

Entry for new Pergammon Encyclopedia of Adult Education

Social Movement Learning

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“Social movements are not merely social dramas; they are the social action from where new knowledge including worldviews, ideologies, religions, and scientific theories originate” (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991, p 14). Social movement learning is: a) learning by persons who are part of any social movement; and b) learning by persons outside of a social movement as a result of the actions taken or simply by the existence of social movements. Learning by persons who are part of a social movement may occur in an informal way because of the stimulation and requirements of participation in a movement. Learning by persons who are part of a social movement may also occur as a result of intentional educational activities organized within the movement itself.

Learning for those outside a social movement happens both in informal and intentional ways as well. The study of social movement learning recognizes that whatever else social movements are or do; they are exceedingly rich learning environments. (Clover and Hall, Finger, Foley, Holford, and Welton). Social movements are privileged locations for the creation of new knowledge; they are, as Eyerman and Johnson have said, “epistemic communities” (1991, p 10)

Learning for persons within a social movement may be informally acquired simply by being surrounded new understandings of the issues of the movements themselves such as knowledge of the impact of global warming on the biosphere or the impact of mercury contamination in fish in the case of some environmental movements. It could be the learning that we do about the proliferation of small arms in Africa as members of one or another

peace movement organizations. It could be about dealing with diverse forms of homophobia or intolerance within the gay and lesbian movements. Informal learning may also take the form of specific organizational skills which are needed to reach social movement goals such as when we take on working with the media, creating web sites, raising funds or engaging in public speaking. We learn, and we learn at an incredible rate, in both of these cases in action, as a result of the imperatives of social movement activities. For those interested in a fuller discussion of informal learning, the recent work of David Livingstone bears close attention (Livingstone, NALL)

Persons within social movements also learn from intentional adult educational efforts to stimulate learning. Trade union movements offer a full range of educational activities for members ranging from ways to interpret the impact of larger political phenomena such as globalization or trade liberalization to more practical matters such as understanding management, conducting collective bargaining or making grievances (Burke et al, Martin, Delp et al, Taylor, Spencer).

Perhaps the most powerful form of social movement learning is that learning which takes place by persons who are not directly participating as members of a given social movement. For example many men have learned much about the gendered dimensions of power and perceptions from the women's movement even though they have not been members. Much of what we first learned about the impact of a rapacious and greedy humanity on the rest of nature came from the actions of the environmental movement protesting for example the clear cutting of local forests. The tools of social movements which include poetry, marches, protests, political theatre are intentionally designed to reach beyond the movements themselves. Such is the power of social movements to reframe the world, that none of us

escapes this on-going democratic flow of energy. To this transformation of vision and imagination we give the name learning.

Vandana Shiva (1989) and Mahatma Gandhi of India, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (Rydstrom, no date), Jimmy Tompkins (Lotz and Welton, 1998) and Moses Coady of Canada (Welton, 2001), Myles Horton (Gaventa and Bell, 1993) and Jane Adams of the US, Antonio Gramsci of Italy and Paulo Freire (Mayo, 1998) of Brazil are but a few of those whose names have been associated with the ideas of social movement learning. Mayo (1998) has rendered the most succinct comparative analysis of the work of Gramsci and Freire, who both see the learning process most fully flourishing within social movement contexts. While Gramsci contextualized his work in the notion of a working class movement of the early 20th century in Italy, Freire initial work grew out of rural organizing in Northeastern Brazil.

Others whose writing is influenced by social movement learning include:

Belanger and Federighi, Faris, Simon, Smith, and O'Sullivan. The historical roots of adult education in the European tradition have been closely tied to the rise of early social movements such as the labour movements, protection of children's rights, the temperance movement, the struggle for women's rights to vote or the anti-poverty movements.

Finger (1989), Menconi (2003), Holford (1995), Welton (1993), have written directly of the linkages between social movements and adult learning. According to Finger, new social movements are the catalyst for personal transformation and the environment within which transformation occurs. They define the future topics of adult education. Learning, according to Finger within these movements has a more powerful impact than does schooling. Social movement learning theory within the context of endogenous knowledge

creation sees learning as a people's tool (political dimension); a democratic right (learning by all) and as learning from the world (epistemological dimension). This is contrasted to exogenous knowledge transmission which sees education as a tool of the system, a package for all, and education about the world (Finger and Asun).

Welton argues that new social movements are both personal and collective in form and content. He sees them as 'privileged sites' of transformative learning or emancipatory praxis. He asks the question, "What are adults learning?" in new social movements, but does not go much further than outlining some ways of understanding what the new social movements are responding to. He asks one of the key questions which we are trying to answer "Is something of great significance for the field of adult education occurring within these sites"? Menconi partially responds by writing about learning citizenship within social movements (p 1)

Holford draws on social movement theorists Eyerman and Jamison who speak of social movements as a location of "cognitive praxis" (1991, 10). Eyerman and Jamison suggest that it is "through tensions between different groups and organizations over defining and acting in that conceptual space that the (temporary) identity of a social movement is formed." (1991, 22) Through the notion of "cognitive praxis" they emphasize the creative role of consciousness and cognition in all human action, individual and collective. They focus simultaneously on the process of articulating a movement identity (cognitive praxis), on the actors taking part in this process (movement intellectuals), and on the context of articulation (politics, cultures, and institutions). What comes out of social movement action is neither predetermined nor completely self-willed; its meaning is derived from the context in which it is carried out and the understanding

that actors bring to it and/or derive from it. *Learning in Social Action* by the Australian Foley offers a wide reaching exploration of informal learning within the context of a variety of social movement settings such as an environmental campaign, a Brazilian women's organization and an African liberation struggle. He notes that informal learning emergences as well as advances social action such as alternative organizational forms; links between spiritual and political action; the power of a small group of committed people; expertise can be acquired from outside; social action as a part of local struggles is stressful and creates a need for mutual support; and learning deepens in the context of the community action itself. (p. 43-45).

Clover, Follen and Hall in their study, *The Nature of Transformation*, have looked at a wide range of lessons about learning that have been learned from and contributed back into the environmental movement. Their principles include: passionate re-connection with the rest of nature through all out senses; critical examination of unjust power relations behind contemporary social and environmental trends; learning from where we are; taking responsibility for personal and collective action in our communities; transcending the limits of top-down educational models and learning through the creativity of music, poetry, story-telling and more. (p. 23).

There are rich sources of documentation related to learning within specific social movements. Roy of Trent University writes on the learning of Canada's "Raging Grannies" (2004). The Raging Grannies are older women who turn the stereotypes of old age upside down as they sing satirical and well researched songs of political protest on the steps of the legislature while dressed in old fashioned bonnets and dresses. DeKeyser of the Katholic Universtet in Belgium has looked at 10 years of learning in social

movements in the Netherlands and Belgium. (2000) Shugurensky writes of the learning of citizens within the special participatory democracy experiences in Porto Alegre Brazil. Barndt documents the social movement learning of Nicaragua during the Sandanista years (1990). Parajuli writes of ecological ethnicities in Asia from a social movement learning framework (1999). Cunningham and Curry (1997) write of the urban African American movements. Butterwick (1996) and Clover (2002) write of women's creative learning. Hill articulates social movement learning issues as a member of both the environmental and gay-lesbian movements (1996, 2004). Grace and Hill examine the impact of queer theorizing in the adult education movements (in Press). At the global level today's social movements are not phenomena taking place in isolation or narrowly limited to a single issue or actor; they seem be cognizant of a variety of overlapping issues (Edwards and Gaventa, and Hall, 2000). Hence today's movements are radical, complex, visionary, and inclusive of different identities more than any existing social movement theories have been able to capture (Melucci 1989; Hunter 1993).

There is much to be learned from the local and global movements for those with an interest in adult education. From the perspective of social movements, the study of social movement learning can help answer the question of how best to use scarce resources for movement purposes. Reflection on the tacit skills being learned by social movement activists is of critical use for strengthening and extending the power and reach of social movements today.

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