

ACTIVIST RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT MOBILIZATION

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ABSTRACT: The role of social movements and social and political activism as educative processes and milieus is often overlooked by scholars of social movements and those working in the field of adult education. Yet social movements are not only significant sites of struggle for social and political change but also important – albeit contested and contradictory- terrains of learning, knowledge production and research. Grounded in insights from the author’s longstanding involvement in multi-scalar social movement organizing, education and research, this article draws primarily from his current research on activist research practice in social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which work closely with them. It traces the dialectical relations between informal and non-formal learning and education in social action, research, education and action. Drawing on interviews conducted in 2012-2013 in the Philippines, South Africa, Canada and the UK, the article focuses on the ways in which research is carried out by movement research activists “in the struggle”, located outside of university institutional contexts or partnerships. Emphasizing the social character of all knowledge production, it argues that everyday struggles are not only the means to build movements, alliances, and counter-power but are generative of, and in turn informed by the learning/knowledge aspects of this activity.

The U.S. historian Staughton Lynd (2009) suggested that “[e]verything we know about learning instructs that people do not learn by reading Left-wing newspapers, nor by attending lectures ... at which some learned person offers correct theory. **People learn by experience...** People must touch and taste an alternative way of doing things, they

must however briefly live inside that hope, in order to come to believe that an alternative might really come true” [emphasis in the original](p.74).

Social movements and social/political activism can be inherently educative processes, spaces and forces in which a great deal of learning, theorizing, research and other kinds of intellectual work take place. While there is an emerging scholarly literature which acknowledges this, nonetheless, many people still see activism as action/practice, and education, theory and research as something generated elsewhere, such as in academic and scientific institutions. Even in more critical areas of education scholarship, it seems that the institutional context in which people learn and in which knowledge is created often remains a major factor in influencing how and what knowledge and education is held to be valuable or taken seriously. Biju Mathew (2010) noted that activist spaces can sometimes be “dominated by a destructive anti-intellectualism that is very often advanced through an anti theory/anti academy attitude” (p.158). While this is sometimes the case, I have also encountered genuine hunger for debate, discussion and ideas in many organizing milieus, with many activists and organizers being voracious readers of histories of earlier social struggles and movements with an interest in gleaning practical, conceptual resources to help think through their own engagement and challenges. Many of the debates, discussions and other kinds of intellectual work which happen in these contexts are not documented; if they are, they are not always valued for their contributions to theory and the production of different kinds of knowledge.

In this article, then, drawing on critical currents of adult education/social movement learning literature (Allman, 2010; Foley, 1999; Holst, 2002; Choudry and Kapoor, 2010; Scandrett, 2012), I highlight some of the ways in which learning and knowledge production take place in social movements with a particular focus on activist research. Intimately connected with other forms of learning, education, knowledge production and action in social movements, research is a major undertaking in many movements and struggles for change. Drawing on research that I have conducted with activist researchers based in small NGOs and social movements in a number of countries since 2011, I then turn to discuss the relationship between activist research, education and action. In this article, I will draw from interviews with activist researchers in South Africa, the Philippines, Britain, and Canada about their practice. For the most part, I came to know of these movements/organizations and their contributions to knowledge production through my own involvement in Asia-Pacific and global anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles for over 25 years¹.

Commenting on scholarly literature in the field of adult education, John Holst (2002) noted “a general tendency to dismiss the importance and nature of learning in social movements. This reluctance”, he says,

stems from (a) viewing social movement practice as political and not educative; (b)

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the tendency in adult education to dismiss informal education in everyday life; and (c) the increasing professionalization of the field, which has moved the field away from its historical roots within social movements themselves (pp.80-81).

The learning, education and knowledge production that takes place in these milieus is of great significance. But sometimes it is not easy to discern, especially the non-formal and informal forms which occur outside of professionalized contexts, including large NGOs, their networks and projects. Reflecting on popular education schools in marginalized, historically disadvantaged communities near Cape Town, South Africa, Astrid von Kotze (2012) has observed: “As non-formal education much popular education is ...invisible: informed primarily by the commitment towards change it happens in the nooks and crannies of society, driven by belief and passion rather than (financial) resources” (p.103). Perhaps even less visible or acknowledged is the incremental, below-the-radar, often incidental and informal forms of learning, and knowledge production in action that can be so important, but so hard to recognize, let alone to document or theorize (Choudry 2010). Griff Foley (1999) has made a strong case for the significance of this kind of learning. “While systematic education does occur in some social movement sites and actions,” he wrote (see, for example, Tarlau in this issue), “learning in such situations is largely informal and often incidental – it is tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognized as learning” (p.3). Yet, as Lynd suggested

at the beginning of this article, it may be the 'learning by doing' that leaves the deepest footprints on us.

Paula Allman (2010) insisted that

it is through and within the struggles for reform – whether these pertain to issues emanating from the shop floor, the community, the environment or any other site where the ramifications of capitalism are experienced – that critical/revolutionary praxis develops. These struggles are some of the most important sites in which critical education can and must take place. Moreover, if this critical education takes place within changed relations, people will be transforming not only their consciousness but their subjectivity and sensibility as well (p.128).

I find Eurig Scandrett's (2012) characterization of the common terrains and dynamics of learning within social movements to be insightful. He has captured well the dynamic relations between more structured forms and processes of popular education in social movements and informal and incidental learning and knowledge production that takes place. He has suggested that

learning may take place as a dialectical interrogation of knowledge from the perspective of struggle, and may occur through structured popular education or

incidental learning, and in a complex relationship between the two as values and knowledge interact. Incidental learning occurs prior to and as a result of structured popular education, but is affected by such experience through dialogue with knowledge to discern what is 'really useful'. At the same time, incidental learning, even in the absence of structured popular (or indeed didactic) education, can take place through alternative processes, such as in discursive encounters with other movements, in which the methodology, if not the method of popular education occurs (p.52).

Social movements and activist milieus are also terrains of struggle over power, knowledge and ideas, including what constitutes legitimate or authoritative knowledge. Indeed a critical analysis of learning in 'progressive' social movements also necessitates looking critically at the claims of some of these in relation to actual practices, and in particular the way these are experienced by racialized peoples, women, and society's most marginalized and oppressed. Michael Newman (2000) has asserted:

People's everyday experience and learning can as easily reproduce ways of thinking and acting which support the often oppressive status quo as it can produce recognitions that enable people to critique and challenge the existing order. And even when learning is emancipatory it is not so

in some linear, development sense: it is complex and contradictory, shaped as it is by intrapersonal, interpersonal and broader social forces (pp.275-6).

One cannot presume romanticized notions of social movement organizing, learning and knowledge production. Indeed, elsewhere (Choudry, 2009, 2010, 2013), I have discussed struggles over knowledge and power in global justice and other movements, including forces of co-optation, internal forms of disciplining dissent within social movement, NGO, and community organization networks (Choudry and Shragge, 2011) and the “NGOization” of social change, employing an anti-colonial lens of analysis.

An enduring aspect of Martinique-born Frantz Fanon’s (2001) contribution has been his recognition of the intellectual work, the dialectic of learning, in the struggle – with all of its tensions and contradictions. He was clear not to set up some kind of dualistic notion about ‘the brain’ and ‘the brawn’ of movements, viewing that both reason and force have great importance in popular mobilization, and that these are dialectically related. Fanon was insistent on social and political change depending on the muscles and brains at the bottom, not top down revolution imposed by an elite. Writing in the context of the Algerian struggle for liberation, at a time when many other colonized peoples were rising up to demand independence throughout Africa and Asia, Fanon noted how ordinary people have the potential to take control over their lives, that their consciousness emerges through struggle, and he articulated a faith in the intelligence and

consciousness of ordinary people. Another important anti-colonial thinker and revolutionary, Amilcar Cabral (1973) also remarked on how leaders of the liberation movement (in the struggle of Guinea and Cape Verde from independence from Portuguese colonial rule) came to

realize, not without a certain astonishment, the richness of spirit, the capacity for reasoned discussion and clear exposition of ideas, the facility for understanding and assimilating concepts on the part of populations groups who yesterday were forgotten, if not despised, and who were considered incompetent by the colonizer and even by some nationals (p.54).

These observations from Fanon and Cabral resonate today in movements and organizing contexts. I want to emphasize the social character of all knowledge production, and the ways in which everyday struggles are not only the means to build movements, alliances, and counterpower but are generative of, and in turn informed by the learning/knowledge aspects of this activity. Fanon and Cabral's reflections also seem relevant to making a strong case for the capacity of social movements building knowledge and conducting research from the ground up, without a dependency either on university or NGO professionals for their 'expertise'.

Church Land Programme is an NGO based in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, which was initiated in 1996 as a joint project between an independent land rights NGO and a church agency, in response to the land reform process taking place in South

Africa. David Ntseng, a researcher with Church Land Programme, works closely with Abahlali baseMjondolo, a social movement of shackdwellers who live in informal settlements in Kwazulu-Natal (see Figlan et al, 2009). Since 2005, Abahlali has campaigned against evictions, demolitions and for basic services for shackdwellers, including clean water, electricity, sanitation, adequate healthcare and education. Ntseng commented that militants in this movement always highlighted the learning element in their struggle, some saying that their struggle is 'a school'. He noted that they would say "This is where we learn to defend ourselves, we learn to be who we want to be, this is where we formulate who we are, this is our university", 'there is a university of Abahlali base Mjondolo', something which is not so often heard in spaces of community organizations". He emphasized that militants in Abahlali take time to think seriously about the issues and that "militants in the struggle are actually professors of their own education" (Interview, 7 December 2012). With this in mind, I turn now to focus on one aspect of knowledge production in struggle - activist research.

Research in/and social and political activism

Critically engaged sociologists have reminded us that activists actively engage in analyzing and theorizing. Gary Kinsman (2006) contended that sometimes,

when we talk about research and activism in the academic world we replicate distinctions around notions of consciousness and activity that are

detrimental to our objectives. We can fall back on research as being an analysis, or a particular form of consciousness, and activism as about doing things ‘out there,’ which leads to a divorce between consciousness and practice (p.153).

Addressing critical anthropologists, Shannon Speed (2004) has argued that, in activist research, tensions exist “between political–ethical commitment and critical analysis” (p.74), those of universalism, relativism or particularism, power relations between researcher and researched, and of short-term pragmatics and longer-term implications, yet that these are also present in all research. For her, “[t]he benefit of explicitly activist research is precisely that it draws a focus on those tensions and maintains them as central to the work” (p.74).

In social movement and NGO networks, activist research is generated and its production organized in diverse ways. In the context of the global justice movement, William Carroll (2013), and Carroll and J.P. Sapinsky (2013) have examined transnational alternative policy groups – NGOs which operate internationally/transnationally and which have been active in contesting neoliberalism as alternative/counter-hegemonic thinktanks. Carroll and Sapinsky (2013) focus on “transnational alternative policy groups that pose their politics globally” (p.213). These are organizations which, they have suggested, seek “to provide intellectual leadership for transnational movements and have come to occupy a unique niche within the organizational ecology of global justice politics”. Yet they have questioned the extent to which these

kinds of organizations are actually embedded in, or related to broader social movements.

The research aspects of social movement and NGO networks include the establishment and maintenance of specialized research and education institutions by social struggles to support movements. Kamat (2004), Caouette (2007) and Bazán et al (2008), among others, have explored the emergence and significance of “a certain type of non-governmental organisation: those that combine grassroots work with various forms of research, publication and knowledge generation” (Bazán et al., p. 176). While some of those whom I interviewed for this article work for NGOs which might fit this description, others are researchers who juggle many roles and responsibilities in social movements which include organizing/mobilizing, education, media outreach and research, but which are not seen as specialist “research organizations” as such. Despite considerable academic focus on the involvement of scholars in forms of popular/community education, activist research, academic activism, engaged scholarship and research partnerships, relatively little work documents, explicates or theorizes actual research practices of activist researchers located outside of the academy, let alone takes as its point of departure the perspectives of activist researchers’ everyday worlds. For me, these practices and perspectives are largely overlooked by two frequently-cited, critically-engaged texts on activist research, Shukaitis and Graeber’s (2007) collection on the relationship between research, radical theory and movements for social change, and Fuster Morell’s (2009) discussion of ‘action research’ in some strands of the global justice movement.

Carroll and Sapitsky (2013) have called for in-depth field work on how the kinds of transnational advocacy policy groups/NGOs they are investigating produce and mobilize alternative knowledge. And while they encourage further exploration of the impacts their work has on “movement activism, intergovernmental and state policies, and (trans)national political cultures” (p.237), the focus and nature of the organizations in their study was in general different from most of the organizations and movements in my research.

While claims are sometimes made about implicit connections between social justice, activism and certain methodological approaches such as participatory action research (Jordan, 2003), a frequent assumption in scholarship on activist research, research for social change, and community-based research is that university researchers with specialist academic training must conduct research. Carroll’s (2013) study of transnational alternative policy groups (TAPGs), contended that, in general,

the activists who animate these groups are not themselves deeply placed within subalternity. They are, like many movement activists, well educated and comparatively resource rich; typically they are members of ... the cadre stratum—a diverse formation of professionals and administrators to whom a good deal of capitalist authority is delegated, who may align themselves either with the capitalist bloc or against it. To the extent that activist intellectuals are ‘organic’, their close

relation to the subordinate class may be more a political accomplishment than an existential fact preceding activist careers (p.706).

The organizations and movements that I have focused on are, in general, less well-resourced, less professionalized in the sense that Carroll suggests, and from outside of this rather elite layer of 'alternative' policy/research. Many of those I interviewed did not have a background that included formal research training, but rather learnt through doing research for, and in, organizing. The profiles of those interviewed for this article within these social movements and the NGOs who specialize in research as a major activity—including educational backgrounds—varied. While some had undergraduate degrees, and one had a graduate degree, none had undertaken what would generally be conceived as formal academic training in research. Broadly speaking, those organizations with a stronger 'research' role (such as IBON and EILER), do internal trainings and train other social movement/NGO activists on data collection and analysis. Yet for organizers in social movements (such as those which comprise BAYAN), research is a key first step in effective organizing at the grassroots, conducting basic 'social investigation and class analysis'. Thus I believe that activist research exists across a continuum - from work conducted by research-focused organizations to everyday forms of on-the-ground research in the course of organizing and mobilization. The next section draws on interviews with some of the activist

researchers with whom I have discussed their research practice.

Connecting research, education and mobilization in practice

Founded in 1978 during the Marcos dictatorship, IBON² studies socio-economic issues confronting Philippine society and the world. It provides research, education, information work, and advocacy support, including non-formal education to people's organizations, and all sectors of society (e.g. IBON Research Department, 2003). Thus it works closely with militant trade unions, farmers' movements, urban poor and women's movements, among others, to support their struggles. IBON executive director Sonny Africa reflected on the skills needed for research for/with movements:

The sort of skills that the researcher has are also skills useful for other aspects of political work; a good researcher has skills that will be useful if you're an organizer. A good researcher has skills that are useful if you're a media liaison or a propagandist. A good researcher has the skills to be a good manager for whatever work is involved. So when talking about research skills there's a sort of a tension between using these for research or for other things. They're so useful for other lines of work in the mass movement that there's a tendency for the

² IBON takes its name from the Tagalog word for 'bird', suggesting that the organization takes a bird's eye view of socio-economic injustices in the Philippines. Hence IBON publishes a comic strip called "Bird's Eye View" and conducts the IBON Birdtalk, its semi-annual briefing on socio-economic and political assessment and trends.

research work to be downgraded (Interview, 16 December 2012).

Formerly a department in IBON, with an independent program since 2005, IBON International provides capacity development for people's movements and civil society organizations outside of the Philippines, with major focuses on food sovereignty, agriculture and rural development, environmental and climate justice, trade and development finance, and the politics of aid and development effectiveness. For Filipino activist researcher Paul Quintos, of IBON International, with a background in labour research and union organizing in the Philippines, research

helps guide action, it helps unite groups, individuals to come to common positions about certain issues. Research is "very integral to organizing and mobilizing so it's definitely not a stand-alone or distinct category of activity... and this was very prominent to me when I was in organizing. In that social practice, you can't really put boundaries in terms of 'am I doing research now or am I doing education, or am I doing organizing?' - the lines are blurred (Interview, 12 December, 2012).

The Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research (EILER) was founded in 1981 by worker-leaders and progressive church advocates in the Philippines. Its focus on mass worker education to support the building of militant trade unionism includes substantial research to sharpen unions' analyses and for broader labour advocacy. Carlos Maningat, EILER's head researcher said that as

much as possible, EILER seeks to link the research it conducts with worker education and that the two are dialectically related. He said:

We seek to make use of our research studies in coming up with modules, curriculum education trainings for workers so that we can help them in organizing and launching campaigns and so on. And it's also dialectic - from the education program we gather inputs from workers themselves where we discuss for instance genuine trade unionism, neo-liberalism. We try to maximize the venue to extract insights, case studies from workers themselves, so it's actually a dialectic process and we appreciate research in the way that it must be empowering to workers ... it's not like the academic version of research studies where they are just in the libraries and professors just discuss them in the classrooms - we try to popularize the findings ... We translate them in local languages so that they can be used in forums and discussions so there is, there are a number of approaches in popularizing our research studies. One concrete approach is we launch the research studies through roundtable discussions with trade union organizers and trade union leaders, so during the roundtable discussion we present the findings and afterwards we solicit inputs and comments, suggestions from the participants - so it's a way to validate the findings and to strengthen the framework

that was used in the research (Interview, 13 December 2012).

Paul Quintos, reflecting on his earlier work as a researcher with EILER, in regard to research, education and labour struggles, shared that often, ordinary rank-and-file workers and union members have the information, knowledge and analysis themselves, but perhaps cannot put this in a structured argument and write it down, which is where student activists going into the trade union movement with some level of academic training can sometimes be quite useful. Reflecting on his time as a union organizer, Quintos saw research as integral to organizing, mobilization and education, noting:

When I was in EILER, it was also very tightly connected because we were very much involved, although not directly in organizing but in terms of our relationship with the trade unions, with community organizations - it was pretty close and so there's always that constant communication and exchange of perspectives and views and so you kind of invite their priorities and what's most urgent .You immediately get a sense of that and so that informs your research priorities, programs and other initiatives (Interview, 12 December 2012).

As both reflections on EILER suggest, this research clearly draws on the knowledge, experiences of workers and relationships, relies on close communications with workers and their

unions, and understands research, education and action to be tightly connected to each other. For Arnold Padilla, public information officer and researcher for the umbrella, multi-sectoral alliance of, and campaign centre for numerous mass movement people's organizations on the national democratic left in the Philippines, Bagong Alyansang Makabayan/New Patriotic Alliance (BAYAN - founded in 1985 during the Marcos dictatorship), research is also an important aspect of education for organizing, without which mobilizing people would be much more difficult. In the context of a campaign, he said that research is the

source of ammunition for your lobbying work, for the education of your forces and the broader public. So if you do not have a solid research launching a campaign and mobilizing people and getting the attention of the people that you are targeting [it] would be much more difficult because they could easily have dismissed activist groups as us as propaganda. But if you are able to back it up with solid research - to cite experiences and macro-data - that can support your advocacy, then [opponents] will be forced to engage with you and you will be able to influence public opinion (Interview, 15 December 2012).

Padilla's research work for BAYAN is both informed by grassroots research that takes place in the course and organizing communities in different sectors across the country. This research in turn, supports popular mobilizations and campaigns;

thus, getting the research ‘right’ is vital both for the effectiveness and credibility of the movements, and for building pressure on political and economic elites through associated campaigns.

On sharing knowledge and disseminating activist research

How activist research is integrated with education and mobilization is certainly not always connected to the idea of a final “research report” for dissemination, if at all. Kevin Smith is a campaigner with Platform, a London (UK)-based organization that combines activism, education, research and the arts in projects that promote social and ecological justice. Founded in 1983, and based in one of the global centres of the oil industry, over the last fifteen years, much of its focus has been on British oil companies and their human rights impacts around the world. As Platform puts it, oil companies use the city to extract a combination of financial, political, legal and technological services that enable them to produce, pump, transport, refine and sell oil and gas. “By looking closely at corporations, trying to get to know their 'texture', their 'life story', we can see the possibility of change. The focus of our work is to look closely at BP and Shell, the two giants of the global oil industry that have head offices in London, our city” explains Platform’s Unravelling the Carbon Web website³. Smith discussed the ways in which the research that the organization does on the oil industry and its relationship to London is shared using arts-based educational strategies. In 2012, to

³ <http://www.carbonweb.org/showitem.asp?article=2&parent=1>

expose and oppose oil industry funding of the arts, and in particular BP's funding of the Tate Gallery, Platform launched 'Tate à Tate', a collaboration with sound artists to try and present information and research in the form of a three part audio tour from the different Tate spaces, which can be downloaded onto a portable mp3 player, an iPod, or mobile phone on which the mp3 audio files can be played (see <http://tateatate.org>). Smith said that arts-based approaches make it possible to speak to people who "feel alienated or are left a bit cold by the idea of reading an NGO report...Sometimes, as long as you can validate the topline message with what's there in the rest of the research you can re-package that in more interesting or innovative forms that might provoke more people to engage in that topline message" (Interview, 7 March 2013).. Platform has also run a program in the form of a performance promenade and site-specific theatre that involved leading groups of people to various locations in London that are related to the network of financial and political interests of the oil industry, and small performative deliveries of information or reportage amongst participants.

Kevin Thomas is a researcher from Toronto-based Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), a labour and women's rights organization that supports efforts of workers in supply chains, mainly in the global south, to win improved wages and working conditions and a better quality of life. He shared some reflections on external pressures on research NGOs to produce research in ways that are not necessarily the most conducive to supporting wider dissemination, education and action:

There is a bias sometimes in research around written materials in the activist world ...some of the audiences which really like written stuff and some who really don't make use of it in any useful way. I find that actually the best dissemination tends to be in terms of a workshop format, or speaking format, even one on one, but in some ways where you're working with the group, going over the findings and the outcomes and the strategies that come out of it. The problem with that [for most NGOs], is that the funders like written, published materials that they can link to on their websites. [There is] a bias in terms of funding towards written material, documentation, and there's a bias in terms of actual effectiveness in my opinion in terms of the group work where you are actually thinking about and discussing what the research means. So the written document is I find fairly dry - I work very well with written word, I can take that and think about it, and disseminate it. I think in terms of activist stuff, the best stuff happens in groups, and the best kind of strategy happens in groups, and so research that feeds into that process is usually better (Interview, 20 April 2013).

Elsewhere (Choudry and Kuyek, 2012), Devlin Kuyek and I have written that activist research is often a continuous process, where information and analysis is shared and processed constantly with others, from beginning to end. A publication may be

only one part of this process, or, in some instances, perhaps not at all. Some of the most important outputs may come from email exchanges or workshops that happen before anything is formally written. This process strengthens the research, as collaboration brings out more information, deepens the analysis and connects the research with others working on the issue. The research process itself can be critical to building networks and long-term relationships. It is also critical for enabling the output to have a bigger impact, as the groups and individuals involved will be more connected to the work and there will be more reason for them to use it in their own work and to share it with their networks.

In an interview, Bobby Marie discussed his work in the Community Monitors Project, established by the Bench Marks Foundation in Johannesburg, an NGO mandated by South African churches, to support local communities to act to stop destruction of their environment and community by transnational corporations (especially the mining sector) and omissions of the government. This program emerged from Bench Marks coming to understand that the direct involvement of communities most impacted in the mining areas was crucial to countering corporate power. A key part of this has been the creation of Community Monitoring Schools, set up in collaboration with local community organizations, where community activists develop their skills in information gathering, writing, research, communications and community action (Bench Marks Foundation, 2012). Marie emphasized the importance of creating a

space where especially younger people from these communities could come together and reflect on what they do, observe, write and communicate their concerns. For him this was about building community members' confidence, analysis and collective action, building knowledge, and a process for communities to come into their own in ways that do not impose outside structures on them from above. He noted that this was a different process from generating NGO research reports (which Bench Marks Foundation does), and exists in tension with notions of research which are backed up with statistics and scientifically referenced. Yet, he contends, in many research reports generated by NGOs,

the little voices of people are really good but they get added on in a decorative way And it also struck me that that's how I've seen lots of reports being written. That's called 'the community voice', that it is - you do the research - and then you add on people's voices to illustrate your point, the whole structure of it. (Interview, 2 December 2012).

Starting with the experiences and ideas of community members, and viewing writing as a powerful organizing tool, the Community Monitors Project develops skills needed in information gathering, analysis and strategies and tactics for community action and to help organize community campaigns and connect up with others nationally and internationally. These include gathering information and documenting through photographs and video taken on mobile phones, and the use of

social media and the Internet (e.g. blogging) to disseminate campaign demands. Here, ordinary community members' experiential knowledge, and the sharing and building of skills bridges learning/education, research and community mobilization.

Discussion and concluding thoughts

People struggle, learn, educate and theorize where they find themselves. The forms may change, but the importance of spaces and places for collective action, learning, and reflection seem crucial, along with an openness to valuing processes of informal and non-formal learning and knowledge created from the ground up, produced from within people's everyday struggles and experiences. As some of those interviewed here suggest, in practice, boundaries between research, education and organization are often blurred to the point of non-existence. Such understandings challenge binaristic thinking which separates, fragments and compartmentalizes activities into categories of "research" "education" and "organizing", and actors into "researchers", "popular educators" and "organizers".

There is a range of contexts, movement and organizational forms in which the activist research discussed in this article takes place, and this in turn is located in a broader milieu of 'alternative research' actors which includes Carroll's (2013) TAPGs, large, funded international NGOs which undertake policy advocacy and research, alternative thinktanks and others. Within this article are reflections from

activist researchers in funded NGOs such as Platform London, the Maquila Solidarity Network, the Benchmarks Foundation/Community Monitors Project, and Church Land Programme, as well as organizations like EILER and IBON which, having been established directly out of mass popular struggles can perhaps be described as hybrid NGO/movement research and education NGOs. BAYAN is an alliance of mass movements. Does activist research mean the same thing in each context? Are the organizational/movement forms and structures related to the way in which certain kinds of activities and processes are viewed more readily from the outside as “research” and others not? What of the relationship between the rationales for research activities of those organizations that prioritize influencing official, private sector and “civil society” platforms, policies and positions (often reinforced by external funders’ orientation and reporting expectations) - and those which view research as serving primarily to strengthen and broaden social movement activism and the needs of struggles ‘from below’? While these may not be mutually exclusive, as several of those interviewed noted, there are often tensions over who and what the research is for, and what form it takes.

In thinking through these, and other questions, it seems pertinent to suggest that much research on social movements and NGOs has tended towards the construction of and adherence to certain categories and typologies of social action as units of analysis, sometimes of questionable utility and relevance to those outside a relatively small, and arguably somewhat self-referential field of scholarship. Richard Flacks (2005) has suggested that “[w]ritings

proliferate that are aimed at establishing, critiquing or refining ‘paradigms’(p.7). He continued:

More and more, the work of younger scholars seems driven by their felt need to ‘relate’ to one or another of such ‘paradigms’ – or to try to synthesize them in some way. Journal articles increasingly analyze social movement experience as grist for the testing of hypotheses or the illustration of concepts (p.8).

In other words, rather than building an analysis that is based on actual practice and useful to movements for social change there is a temptation and perhaps a danger of imposing typologies on activist research. The alternative is to seek to understand such research processes through starting from actual practice and the sense activist researchers make of this, as well as the ways in which movements with which they are connected understand, use, and are often part of the research process themselves.

These interviews confirmed that activist research, learning and organizing can often be mutually constitutive and that knowledge production in many movement networks is often dialectically related to the material conditions experienced in struggles for social and economic justice. Hence the relationship between the different kinds of learning, knowledge production and intellectual work which are part and parcel of everyday struggles for change, campaigns, does not lend these activities to be easily categorized or compartmentalized.

While it might be interesting to interrogate under what circumstances some NGOs and movements can have the capacity to engage in conscious / explicit research processes, perhaps it is more relevant to move away from staking out what activities really 'count' as research. This is a good place to reiterate Kinsman's (2006) caution about understandings of research which divorce analysis/consciousness from practice/action and his contention that research is an integral, everyday part of organizing. Likewise, Scandrett's (2012) approach to theorizing learning/educative aspects of social movements which contended that we should attend to the dynamics between more structured forms and processes and informal and incidental learning and knowledge production seems relevant in thinking about how we should understand the spectrum/dynamics of activist research in its more formal/intentional and everyday/incidental forms. In addition, besides the reflections of a number of those interviewed here, Fanon (2001) and Cabral's (1973) warnings, in their own ways, to movement elites, that ordinary people can think through ideas and concepts themselves - and act, seems relevant today in illuminating how we recognize and value learning and knowledge production in social movements and organizing milieus.

A Marxist theory of praxis which insists upon the unity of thought and action necessitates, as Carpenter and Mojab (2012) have noted, a dialectical theory of consciousness in which thought, action, and social relations are inseparable. Allman (2010) contended that

revolutionary critical education must offer an ‘abbreviated experience’ or ‘glimpse’ of the type of social relations that we are working toward establishing through revolutionary social transformation. This idea is based on the recognition that authentic and lasting transformations in consciousness can occur only when alternative understandings and values are actually experienced ‘in depth’ – that is, when they are experienced sensuously and subjectively as well as cognitively, or intellectually (p.157).

Such learning and knowledge production is key to building, expanding and maintaining the social groupings, networks, organizations -formal and informal - of resistance. This is what Alan Sears (2005) has called “the infrastructure of dissent” by which he described “the means of analysis, communication, organization and sustenance that nurture the capacity for collective action” (p.32). Reflecting on workers’ struggles and militancy in Canada during the early 20th century, Sears asserted that this infrastructure of dissent developed a community of activists,

many who could think their own way through strategic and tactical questions, and take initiative to pursue struggles and organize effectively. An important layer of individuals in these areas were worker intellectuals, thinkers whose development came not through formal education, but from the debates, discussion and

educational activities tied to activism. This infrastructure provided the means to sustain memories, learn lessons and take action (pp.32-33).

Taking such movement knowledge seriously, whether we understand it to be ‘activist research’ or ‘social movement learning’ certainly does not imply that we should do so uncritically. It is heartening to see that there is growing scholarly interest in the politics and significance of knowledge production within social movement activism. But in order to more fully understand movements, it is important to engage more deeply with knowledge, debates and analysis being produced by social movements and activist networks, rather than to objectify them through the imposition of conceptual/theoretical paradigms and categories. Yet finally, as Marx (1968) noted nearly two hundred years ago in that memorable (if over-used) statement, “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it”. Ultimately the relevance and utility of activist research and other forms of intellectual work in social movements in facilitating and supporting collective action for social change remains its key defining feature (whether or not its usefulness is immediately recognized as valuable, or only becomes apparent later). As this article has suggested, this work is taking place across a spectrum of movement and organizational contexts, and not least (as von Kotze (2012) has contended is often the case for popular education) in the “nooks and crannies” (p.102) of the societies that we live in.

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