

**Review****Studies in the Education of Adults**  
**Vol. 43, No. 2, Autumn 2011.**  
**Special edition on ‘Social Movement Learning’.**

Edited by Budd Hall, Darlene Clover, Jim Crowther and Eurig Scandrett

In the field of sociology, much has been written about the emergence and development of social movements; in adult education, linking education to action is an essential characteristic of the ‘Freirian’/‘radical’/‘popular’/‘transformatory’ tradition. Yet only recently have attempts been made to combine the two and seriously research the learning (potentially) taking place within and resulting from the actions of social movements. Drawing on a wide variety of experiences, this edition of the journal ‘Studies in the Education of Adults’ is a timely and welcome investigation into the messy and blurry terrain of theory and practice in ‘social movement learning’.

After a good introduction, Holst’s article on *Frameworks for understanding the politics of social movements* helpfully analyses conceptualisations of ‘old’ versus ‘new’ social movements and his call for a revolutionary pedagogy within social movements sets the scene well. This is followed by Kapoor’s *Adult learning in political (un-civil) society: Anti-colonial subaltern social movement (SSM) pedagogies of place*. Focusing on movements in rural east India, he usefully highlights the concept of ‘subaltern’ social movements and discusses the notion of a political ‘un-civil’ society, though the article addresses ‘learning’ less than the others and in places I found it heavy with acronyms and overly academic language. We head to Africa with Langdon’s *Democracy re-examined: Ghanaian social movement learning and the re-articulation of learning in struggle*. This is an excellent article, providing a perfect amount of contextualisation and a good critical review of the literature, related to context. It gets to the heart of learning in movements (‘in’, ‘through’ and ‘to’ struggle), with all its ambiguities, and suggests ways of conducting research across a number of movements. It also illustrates the complex nature of both old and new movements and how they have inter-related historically.

Still continent hopping, Meek examines *Propaganda, collective participation and the ‘war of position’ in the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement*, through a historical analysis of the movement’s official Journal. As part of its pedagogic role he says the Journal

‘seeks to generate awareness, helping its members develop an understanding of the nature of capitalism and the important role of their struggle in the formation of a new society. The communication of this pedagogy can be described as an implicit curriculum, which is accessed through formal, informal, incidental and tacit learning’.

He provides a helpful analysis of the various meanings of ‘propaganda’, has much to say about different types of informal learning and describes the movement’s struggle as an example of Gramsci’s concept of ‘war of position’ (though personally I always find the metaphor confusing and keep mixing up ‘war of position’ with ‘war of manoeuvre’!). It’s a useful chapter though I would have been interested to read more on the educational role of the movement’s leadership and its potential to dominate rather than liberate thinking. Next, Larraburre, Vieta & Schugurensky discuss ‘The ‘New Cooperativism’ in Latin America: Worker-Recuperated Enterprises and Socialist Production Units’, the former in Argentina, the latter in Venezuela. In very different contexts, these case-studies attempt to ‘pre-figure’ an alternative future in their practice. In both countries we see many examples of positive learning taking place - about the needs of others, collective organisation and so on – and though this is not romanticised, I thought there might have been some examples of ambiguous, frustrated or problematic learning to refer to as well. I found the discussion between old and new co-operativism enlightening and the example of co-operative ‘apprenticeships’ a useful alternative to contrast with the model of capitalist-orientated apprenticeships which dominate mainstream thinking.

In the UK Grayson’s *Organising, educating, and training: varieties of activist learning in left social movements in Sheffield* reminds us that social movements do not exist in a vacuum and that the wider political culture in which they operate is extremely influential. Grayson shows how movements in Sheffield retain continuity with left traditions, he looks at the incidental learning taking place in the midst of campaigns and calls for a repoliticisation of the analysis of social movements. I was struck by his claim that in the past ‘liberal adult education’ was often more politically liberating than purposeful indoctrination. He argues that ‘popular adult education movements in Britain are best understood historically, as part of a range of ‘left social movements’.

From South Africa, Rule discusses *Cross-learning: The possibilities of a learning dialogue between the HIV & AIDS and disability movements* and begins with an important explanation of the difference between old and new movements in South Africa, as opposed to elsewhere. There is a good discussion of learning too, though the research is mostly about movements themselves, rather than learning, and at times struggles to connect the two. Perhaps influenced by having read the previous article, I also thought this article stopped short of connecting the focus on a particular issue to a wider vision of political dominance and struggle.

Over to Australia and in *‘Eating at us’: Representations of knowledge in the activist documentary film Food, Inc.*, Flowers and Swan urge us to theorise about ‘knowledge’ as well as ‘learning’ in social movements. They make useful critiques of what they see as insufficiently evidenced claims in much radical adult education. This was a thought-provoking article and I found the authors’ attempts to elaborate on different typologies of knowledge insightful. They are right to challenge the simplistic notion that movements and ‘popular’ knowledge are indisputably, good *per se* – though in Latin America, at least, the popular education movement has long criticised exaggerated notions of ‘grassrootsism’ – and it is good for popular educators to be taken to task and have their thinking challenged, from a critically sympathetic perspective.

In the final article, *Social Movement Learning: From Radical Imagination to Disempowerment?*, Ska, Kowzan and Prusinowska analyse a social movement trying to democratise Gdansk university, in Poland, and they problematise the whole notion of learning in social movements, puncturing any idea that it is plain sailing. Whereas the case studies in Argentina and Venezuela showcase how much can be learned in co-operative action, here we find that much learning was related to conflicts and tensions within the movement itself, that there was burn-out among activists, that co-operation between people can be difficult, that change might not be achieved and that the less positive side of learning also needs to be addressed in educational theory related to social movements. It showed that while educator-provocateurs can engage in action which undoubtedly challenges people to think, it is difficult to be sure what learning actually takes place. My previous thinking was turned upside down by the assertion that ‘paradoxically, from the social movement perspective it is formal education that produces vague outcomes, because it rarely results in tangible collective action that seeks to make real differences in people’s lives’. An excellent article.

In reading as an integrated whole rather than a collection of fragmented, individual pieces, this edition of *Studies in the Education of Adults* avoids the fate of many multi-authored publications. There is some overlap between articles: almost all address the literature on learning in social movements, for example, though rather than being repetitive, it is progressively enlightening. Authors focus on different sections of the literature, or introduce different references or respond differently to those cited by all. Collectively, the articles combine to explain the differences and connections between old and new social movements and how they relate to issues of class. There is a good spread of movements presented, in terms of their type, focus and geographical location. And the journal deals with all relevant issues: the ways in which people might learn in movements, how the learning links to campaigning, how learning might vary within different types of movement, whether learning is focused on a single issue or, promoting solidarity, links to the concerns of other movements and so on. Within a broader understanding of the theme, it might have been interesting to have included at least one explicitly conservative movement, challenging the notion that all social movements are progressive, though it would probably have detracted from the overall sense of social purpose which underlies this edition of the journal.

There is much more to this publication than can be communicated in a brief review. It greatly improved my own understanding of learning in social movements, I highlighted multiple lines of text in every article, to be re-read at a later date, and I strongly recommend this edition of *Studies in the Education of Adults* as a starting point for any activist-educator seeking clarity on the learning which may or may not take place in the midst of social movement action.

Liam Kane  
University of Glasgow.