

Review

Learning and Education for a Better World: The Role of Social Movements
Budd L. Hall, Darlene E. Clover, Jim Crowther and Eurig Scandrett (Eds.)
Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2012
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My overall impression, after reading the twelve chapters of this book, is of resistance – like shafts of light in all corners of the globe breaking through the gloom of a world fixated on greed. As an activist, I was excited to read about creative social movements and take lessons for my own involvement; as an adult educator, there was much to ponder about how and whether a revolutionary message can be imparted from the comfort of state-funded institutions.

The first section ‘Historicising and Theorising Movement Education and Learning’ has five chapters. I found them all very stimulating but a slow read. I found the ideas and breadth of research so interesting that my mind went off, eagerly testing theories against campaigns and movements in my own experience. But I also found the language so cluttered with references to other texts and theorists in places that it was hard to get the meaning.

In the first chapter Anne Harley writes about lessons and challenges for her university arising from a small group of students from poor communities attending a course for grassroots community educators in South Africa. They meet together to discuss the relevance of the course to their social movements in what they call ‘Living Learning’ sessions. The chapter describes a learning process that practises what it preaches. The group shares and publishes its findings, both to make it possible to engage others in the discussion, but also as a political act, challenging the assumption that only the University has valuable knowledge. The challenges posed by the ‘Living Learning’ analysis echo through the book. They believe that the poor are as good at thinking as anyone else and through this lens re-examine the inbuilt bias of the university, the

assumptions about who needs to learn, what they want to learn and how learning takes place.

From a nonviolent activist's point of view, Elisabeth Steinklammer's chapter 'Learning to Resist' should have been old hat. Yet I found this chapter refreshing in its focus on the power of the small repeated actions we all make which constantly rebuild – or challenge - the status quo. Learning by resisting, she argues, is most likely to happen in a social conflict, where we practise new actions in 'living the change' we want to see and reflect on them. I was delighted that there were illustrations of the kindergarten protests, but would have loved to know more of their context and would have liked more feminist analysis in this chapter.

Eurig Scandrett draws on examples of environmental justice campaigns from Scotland and India to illustrate the way in which lay people in these campaigns learn about the ecological science that is relevant and helpful to their cause. He goes on to show how activists talking to each other across campaigns or taking time to attend relevant courses can help them to see the bigger picture. This is a scholarly chapter bristling with references and Marxist analysis which argues for the distinctive character of political ecology.

In their chapter on 'Reconnecting Intellect and Feeling', Crowther and Lucio-Villegas give a very readable refresher on Marx, Gamsci and Williams. If you are not up on your Marxism, read this chapter first. The writers are concerned with the challenge of developing leadership within social movements which has the calibre to replace the current elite capitalist leadership without replicating it. They rightly see a role for adult educators in this. Touching on the age old paradox, they caution us against education which is constructed as a 'ladder out of communities for individuals to climb rather than a collective resource for change'.

Liam Kane's chapter gives us a really helpful and clear history of popular education in Latin America, its philosophy and practice and current developments. This chapter brought back all the excitement I felt when I first encountered Freire. In my notes I

have written the words ‘inspiring’ and ‘YES!’. Kane recognises that, although popular education is a key factor in the political landscape of many Latin American countries, it may need to be adapted for use in other places. To me it seemed to link to ideas emerging from many other chapters in this book, e.g. that the learning in social movements should be made explicit, reflected on and shared and that to be effective movement leaders and community educators must exemplify power sharing and participation and be thoroughly rooted in the struggle.

In Section 2 ‘Learning Through Cultural Struggle’, it was a delight to read the poetry and stories of the power of the arts in protest and learning in Darlene Clover’s chapter. The projects Clover describes – of quilt making, puppetry and photography - make visible the different struggles in creative ways which promote participation. This chapter also brought in a welcome feminist perspective and sparked ideas for campaigns I’m active in.

Astrid von Kotze tells us about the work of successful Popular Education Schools among the ‘invisible poor’ of a Cape Town township, but she is clear about the limits of this learning. She asserts that resistance is not enough, that the process of imagining and bringing into being a new and radically different way of living is a long slow ‘composting process’. Stephen Brookfield talks about Ken Loach’s film-making in the cultural struggle and advocates the use of a clip from Land and Freedom as a tool for learning.

Section 3 is headed ‘Changing the World’ and Budd Hall’s chapter ‘A Giant Human Hashtag’ is a great start. The Occupy Movement has given us the succinct unifying 1% - 99% short-hand way of talking about global economic inequality. Hall sees it is an experiment in ‘living the change’. I found it energising to read about the lessons that are emerging from new ways of organising, e.g. the emphasis on consensus decision-making and the importance of leaving ideologies aside. While inspired by the idea of learning to tweet, I skipped to Mark Malone’s chapter on ‘Tweeting History’. Using his own and others’ blogs and tweets, and research into internet traffic at crucial times, he explores the role of the social media during the days leading up to

the Egyptian revolution. I hadn't heard the term NGOisation before reading Aziz Choudry's insightful chapter – but I immediately recognised the phenomenon. He writes as an activist in the struggle against free trade agreements in Asia and highlights again the important knowledge and learning that emerges from grassroots social movements willing to challenge capitalism head on. This knowledge is often undervalued and even silenced by professionalised technical experts from NGOs which claim to be on the side of global justice. I enjoyed Catherine Etmanski's chapter on organic farming as political action in the face of global industrial agriculture, and welcomed the gender analysis and reflections on what she learned working on the farm.

I am very glad I have had the chance to read this book. The wealth of activism and struggle described is inspiring and hopeful. Despite being mostly academics, many of the writers argue that the most powerful learning and most useful knowledge in social movements comes from the struggle, not the academy. So if you are not an academic, read the second and third sections first but persist with Section 1 – it is rich and stimulating underneath all the references. As an activist and a feminist, I found there were lots of ideas to learn from, but less attention to overall strategy of social movements and gendered analysis than I would have liked.

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