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Review Article

Environmental NGOs as adult learning spaces: Reflections on the Friends of the Earth 40th anniversary conference, 9-11 September 2011, Nottingham University

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Introduction

This review article, based on a weekend of participant observation at the 40th anniversary Friends of the Earth (FoE), England, Wales & Northern Ireland (EWNI) local groups' conference, is intended to provide a snapshot of learning and education in an environmental non-governmental organisation (ENGO). Allen Tough's (1983) metaphor of the iceberg of adult learning, which occurs beneath the learning spaces often visible to adult educators, is well known. The purpose here is to make visible and reflect on this conference space specifically as one of adult learning for collective action. I begin with a very brief review of the theory of social movement learning (SML) as it connects to the conference before reflecting on my own experience.

Social Movement Learning

It is argued that participants learn *in* social movements, and non-participants learn *from* social movements (Hall *et al* 2011). This learning can be informal or non-formal. *Non-formal* refers to any space created by social movement organisations (SMOs) with a purposively pedagogical dimension. *Informal* learning includes "self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization" (Schugurensky and Myers 2003: 331). In these terms, this conference can therefore be interpreted as a non-formal learning space, albeit with the purpose of retaining, systematising and consolidating the "messy" and ephemeral informal learning generated through collective action. FoE can loosely be divided into a central professionalised organisational core, and locally-based satellite groups. As an organisation, it has historically been considered part of a larger green movement, which itself accommodates a range of philosophies, strategies and tactics.

However, the focus in my interpretation of learning at the conference is wider than just individual participants. Individuals learn, organisations learn, movements learn and societies learn. Moreover, there is a dialectical relationship between these different learning scales. For example, successful movements both affect cultural change and draw from the wider cultural stock to ground their claims (Rochon 1998). The point need not be overstated. This account touches on the relationships between scales of participant learning, organisational learning and societal learning.

The concept of scale is also a *learning outcome*, constantly negotiated in our understanding of environmental issues and their interconnections: issues can only be

perceived as 'environmental' through a particular interpretation of globally linked issues where 'the environment' is understood as a complex (and not unproblematic) reification, abstracted from the real world, as it were. However, the networking of local communities with one another, as well as with larger communities of interest (both nationally and internationally) arguably creates a sense of agency which helps to counter the received wisdom that *local* communities can only have *local* reactions to *global* processes that are inflicted upon them. It is after all a basic premise of community education that making the connections between the private and the public, the cultural politics of communities and the political culture of the state, or between the local and global, is an educational task. At the FoE conference, intrinsic to the learning taking place was the often implicit effort made to make sense of and connect the narratives of FoE International, FoE EWNI, right through to the local groups.

Finally, what was the curriculum of the conference? Learning for collective action involves the head, the heart and the hands, to use a distinction oft quoted by activists themselves. Here, I use the typology of green movement learning categories employed by Chase (in Whelan 2002: 172), which covers the head, heart and hands in a clear accessible manner: scientific eco-literacy; organisational development skills; social action skills; political analysis; and personal growth and life skills.

The conference: composition and curriculum

The conference was made up of approximately 300 delegates, from local groups all around England, Wales and Northern Ireland and guests from FoE Scotland (a separate ENGO). Just under a third were FoE staff, there were a small number of speakers and independent participants (myself included), and around two thirds were delegates from local groups. In terms of the format of the weekend, the majority of sessions were either seminars or training sessions. Seminars took a more didactic approach, hosted by guest speakers with some area of specialist experience, and ended in questions and discussion. Training sessions were generally more participatory, characterised by informal dialogue. In what follows I will outline the seminar content and selectively describe my own seminar experience. After this I will reflect on my experience of training sessions.

Seminars

There were seven seminars altogether: *Table 1* categorises these sessions under an adapted version of Chase's curricular categories in order to give a flavour of what was on the educational agenda for the weekend. No seminars (or training sessions for that matter) seemed to fall specifically under the 'personal' category. It has been noted that non-formal learning addressing issues of personal sustainability is often neglected in green activism (Whelan 2002). Perhaps this was not considered important, given that plenty of time was put aside for socialising, and indeed in planning the sessions local delegates had substantial input.

Table 1 *Curriculum of conference seminars*

Learning domain	**Seminar(s)**	**Purpose of learning**
Scientific eco-literacy	What are the global implications of a growing gap between science and political action on climate change?	To learn about technological solutions and debate their wider role in the face of political inaction against climate change
Social action skills	Tackling climate change in the UK – what can we learn from anti-smoking campaigns?	To learn from public health campaigns and explore what new approaches and strategic alliances are needed to scale and speed up the transformation to a low carbon economy
	Weaning the world off consumption	To better understand the psychological basis of consumption as a mark of success and explore how to tackle this issue in campaigning
	Power to the people – how is it changing?	To explore, and mutually learn from the tools, tactics and strategies employed by different grassroots movements such as the Arab Spring and UK direct climate action movement.
Political and economic acumen	Natural choice – putting a price on biodiversity	To explore new ideas on biodiversity protection and debate the nature of value and the (economic) value of nature
	Sustainable growth I presume?	To explore how to respond to Government co-option of the term sustainability such that it applies primarily to economic growth.
	Land – they're not making it anymore	To explore how to respond to the 'new colonialism' of land grabbing practices in developing countries.
Personal growth and life skills		Renewal of commitment and prevention of burnout

I attended the 'Power to the People' session. The purpose was to provide a space for FoE activists to learn about different action repertoires: to explore different approaches to collective action and ask what constitutes success in each case. An input from an Egyptian campaigner who had edited a book called *Tweets from Tahrir*, set the context for a discussion of the role of social networking technologies in mobilisation. This generated a group analysis, where the danger of an unhelpful 'fetishisation' of such technologies was discussed. To explain further, it allows for the (intentional or otherwise) obfuscation of real, as opposed to virtual, human agency. As was pointed out, the BBC's documentary account of the Arab Spring was called "How *Facebook* Changed the World" (my italics). The input also prompted discussion of online campaigning organisations such as Avaaz, and how to bring such cyber constituencies off-line once they are built.

Next, I learned about anti-GM action in Flanders. The main tactic here was the so-called "invisible work" of bringing together activists and concerned potato farmers, which involved training in non-violent direct action, creating alternative farmers' markets and "decontaminating" fields. It was argued that the real success lay in opening space for public debate by connecting up the issues of GM science and food sovereignty through media coverage of direct action. In other words, direct action can shift public discourse when people *learn indirectly from* movement actions. There may be a time-lag effect of course that is difficult to quantify, but nonetheless important to understand. The media focus on violence as a corollary of direct action always has the potential to deflect wider public understanding of the real issues even when no such violence occurs. Notwithstanding these points, the key drivers of the success of actions were broken down as follows: clear analysis; the naming of vested interests; clear view of alternatives; and clear strategy of grassroots mobilisation.

Finally, the director of film *Just Do It*, documenting a year in the life of direct climate action practitioners, described how anti-aviation expansion protestors Plane Stupid combined personal risk with creative confrontation and tactical reflexivity in their airport runway occupations. Analogous to the anti GM narrative, it was conveyed that, despite the backlash and vitriol in the media response, direct action was successful in shifting public discourse by bringing aviation and climate change into the same conversation – something that was not happening in NGOs at the time. In these two examples, it is important to understand that merely connecting two issues usually discussed separately (food sovereignty/GM; climate change/aviation) was considered a success.

What also came through for me was the importance of being creative and imaginative when "defining the enemy". In Freirian terms, power that is non-visible is non-negotiable. In other words, the importance of naming names was recognised to be important in a world where responsibility is outsourced, and ownership separated from control. The cross-cutting nature of this session was clearly contributing to the development of a sharp political analysis in order to inform further praxis. This was a space to encounter and learn from different kinds of progressive collective action in order to develop social action skills. Now, I move on to discuss the training sessions that I participated in.

'Just Do It' documentary screening

This session differed pedagogically from the other training sessions as it was a film screening of a climate activism documentary. It involved local activists (who, incidentally, continually made reference to the older age bias at the conference!) learning from the approach of a new generation of climate camp activists through film. What was evident to me was the young white middle-class composition of the activist camps. As a prominent direct climate action practitioner put it when interviewed by me over a year ago:

> People see environmental [direct action] protestors…as people who have got the privilege to think about something telling people how to live their lives. Understandably it puts people off […] We've still got so much to do

in terms of building a discourse around privilege, action and responsibility.

I think that film can help to do this by humanising encounters between protagonists and their enemies in a style that challenges caricatures. For example, one of the most oddly touching moments for me was watching a woman activist and woman arresting police officer both crying after the activists had been evicted from a piece of land, as the two of them had built up a relationship previous to the arrest over cups of tea.

To me, the work with local Heathrow residents campaigning against the third runway shown in the film, illustrated the importance of cross-cultural dialogue and popular education in making that campaign effective. One very positive segment was Climate Campers occupying ground near Vestas wind turbine factory, which had been closed. They delivered food to redundant workers who were occupying the factory and their presence seemed to be appreciated by the local community. From a viewer's standpoint, it was educative in clearly showing how green industry can still be interpreted through the lens of the capitalist/worker dichotomy. However, as a piece in the Just Do It 'newspaper' launched in conjunction with the film stated: "We have to acknowledge that it is the responsibility of the government to create the policies for the green sector to gain strength…and it was lack of orders that eventually drove Vestas away" (Thomas 2011: 15). So the film raised questions for me about activists prematurely giving up on the state, so to speak.

'What does a green economy look like?' workshop

This workshop discussion was requested by delegates interested in exploring how a transition to 'steady state' (i.e. no growth) economics would manifest in policy terms. Points of discussion that stuck with me included: general re-localisation of economies; 'cap and share', where carbon allowances (which decrease annually) are rationed to individuals and energy providers, such that private individuals are able to trade their own carbon; creating a compound index for carbon-costed goods; and intergenerational skill sharing, as well as emphasising the positive and fun aspects of low-energy living in order to encourage attitudinal change. This session, therefore contributed to the development of political and economic acumen.

In terms of my own experience of the session, I found that although there was plenty made of the distinction between exchange and use-values, there was not enough discussion of ownership patterns and mobility. This perhaps reflected the composition of the group itself (almost entirely white middle-class), and this observation admittedly reflects my own preoccupations – namely, that re-localisation and rootedness are usually espoused as solutions to those who already have the power of (voluntary) mobility, and do not find themselves living in "contrived communities" (Shaw 2008). Lastly however, I saw a big potential for intergenerational learning processes in the kind of 'reskilling' that was deemed to be necessary in the re-localisation of economies. I think that what was being discussed has wider resonance for the often segmented Community Learning and Development 'specialisms' in general. In other words, why is youth work so consistently detached from adult education, when there is so much potential for mutual learning?

'Campaigning in a European context' workshop

As approximately 80% of the UK's environmental legislation is estimated to come from the EU, it is increasingly necessary for local activists to know how to influence what happens in Brussels. This session seemed to be well received by local activists in general. The process of co-decision was explained as the chief law-making procedure, and the people delivering the workshop gave tips on how, who, and at which stages of the process to lobby. Terms were de-jargonised, distinctions were made clear (i.e. the difference between directives, regulations and decisions), and opportunities to link domestic campaigns to European policies were pointed out. In the literature, this process of networking beyond state boundaries is known as scale jumping, meaning the efforts of local and national actors to transcend local and national scales through transnational communication circuits forged with other oppositional actors, and the informational exchange, political networking and socio-political organisation that results (Smith 2001: 67). Again, this contributed to social action skills and the development of political and economic acumen.

'Common Cause' workshop

This activist-led session, once again emerged from the suggestions of local delegates. Led by two local activists, it aimed to clarify, explore and debate FoE's new self-conscious commitment to applying principles of social psychology – namely values and frames – to their campaign strategy. It should be said that this theme permeated the weekend, including the speeches given by the Policy and Campaigns director and the Fundraising, Communications and Activism Director.

A handbook (Holmes *et al* 2011) was made freely available during the weekend, which explained the basic principles of values and frames in campaigning in reasonable detail. Local delegates were also referred to the online resource valuesandframes.org. Such knowledge products reflect the emergent "cognitive praxis" of professionalisation within the green movement (Jamison 2001). ENGOs produce educational materials and civil society research, which is often a particular mix of scientific research and investigative journalism designed to influence policy and practice.

The basic principles involved are informed by a large body of social psychology research, which also inform the construction of the World Values Survey (Holmes *et al* 2011: 56). The 'guiding principles' are that intrinsic values and extrinsic values inform all that we do. Intrinsic values are those such as "affiliation to friends and family, connection with nature, concern for others, self-acceptance, social justice and creativity", which are "intrinsically rewarding to pursue" (ibid.: 21). Extrinsic values are deemed to be those "centred on external approval or rewards", such as "wealth, material success, concern about image, social status, prestige, social power and authority" (ibid.). The goal is to nurture intrinsic values, and be cognisant of the longer term trade-offs between nurturing intrinsic values and the pragmatic short-termism of appealing to extrinsic values in order to affect quick change. This is an interesting agenda for popular education as FoE state that "meeting people where they are will therefore be important in engaging them, with a view to ultimately creating spaces for change and facilitating the flourishing of more intrinsic values" (ibid.: 41). The handbook states that it is a useful resource for "creating campaigns, organising

community events [and] teaching and learning", and contains workshop exercises designed to "familiarise, engage and start conversations with groups" (ibid.: 3).

An interesting point which arose in the workshop was around the issue of coalitional work – the contention being that challenging cultural values can only come about through collaboration and co-operation with other organisations operating outside the environmentalist sphere. Indeed, FoE in their own literature state that "the Robin Hood tax has successfully rallied a diverse set of groups, organisations and individuals – including religious groups, big NGOs smaller civil society organisations, trade unions, economists and private sector representatives–around the otherwise unlikely cause of financial sector reform…[T]he campaign also draws on a potent frame: the culturally archetypal figure of Robin Hood, who embodies the idea of redistribution as social justice" (Holmes *et al* 2011: 45).

The above point relates backs to the notion of different scales of learning and their relationship. Local participants struggled to reconcile their views on traditional campaigning for the environment – "FoE cannot abdicate its responsibility to educate the public" as one participant argued – with new strategies from the centre. Whether the tactics are right or wrong, there is an emergent organisational recognition regarding its remit in shifting cultural values, and a recognition of the need for collaborative social learning with other organisations in order to get there.

Conclusion

This review aimed to illuminate how campaigning organisations can be thought of as adult education sites. By conceptualising them as such, insights can be gleaned, which are apposite to contemporary community education practice. However, in highlighting the importance of such spaces, we need to be cognisant of their social composition, who accesses them, and how they shape knowledge.

Filtered through my own experience, I have tried to illustrate some of the learning occurring at the micro level. In the workshops discussed, this included the development of political and economic acumen, instrumental learning on how to lobby effectively, as well as learning across and from other activist cultures and industries. At organisational and societal levels, I highlighted how FoE is self-consciously interpreting its own activity in terms of cultural value shifts. Haluza DeLay (2008) argues that although we can understand the green movement in terms of the development and promulgation of distinctive knowledge interests, this is an overly cognitive portrayal: his analysis that ecological 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998) should explore opportunities for developing an ecological habitus – rather than concentrating on informational pleas, or short-termist social marketing strategy – shifts the focus somewhat back to pedagogical issues and, indeed, provokes wider ethical questions. That FoE has organically taken up this analysis, points to a wider process of social learning within the organisation.

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