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# **The Characteristics of Learning in Social Movements: A Pilot Study of an Environmental Organization**

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study addresses the distinctive characteristics of learning in social movements in terms of learning content, motivation, format, and outcomes. Based on the researcher's constructivist stance on knowledge, social movement activists in a currently active local environmental organization, the Protect Elica Island (pseudonym, PEI), were interviewed. The study showed that PEI activists learned skills and knowledge about the movement, as well as suggestions for more successful organization activities. Participants reported learning about the nature of social movement participation from reflection, and the significance of their social movement activities in more passionate, self-directed, self-controlled, and self-rewarding ways than in schools or workplaces

## **Introduction**

Lifelong education is no longer a new concept in many societies, and the importance of learning throughout one's whole life and of learning across the diverse dimensions of life has received much attention recently. In addition to the distinctive characteristics of learning in different phases in a lifespan, the characteristics of learning in diverse dimensions of life and society are worthy of being explored in the field of education. However, learning outside of schools has not received much attention; as a result, learning in informal and non-formal settings has not yet been sufficiently illuminated in the education field. One non-formal setting that merits further investigation is learning in social movements because, although scholars have explored the possibility of social movements as sites of learning, the characteristics that distinguish learning in social movements have not been empirically addressed. Thus, this study can help to fill this gap and contribute to our understanding of learning in social movements. Besides, studying learning in resistance settings which are different from school settings, will show different aspects of human learning; as a result, the study has potential benefits to humankind, in terms of gaining a better understanding of the nature of human learning.

This pilot study, which used qualitative research methodology including interviews, had two main questions: (a) what do social movement activists learn from social movement participation, and (b) how do social movement activists learn in social movement organizations?

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Sociologists have challenged the collective action theory, which was dominant before the 1970s and regarded social movements as social pathologies from the psychological perspective. In the 1970s, alternative approaches such as resources mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), new social movement theory (NSM) (Melucci, 1984), and political process theory (McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 2004) emerged in social movement research, and those

theories provided explanations for the emergence of social movements and the characteristics of social movements. However, sociologists neglected to shed light on participants' experiences in social movements.

As the importance of learning throughout a life span and across life spaces received greater attention, learning outside of schools and learning in adulthood became an issue in education. This extension of educational interests allowed learning in social movements to be actively researched and this effort can be summarized as four themes: (a) learning for social change, (b) social movements as learning sites, (c) collective learning processes, and (d) knowledge construction.

The first approach—understanding education as a strong tool for social change, is grounded in educational philosophies of Dewey's (1939), Lindeman (1926/1961, 1945), and Freire (1970,2000). The second approach, which understands social movements as learning sites, is primarily based on new social movement theory. In a NSM, Finger (1989) argued, social change occurs through the transformation of individuals; as a result, the concept of adult education was embedded in the NSM's concept of adult transformation. Welton (1995) suggested that NSMs were privileged sites for emancipatory praxis because NSMs were "interpreted primarily as defenses of the threatened lifeworld and ecosystem" (p. 152). Highlighting social movements as learning sites provides new ways to include social movements in adult education. However, some scholars argue that simply defining social movements as learning sites does not fully explain the relationship between adult education and social movements.

The third approach concerns actual individual and collective learning processes that happen through social movements. Foley (1999) explored informal learning processes that occur through participation in social practice and political struggle. Foley called it "learning in the struggle" (p. 39), and emphasized the informal nature of social movement learning. Kilgore (1999) drew on collective learning theory to understand learning in social movements. Specifically, Kilgore viewed the group itself as a learner, arguing that the relationship between individual and group learning should be reexamined. However, as Kilgore also pointed out, the construction of collective identity includes not only the process of solidarity and consent but also the process of conflict. If the group is large and diverse, the construction process is much more complex.

The fourth approach to the role of social movements in adult education focuses on the issue of knowledge construction (Cunningham, 2000; Hill, 2004; Holford, 1995). The types of knowledge created through social movements and the ways knowledge is constructed in the process of social movements are explored by some adult education scholars. For example, Cunningham (2000) regarded social movements as a major source of alternative knowledge production. Hill (2004) explored the nature of knowledge constructed through social movements and found that this knowledge has features of "fugitive knowledge" (p. 228) in that this knowledge is not included in the range of official knowledge, which is controlled by government and professional intellectuals. My literature review revealed that the amount and the depth of theories are not sufficient for fully understanding learning in social movements.

## **Research Design**

This qualitative research study utilized interviews to explore the experiences of social movement activists in terms of learning. Research participants were from an environmental

social movement organization in an east coast area of the United States, which focused on political and environmental state-wide issues.

Five social movement activists reported on their learning experiences in social movements. Specifically, interview participants were identified through a network sampling (Roulston, 2010) of acquaintances who knew others who participate in social movements. The researchers contacted recommended activists via email and asked if they themselves would like to participate or if they could nominate others who might like to participate. Once a participant was identified, the participant recommended another working in the same social movement, and this process continued until five people participated in the interview.

To collect data, an in-depth semi-structured interview format (Roulston, 2010) was used. Five participants were asked about their participating motivation, roles in the movement, learning experiences, and self-identified differences of learning in social movements. Four interviews took place face-to-face while the other interview was done over the telephone. Each interview took one and one half hours and was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded for themes. The constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed for analysis. All proper nouns including participants' names and geographical names were replaced with pseudonyms.

## **Findings**

In the analysis of question one, what do social movement activists learn from social movement participation, three different types of learning content emerged. The first category of learning content in social movements was skills and knowledge about the movement and suggestions for more successful organization activities. The second category was the understanding of the nature of social movement participation, which emerged from reflections on their participation in social movements, and the third category was learning about the significance of their social movement activities.

### **Skills and Knowledge about the Movement**

The Protect Elica Island (PEI) participants learned about the movement and the organization while participating in letter writing, organizing an organization, presenting and submitting bills, and other activist actions. The participants did not decide to participate in the movement because they know everything about the issues. They began participating because of their own initial motivation such as conservation purpose, personal relationship with the island; then, in the process of working in the organization, they learned more about historical, environmental, and political information related to the issues and the movement. For example, Olivia researched the history of Elica Island and found many historical facts supporting the organization's actions: "The Clarkson University (pseudonym) has a collection of papers donated by Paul Smith (pseudonym), the Governor who bought Elica Island. ... Mark and Cindy asked me to go down and to do research at the state archives on laws and records that had been kept regarding Elica Island" (Olivia). The PEI participants learned factual information related to organizational activities (i.e., legislators' names, how bills were made into law) as well as practical strategies (i.e., how to frame messages effectively, how to approach senators and other people).

### *The Nature of Social Movements*

In addition to skills and knowledge about social movements, PEI members learned about the nature of social movements. Throughout their diverse encouraging and discouraging experiences, the PEI participants reflected on the dynamic relationship between their activities and outcomes; they learned that social movement activists should not be satisfied with one small victory: “the battles are never over, really. You don’t just say, ‘We won! That’s the end, we can all go home now’ ... because they may change their mind, something may back off, they may lose a bill, but there will always be somebody there wanting to make a whole lot of money off whatever. ... So, you don’t rest on your laurels” (Olivia).

As the success of social movements is hard to define and even harder to achieve, Tara also recommended activists not give up: “So, I’ve learned that in order to affect change, or to be successful, that you cannot give up. You have to keep pressing. You have to keep letting them [large companies] know that you’re not going to let this go” (Tara).

### *The Significance of Their Activities in Social Change*

Finally, participants learned about the significance of their activities in social change. At first, they realized the conflict between what they had taken for granted about power and money and how power and money operate together in reality. According to Mark, the bill about a new development plan of the Elica Island which was designed by the PEI and strongly supported by many State citizens and senators was turned down by a call from the Lieutenant Governor, one of “the big players” (Mark). Instead of giving up, the PEI activists put more effort into learning skills and knowledge in order to be more effective; as a result, they made progress in their cause. Activists realize the significance of their activity of political involvement and hope. Mary stated that “The Biltmore Company deal, which is now defunct, had a large foot print, but for whatever reasons, I have to believe that our groups’ actions made a big difference; the footprint is about half the size it would’ve been.” Mark also pointed out that “I can tell you if our organization wasn’t around, all three of those things [successful outcomes] wouldn’t have happened.”

### *Intrinsic and Practical-Application-Oriented Motivations*

In regards to the second research question, the learning process in social movements seems to differ from learning in other social settings in terms of motivation, format, and outcomes. First, the PEI participants’ motivation for learning was intrinsic and practical-application-oriented. They learned not because they were supposed to learn in the given contexts, but because they needed information and skills to apply to their social actions: “whether Elica Island gets developed or doesn’t is not gonna make me lose my job tomorrow, or get my job, or get a bad grade or anything like that. It’s really a different kind of motivation. It’s something that comes from inside: you know, wanting to see the right thing done” (Lisa).

### *Self-directed and Self-Controlled Learning Format*

In addition to the intrinsic and practical-application-oriented motivation, learning in social movements was more self-directed than school learning. Activists learned “by doing” (Lisa), “by the seat of my pants” (Tara), and from “trial and errors” (Mark). Another unique aspect of the learning format of social movement learning is that it is self-controlled learning. Mark described that “[in class] you’re not the one who’s structuring this, you know, you’re not driving the bus, as they say, somebody else is.” Olivia pointed out, “the best part about this [learning in social movement]; if I’m interested in something through a social movement, if I want to learn more about coal-powered power plants ... I can do it. Nobody’s telling me I can’t spend all day researching coal-fired power plants. Nobody’s telling me I can’t spend all day in

the archives, digging up whatever needs to be dug up on the Elica Island. So, you have a lot more liberty to pursue knowledge that interests you.”

### *Self-Rewarding Learning Outcomes*

Finally, learning outcomes in social movements are more rewarding than other learning outcomes because the outcome includes direct impact on social change. Based on the Marxist concept of use-value and exchange-value (Marx et al., 1990), this type of outcome is better understood as result from pursuing use-value rather than a means of exchanging with capital. Mark said, “University experiences are more geared towards requiring certain skills and knowledge, looking for discipline or career, whereas this experience has much more practical applications, you know, you can see direct impact on people’s lives, lots of people’s lives from what we’re doing here. So in a sense, this is more rewarding because you understand that were having an impact.” Lisa compared the learning experience with workplace learning: “If it’s professional development, you can put it on your resume. But, in a social movement, as chances are it may not do that. . . . I get a sense from the careers that I’ve had, there’s absolutely nothing about working with the PEI that would have done good or bad or anything to my resume. I mean, I just can’t think how it would’ve impacted on me at all.”

### *Summary*

In summary, the PEI activists learned three types of content from participation: skills and knowledge about the movement and suggestions for more successful organization activities; the understanding of the nature of social movement participation from reflections; and the significance of their social movement activities. In terms of distinctive learning process in this particular social movements, learning in social movements was more passionate, self-directed, self-controlled, and self-rewarding than learning in schools or workplaces.

## **Discussions and Conclusion**

The category of learning contents in social movements, though one aspect does not clearly exclude another aspect, corresponds to Habermas’s (1971) three kinds of knowledge: instrumental, practical or communicative, and emancipatory. If we can assume that learning about the nature of social movements and social change is a higher level of knowledge than instrumental skills and knowledge for social movements, what enables a social movement participant to achieve a higher level knowledge is reflection. Reflection is embedded in social movement learning in that social movement activities are voluntary. Faced with encouraging and frustrating experiences from social movement participation, activists cannot help but keep asking themselves about the reason for their continued participation; this process, self-questioning and self-answering, is exactly the process of reflection. Mark’s commented on the book, *Politics*, that “in some situations, one has to compromise one’s principles in order to be effective as an organization” provides insight for the role of reflection in different kinds of learning in social movement. In conclusion, the PEI activists learned hope by learning skills and knowledge for effective organizational activities and through reflection on their actions and the ensuing outcomes.

In many advanced capitalist societies, adult education tends to play an exchange role. For example, the government encourages high school dropouts to get a GED saying “get a GED and get a better job.” People widely regard education as a means of getting a higher salary job. When learning is detached from teaching as a result of the postmodern project of deconstruction,

and given the context of education for better salary, it seems that learning in social movements can provide both meaning and insight for those who are concerned with adult education and social change.

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