCLC drove a bus over several southern states, picking up respected local grassroots community leaders and activists, inviting them to participate for free in a 5-day intensive in Dorchester, GA. They’re transportation, lodging and meals would be paid for. Classes might have 25-50 or more participants, who would begin getting to know one another and then be immersed in a program that might address basic literacy and relevant vocabulary, how to pass the test for voter registration, how to fill out forms, e.g., a money order, but the design emerged in relation to what people said they needed to learn. People came to the CEP with different levels of education and the program was adapted to meet their needs and interests.

One of the first discussions happened when Dorothy and asked participants to talk about “What is a citizen?” “What is citizenship?”

Then people began to share stories of the challenges and suffering they faced under segregation, threats and intimidation. Often people discovered that folks in other states, other communities, were experiencing very similar kinds of mistreatment and abuse. The found common experience, empathy, and connection.

After letting people share their pain and anger and sense of hopelessness, the group was guided to focus on what they could do about it all: “Who is making these decisions? Who gets to decide?” “Why aren’t you in charge?” The point was to assist people to move from a sense of themselves as “victim” to “citizen”—from despair and passivity and helplessness to empowered, informed action with a plan and the encouragement and support of others.

People were asked “What is the Constitution?” “What are Amendments?” They were introduced to important Constitutional Amendments and what rights they afford citizens. They memorized and could quote whole sections. Out of necessity, people who have been illiterate all their lives tend to have developed amazing abilities for memorization. And they engaged in interrogating the implications for what rights they had been denied.

At some point mid-week, Dr. King and would come to the program and teach about nonviolence, why nonviolence was difficult and required great self-discipline and commitment but could be very powerful. They learned the principles of nonviolence and the steps of planning a nonviolent campaign, useful and effective means of expressing dissent, petitioning for redress of grievances.

The entire week included shared meals, playing games, singing, laughing, creating friendships, not only learning to write your name in cursive (longhand) so that you could sign the voter registration application. The CEP participants went home with the tools of basic literacy, and a plan for a nonviolent campaign to organize, educate, register to vote, demonstrate, march, sit in, strike, and seek redress of grievances and end legalized racial segregation. Many of the participants were asked to become CEP teachers and were offered training and coaching and support to set up Citizenship/freedom schools in their own communities. Fanny Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, Annell Ponder, Amelia Boynton, Annie Devine, Lula Williams, Bernice Robinson, and many others led citizenship schools that produced effective activists and citizens who later ran for office and won.

The CEP trained thousands of people to use nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience for liberation from what Dorothy called American-style apartheid in the Jim Crow south. CEP teachers like Amelia Boynton and Lula Williams helped organize the march from Selma to Montgomery, and Dorothy Cotton and others organized the Children’s Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama and the desegregation of the beaches in St. Augustine Florida. Fanny Lou Hamer and Victoria Gray and Annie Devine started the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The CEP equipped people to engage in effective, determined action, despite the real threat of retaliation, violence, dogs, fire hoses and jail.

DCI worked with Dorothy Cotton to design The Citizenship Education Program for the 21st Century about ten years ago. But DCI fellows are working now to update the content and tools to be as meaningful and relevant for the kinds of needed change as possible and the interests of changemakers of today, and need to address digital literacy, the connection between technology and media and how organizing and information are shared now.