

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, 204 pages.

The authors of this much-needed study of social movement learning offer a variety of examples of the pedagogical themes that emerge in social movement research. Their examples of social movements from around the world offer hope in the face of injustice. This hope is founded on the new knowledge and pathways constructed by social movements, which give access to spaces to imagine and create the future we want. The essays, when read together, exist as overlapping and intertwined perspectives on how social movement learning provides opportunities to gain understanding of radical, democratic, and transformative methods and processes.

In Chapter 1, Harley sets the tone for the rest of the book by critiquing the assumption that some are ignorant while others know, through the eyes of members of the Abahlali movement in South Africa. During a participatory development course, they met monthly to reflect on knowledge creation. Using their reflections, along with theorists such as Rancière, Harley questions how their radical ideas can impact both activist and academic domains.

Steinklammer looks at the Austrian education resistance movement and, using the lens of critical education, examines what participants learned. She shows how participants had new experiences that challenged dominant power relations. Reflecting on these experiences allowed them to slowly resist their unconscious internal support of existing hegemonic social conditions. She frames the movement as empowering, yet subsequently it has become more difficult to mobilize employees. She does not explore learning in movements that might reinforce dominant hegemonies, but despite this, her analysis persuasively shows the possibilities of critical learning through social conflicts, even in social movements that might not be considered successful.

Scandrett offers a thoughtful Marxist-influenced analysis through the lens of political ecology, in which social movements are seen as responses to accumulation by dispossession and conflicts in the conditions of production. A particularly interesting point in his chapter explores how incidental learning can be structured by discursive encounters between different movements.

In Chapter 4, Crowther and Lucio-Villegas use Gramsci to question how adult educators can support the emergence of organic intellectuals from subaltern groups. Their analysis, which adopts a distinct division between communities and leaders, could have been enriched if it were informed by ideas of community leadership. Yet their insights into cultivating leadership in groups lacking experience in creating their own leaders are still pertinent, particularly how adult educators can support the dialectical relationship between thought and feeling by attending to culture as well as community.

Kane’s chapter explores how popular education belongs to the poor rather than the elite. He describes five stages in the history of popular education, four degrees of social movements’ engagement with the state, and the three areas of Latin American popular education. These structures, along with his explanation of doing the metaphorical hokey cokey, give the reader a comprehensive framework from which to understand the learning opportunities available from Latin American movements.

Clover presents the arts as powerful, potentially subversive, educational practices that can render visible the sometimes intangible struggles in society. Her chapter incorporates quotes and stories that model how aesthetic pleasure is a valuable pedagogical tool and how art can synthesize the cognitive and emotional. She also complicates this notion of aesthetics by demonstrating how the juxtaposition of activist art offers us the discomfort, challenge, and humour that allow for effective learning for change.

Von Kotze vividly describes moments of opening, and the reader gets a peak into the lived experience of people in South Africa imagining alternatives as real possibilities. She argues that what is missing from much popular education is the space to reflexively and collectively imagine a better world. She suggests that even when given that space our ideas need compost, for we need to draw inspiration from a mix of sources.

In Chapter 8, Brookfield gives a detailed description of a 12-minute scene from a film by Ken Loach that is particularly educative in terms of decision making in social movements. He presents art as subversive, and he believes social movement educators need to focus on the radicalizing function of art.

Hall explores the learning dimensions of the Occupy movement. He emphasizes the role of social media, reflects on the blurred lines between education for the movement members and for the public, and refreshingly addresses the colonial issues built into the name “Occupy.” He also presents the intriguing concept of hacking consciousness.

Choudry critiques NGOization of social change, particularly with regard to its learning/knowledge implications. He argues that NGOs often categorize the world into issues rather than confront capitalism directly. They replicate hierarchies and privilege elite academic knowledge over grassroots knowledge production. His chapter frames the NGOs and activists as existing in an unequal dichotomous relationship, with policy analysts as high priests. Despite recreating an, albeit reversed, hierarchical binary between these two elements of social movements, by privileging the knowledge and work of grassroots activists, his arguments are insightful and persuasive. He ends with a call for NGOs to play supportive roles in social movements rather than claiming to speak for them.

Etmanski uses her own experience to discuss organic farms in the context of global food movements; reflect on experiential, informal learning that engages the body, heart, and mind; and explore transformative and spiritual learning. Her chapter gives an accessible introduction to the small-scale organic farming movement and presents examples of how to choose a joyful struggle against injustice by living the world one wants to create.

Malone argues that the mainstream narrative about social media as the essential element in the Egyptian Revolution masks the role that human agency played. He reflects

on the role that social media played in creating history from below and in connecting different groups in the movement, and provides case studies to connect theory with practice.

I would like to emphasize the originality and importance of this book, in which readers are led to the central issues for learning in social movement and are invited to explore the intersections between diverse reflections. It is an excellent resource for both undergraduate and graduate courses on critical adult education or social movement learning, as well as for students, community educators, activists, or anyone interested in critical pedagogy.

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