

HEQA - Nico Slate

[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:49] **Nico Slate:** I'm Nico Slate, professor in the Department of History at Carnegie Mellon University. And I'm the author of "'The Answers Come From the People': The Highlander Folk School and the Pedagogies of the Civil Rights Movement." This article addresses a very big question by way of a smaller question. And the big question is "what was the role of education within the Civil Rights movement? And the smaller question is how did education work at the Highlander Folk School? And Highlander is a small residential school perched in the hills of Tennessee, that by the time of Civil Rights movement started, had already gained reputation as a place where learning could be connected to social change, primarily for the first two decades of its existence in regards to labor and struggles against class and equity, but slowly over the course of the 1940s and into the 1950s Highlander shifts its focus to the struggle against Jim Crow, segregation and American racism more broadly.

[00:02:00] Now scholars have long had an interest in Highlander, and there's also an even larger literature on the role of education and the long African-American freedom struggle and Civil Rights movement in particular. But there are elements of the standard narrative that I think need to be challenged. On the one hand, most accounts of Highlander buy-in to the school's own representation of itself as a place where education comes from the bottom up, where a progressive Deweyian in approach to education dictates that it's the students that are guiding the educational process. That's very true to an extent.

[00:02:48] But when you actually look at the nuts and bolts of how Highlander workshops operated, you find that there was quite a bit of top-down intervention. There were workshop leaders who structured the conversation. They were lecturing. And the two most prominent figures at Highlander in

these years, Myles Horton, the school's long time director and Septima Clark, who becomes the school's director of workshops in 1955 and plays a very important role in connecting Highlander to the Civil Rights movement. Septima Clark and Myles Horton, both play a very strong role in structuring educational experience that's offered at the school.

[00:03:34] So my articles, an effort to present a more nuanced assessment of the variety of pedagogical strategies that are employed at Highlander and in the process, then, to try to open up from a different vantage point this bigger question about the role of education within the Civil Rights movement. And when you think about education within the Civil Rights movement, often people think about how nonviolence was taught in role-playing exercises. For example, there were a variety of different workshops, those run by the Reverend Jim Lawson in Nashville, for example, that helped people both understand the philosophy of non-violence and also on a much more practical level, understand how you protect your body in the midst of a nonviolent protest, how do you remain home when someone is aggressively insulting you, attacking you, trying to get you to act, but that kind of education for nonviolence occurred at Highland. But there were actually many other forms of educational practice that were going on at Highlander, and that help us think about the role of education within the Civil Rights movement from a new vantage point.

[00:04:50] One of the most interesting questions for me is the degree to which the school itself, as an integrated institution-- one of the few openly integrated institutions in the South-- in those years, the way in which the community of the school itself, the experience of living across the color line was itself an educational experience.

[00:05:17] There's actually abundant evidence that for many of the civil rights activists who came to Highlander, people like Rosa Parks, for example, comes to Highlander three months before she keeps her seat on that bus in Montgomery. For someone like Rosa Parks, the conversations that happened at Highlander, the lectures, the film clips that she might've seen, all of those things were of interest, but what really mattered was the experience of living across the color line. Of having White people cook her breakfast, washing the dishes with people that were from different, not just ethno, ethno-racial backgrounds, but also different class backgrounds, from different parts of the US so that lived the experience of being an Highlander was itself educational.

[00:06:02] And that's another thing that I try to do in the article is to simultaneously pull apart the different kinds of education that were happening at Highlander. And then also try to understand how those different forms of education were interacting and intersecting with each other.

[00:06:20] The article aims to contribute to the literature on Highlander by challenging the idea of Highlander as-- in any way-- a simple manifestation of progressive pedagogy. And in the process, the article also tries to contribute to a very long debate within the history of education about what progressive education was. And the easiest answer to that question was to say, well, progressive education was many things to many different people, and that's obviously true, but I think it's actually important to recognize that the label progressive and the idea of claiming that something was progressive had its own historical importance.

[00:07:07] And certainly at Highlander, the school's legacy of connection to the progressive education movement and actually to John Dewey in particular was an important fact that he was a, uh, an important supporter of the school. Myles Horton had interacted with Dewey personally, and so the schools, progressive lineage was an important facet of its effort. And so for me, part of what I wanted to do in this article was to say, all right, we can't just say, well, progressive means many different things to many different people. We also have to understand how the idea of progressive education was deployed by different individuals in different institutions, in different contexts.

[00:07:52] And here's a really rich and interesting one where the idea of education from below is being deployed within a movement that is also challenging hierarchies of many kinds so that the educational focus and philosophy of the school gets melded to the focus and philosophy of the civil rights movement more broadly. Another key way in which I see the article opening up new lines of thought or interaction is in regards to how we understand what you might call the hierarchy of leadership within the Civil Rights movement. There's a range of different scholars that have debated to what degree charismatic leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. advance the struggle by providing guidance and focus, by providing inspiration, by providing spokespeople that could negotiate between the movement and supporters and other parts of the country.

[00:08:58] There are a variety of ways in which charismatic leaders contributed to the movement, but then there are also ways in which an overemphasis on

those kinds of leaders can distract us from the importance of grassroots activism within the movement, can push us towards an overemphasis on men as versus women because of the sexism of the time. Most prominent leaders within the movement, those that ended up being celebrated in the national news media were men, whereas many of the most important figures of the grassroots level are women. So there's a very deep, and at this point, how already old efforts to rebalance the literature on the Civil Rights movement, by focusing more on grassroots struggles, on struggles led by women, and Highlander is a place where all of these different questions about leadership and the hierarchy within the movement play out in real time, uh, and you can see figures like Martin Luther King interacting-- King himself actually only comes to Highlander once, but there are many other prominent figures, ministers of various kinds, heads of organizations, that come to high alert and interact with people who are, uh, without any title who are working much more at the grassroots level.

[00:10:11] And you can see them debate and interact and I'm using the word "see" here, but actually I think a more apt word would be "hear." You can listen in as they do these debates, because one of the most exciting things about studying Highlander is that in addition to a real treasure trove of written documents and archival sources, there's also over a hundred hours of audio tapes of civil rights workshops and other kinds of workshops at Highlander. So you can actually listen in as these historical figures are debating their goals, debating their strategies, learning from each other, learning from these outside experts that are brought in. That's part of what I think makes the, uh, this article especially rich, is that it's drawing not just on the printed sources, but also on these audio sources that are, I think are really unique and a revealing source, both for studying Highlander, but also studying the Civil Rights movement.

[00:11:13] This article actually came about because of how surprised I was at the number of so-called so-called "resource people" or experts that were brought to Highlander to help educate the students when they were there. When I first started studying Highlander, it was in part because I was really moved by this idea of a school where the students were driving the learning, where the answers came from the people. But when I actually started to listen in, on these workshops and to look at the archival sources, I saw that it was quite common for a workshop to be largely if, if not overwhelmingly dedicated to students learning from some kind of an expert. And I found that really

surprising, and it challenged my understanding of what Highlander was, and it led me ultimately to want to know more and eventually to writing this article.

[00:12:16] I see at least three potential broad implications from this line of research. One has to do with the role of education within the Civil Rights movement. And there are many scholars that have examined different kinds of educational endeavors within the movement. But I think that we still need to go further in our understanding of the crucial role that education played, not just preparing civil rights activists for particular protests, but also in helping activists think through what they wanted and what, where they were going, where they wanted to go. There was a tremendous amount of conversation built into the movement with activists meeting regularly in all sorts of venues from a hotel rooms to churches, to restaurants, to institutions like Highlander that are set up specifically to facilitate these kinds of interactions and those conversations were vital to the successes of the movement, and also were-- and are--windows on many of the challenges that the movement faced.

[00:13:35] Secondly, I'd say that there is a really important growing body of literature on social movements, schools, which looks at the role of institutions like Highlander in social movements, not just the Civil Rights movement, but other kinds of social struggles, uh, and I think that this article can contribute to that literature by helping scholars think through the role of different kinds of pedagogies within social movement schools. And then last, but not least, this article is also very much about progressive education and the way in which a conception of progressive education as bottom up a grassroots pedagogy was central to Highlanders mission, but not always central to what actually happened within the school itself.

[00:14:34] **Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:14:53] **Nico Slate:** If I were going to teach this piece in the classroom and I wanted to use it to help students think about how to do history, one of the things I would point out is the tremendous opportunities that arise from using oral transcripts of conversations, because many of the printed materials that we're created to document Highlander's history were aimed at public

consumption. And so it's easy to lose some of the lived experience of what actually occurred at the school. And I think that lived experience is very central to the educational impact of what actually happens.

[00:15:37] So I'll give you just very specific example. If you listen to the audio tapes of Highlander's workshops, one of the things that comes across very clearly, it's just how much laughter there was. This was a joyful and often humorous experience for people. There were lots of jokes. There was a lot of humor. There was a lot of laughter-- even when people were talking about very difficult subjects. And that I think was actually really important to what the school accomplished, because it wasn't just particular ideas that were being debated. But in the process of coming together and talking about goals and strategies, there was community building going on, and that community building was advanced through mealtimes and, uh, having plays and dances and taking hikes in the forest.

[00:16:27] But it was also experienced and advanced. In the workshop discussions themselves, which were often very enjoyable experiences for people. And so I would, I would draw students' attention to the way that those audio sources are opportunities to offer kind of a thick description of what a workshop was. And also just more generally as a historian to think about what was the lived experience for historical actors of what's being described here and to try to think in what can often be flattened and to think about what was it like as a human being, to sit in this room? What were the smells? What were the sounds? What were the emotions that were going on as people were coming together to discuss, uh, how to confront Jim Crow, segregation, and how to try to live into the kind of world that they wanted to create.

[00:17:19] I'd recommend three books as a great place to start when thinking about Highlander and its broader significance, and then also a couple of really wonderful films, the three books that are, would be at the top of my list. And I should say there are actually a lot of great books either on Highlander or related to the Highlander, but the--the three that I most often turn to myself or encourage others to read, or Charles Payne's, *I've Got The Light of Freedom*, which is a history of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, but starts with the citizenship schools that came out of the Highlander, and that were a collaboration between Highlander and activists working in the coastal islands off of Charleston, South Carolina and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* as an absolute classic in many ways, but it's also, I think, one of the best introductions to Highlander and Highlander's significance.

[00:18:16] Uh, then there's a very recent book by Victoria Wolcott called *Living in The Future*, which just came out I think last year, that's a wonderful book on different utopian efforts to embody a better world in twentieth century America. But she's particularly focused on places like Highlander where this so-called utopian experiment isn't cut off from the world. I think one of the important facets of Highlander is one that's really central to Wolcott's book, which is utopias is often get a bad rap as places where people go to escape the world. But many of the most interesting utopian experiments, and again, if we're going to use that word to describe a place like Highlander, were places where people were escaping from the world in order to transform it, in order to go back into it, in order to change it, more of a kind of revolving door view of utopia and Wolcott's approach to Highlander, I think is really revealing. And the whole book is beautiful and intriguing book that I'd strongly recommend.

[00:19:18] And then there's a wonderful biography of Septima Clark. I mentioned Septima Clark earlier. She's arguably the most important figure at connecting Highlander and the Civil Rights movement. The only other person who I would say might be equal to her there as Myles Horton was the longtime director of Highlander, but Septima Clark, who's a very influential African-American educator who plays a central role at Highlander, and then goes on to bring these citizenship schools to the SCLC and to the broader movement. And there's a wonderful biography of Septima Clark by Katherine Mellen Charron. It's not just about Septima Clark, it's a great introduction to her, but it's also a wonderful book about the role of education within the Black freedom struggle, and also very much about Highlander itself.

[00:20:03] In addition to those three books, and also definitely recommend that students watch Bill Moyers's interview with Myles Horton. That last time I checked was freely available on YouTube. Myles Horton was for better or worse than incredibly charismatic figure, and it's a fun interview to watch. And then there's actually several lovely documentaries about Highlander that students can also find by Googling. So in addition to reading, I'd also recommend people watch and listen to the experience of Highlander because that itself was also very moving and I think important.

[00:20:39] There's a tremendous amount of additional research that could be done either on Highlander or through Highlander. And by that, I mean, using the workshops that occurred at Highlander in order to examine other facets of the Civil Rights struggle. My big question has been and remains "What was the role of education within the Civil Rights movement?" The Highlander's an

equally good place to ask questions like was there a long Civil Rights movement that started before the Montgomery bus boycott and Brown v Board? If so, what does that mean? What are the pros and cons of seeing the movement in that kind of long context? Because Highlander as a school is founded in 1932 and gets actively involved in thinking about issues of race and racism in the Thirties and even more so in the Forties and then into the early Fifties. So it's a, it's a very interesting place to think about this long Civil Rights movement debate. Uh, it's also a very interesting place to think about the relationship between labor and civil rights struggles, because Highlander was long, really a labor school, labor organizing school and labor remains a key component of how the school operates even into the so-called classic Civil Rights Era. There could be some very interesting questions about gender and there's already been great work. There's a wonderful biography of Zilphia Horton, who is also an incredibly important figure at Highlander, who was a musician and helped bring, probably more than anyone else actually, helped to bring classic Southern ballads and labor songs like "We Shall Overcome" into the Civil Rights struggle. She was in a very influential figure. And you could study Zilphia Horton as a way of thinking about the role of gender within both the Civil Rights movement, the labor movement, and other Southern struggles. Yeah, there's a wonderful book that just came out recently about Zilphia Horton called *Singing Army* by, um, Kim Ruehl.

[00:22:36] Another really interesting question actually building on Zilphia would be to look at the role of music at Highlander, and there's been several good articles written about this, book chapters written on "We Shall Overcome" in particular. But looking more closely at the role of music in the Civil Rights struggle and how Highlander helped facilitate that role, I think would be another really rich, interesting project for a student

[00:23:01] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.