

Close, yet so far apart: Bridging social movement theory with popular education

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This special issue of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning is a great opportunity to bridge two areas of scholarship that are in close proximity to one another, but have generally failed to establish systematic dialogues and exchanges. These domains, of course, are comprised of educational scholarship devoted to the study of ‘adult’ and ‘popular’ education on the one hand, and sociological scholarship on ‘social movements’ on the other. While the study of popular education¹ has thematic proximity to the social movement literature, it is not a terrain of systematic research and theorising by social movement scholars. A recent search of the terms ‘popular education’, ‘community education’ and ‘adult education’ in both the titles and keywords of two leading social movement journals over the past two decades, for example, yielded zero hits². On the other side of the equation, while scholars of popular education may frequently invoke terms such as ‘social movement’ and ‘activism’, the tools of social movement theory are rarely put to use within this literature (cf. Kilgore, 1999). That these two literatures are so close, but so far apart is rather astonishing

given their overlapping concerns for issues of resistance, solidarity, democratisation and social transformation. In this essay, I briefly address the gap between social movement studies and popular education studies, and then proceed to engage in some initial bridge-building work by discussing the concept of 'free space' (Groch, 2001; Polletta, 1999; Polletta, & Kretschmer, 2013). In particular, I suggest that by theorising community-based sites of popular education as 'free spaces', scholars can better investigate the ways in which the participants within these sites engage in educational practices that actively promote the reproduction of movement-based strategies, tactics, meanings and identities. From such a conceptualisation, researchers can explore the question of how local-level sites of popular education bolster the broader-level influence of social movements in society, thus shedding important light on the socio-political outcomes of popular education programs.

Searching for popular education in social movement scholarship

The absence of systematic research on popular education in social movement scholarship is both unexpected and unfortunate. It is perhaps most surprising given the unambiguously strong historical role played by 'radical' forms of community-based adult education in progressive social movement campaigns across so many parts of the world (e.g. Edwards, & McCarthy 1992; Hall, Clover, Crowther and Scandrett 2011, Lovett, Clarity, & Kilmurray 2018, Ollis 2012). In Latin America, for instance, the links between progressive social movements and the 'emancipatory' forms of popular education inspired by the legendary Paolo Freire have been thoroughly documented by educational scholars, such as Liam Kane (2001, 2010) and Adriana Puigros (1984). Such work has shown that community-based sites of 'radical' adult education from Argentina and Brazil to El Salvador and Mexico frequently serve as a hub of social movement activities for historically marginalized peoples in both urban and rural settings. Additionally, comparative research on the labour movement in Western Europe and the United Kingdom during the 19th and 20th centuries has persistently shown how sites of popular education played an important role in generating class consciousness amongst impoverished workers, thus fuelling labour protests and strengthening progressive strands of labour unionism (e.g. Antikainen, Harinen, &

Torres, 2006; Jansson, 2016). Historical scholarship on the struggle for civil rights among African Americans has also frequently pointed to the significance of adult education programs, most notably via the actions of the Highlander Folk School and its satellites across the American South (e.g. Edwards, & McCarthy, 1992; Evans, 2007; Ling, 1995).

In short, there is a range of scholarship showing how sites of popular education are intimately linked to broader-level social movement campaigns and activities. Yet, in spite of such historical evidence, social movement scholars have not generally approached the empirical terrain of popular education in any systematic fashion (cf. Saez, 2005). This is not to say, of course, that social movement scholars have avoided the topic of education all together. Rather, most of the scholarship on 'education' tends to focus on situational forms of non-formalized learning and knowledge formation that take place among activists as they interact with one another, and participate in social movement activities, such as protest and community organizing campaigns (e.g. Chesters 2012; Choudry 2015; Choudry, & Kapoor, 2010; de Smet 2014; Escobar 1998; Esteves 2008; Ganz 2000; Krinsky, & Barker 2013; Zibecchi 2005). Cumulatively, such work has done very well to show how processes of active learning and the purposeful production of knowledge 'about the world' are inextricable from realising influential forms of collective action 'within the world'. Two key insights yielded by this research show how 'situational' forms of learning and knowledge-making impact the formation of [i] the strategic choices and tactical schemas deployed by social movement constituents, as well as [ii] the intersubjective identities and ideologies that underlie people's commitments to social movement agendas over time.

While research on situational learning and knowledge production is extremely valuable and informative, there is a corresponding need to focus on how social movements operate and unfold within more formalised educational settings, such as schools and universities as well as established sites of adult education. Such a focus can allow social movement scholars to understand how, under certain conditions, formalized educational settings can act as vehicles of social movement activity. This perspective is significant because social movement scholarship has tended to dwell on 'extra-institutional' forms of collective action at the expense of understanding the relevance of 'infra-institutional' forms of action (Schneiberg, & Lounsbury, 2009). As Polletta (1999, p. 1) writes: 'counterhegemonic ideas and identities come

neither from outside the system nor from some free-floating oppositional consciousness, but from long-standing community institutions'. By looking more closely at the expressions of group-based learning and knowledge-making that take place within established sites of popular education, for example, important understandings will be gained on how grassroots actors work to purposefully convert such local spaces into empowering engines of movement-based solidarity, action and influence.

Searching for social movement theory in adult education scholarship

Scholars of popular education are no strangers to the study of social movements. The literature periodically points to the presence of social movements in popular education programs and is saturated with terms such as 'activism', 'mobilisation' and 'community organising'. Over the last decade, for example, the term 'activism' has appeared no less than 186 times in the titles and abstracts of articles published in *Adult Education Quarterly*, and 230 times in the *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*³. However, scholarship in this domain only rarely draws on the established analytical tools and concepts of social movement theory (cf. Finger 1989; Kilgore 1999; Walter 2007, 2012). Rather, the focus of such research is generally placed on understanding the pedagogical practices and didactic resources at work within sites of popular education. While very insightful, such work does not generally strive to address how the internal dynamics of learning and knowledge-making within sites of popular education have external bearing on the strategic capacities of social movements in the broader society. Moreover, within the more philosophical and normative strands of popular education scholarship (i.e. 'critical pedagogy studies') the link between popular education and social movements is often simply presumed from the get go. Of course, given the emancipatory aspirations that frequently underlie many adult education initiatives with a 'radical' orientation, this is probably a relatively uncontroversial assumption (Mayo 1999). However, good social science cannot operate solely through a priori assumptions, no matter how safe they feel.

All of this is simply to say that, from a sociological perspective, any link between social movements and popular education must be viewed as a product of social construction and purposeful interaction, rather than as inevitable truths or pre-determined realities. Consequentially, the linkages between social movements and popular education need to be empirically scrutinised in order to establish how they align, if at all. Such

Careful investigations will allow for richer comparative understandings of how the (putatively) strategic links between sites of popular education and social movements are forged in the first place, as well as how such links are variously sustained, curtailed or transformed over time. One useful way of bridging scholarship on popular education with social movement theory is through the concept of 'free spaces'.

'Free spaces': Applying a social movement perspective to popular education

A key insight yielded by social movement scholarship through the years relates to the importance of 'free spaces' (Polletta 1999). Following Polletta and Kretschmer (2013), free spaces can be conceptualised as small-scale settings whereby groups of grassroots actors can [i] engage in autonomous forms of social interaction that are [ii] largely 'removed from the direct control of dominant groups', and thus [iii] capable of producing the kinds of socio-political challenges that are needed to drive enduring processes of mobilisation and protest (2013, p. 1). Within social movement studies, the study of free spaces stems from a recognition that the initial emergence and longer-term development of social movements is profoundly shaped by spatial dynamics of place and locality. Reflecting on his study of nonviolent protest movements in India, for example, Routledge (1993) argued that 'the concept of place informs us about why social movements occur where they do and the context within which movement agency interpolates the social structure' (Routledge quoted in Nicholls, 2007, p. 609). Understanding where precisely social movement activities take shape is essential to analysing how movements arise and evolve. Consequentially, by exploring where social movements happen it is also possible to gain insight on how social movement actors and constituents are more or less capable of shaping the socio-structural environments within which they are embedded.

The concept of free spaces is rooted in the study of spatial and contextual dynamics. The concept relates to understanding the different kinds of sites whereby social movement activities are most likely to develop, let alone flourish. Not so surprisingly, scholars have shown that free spaces can develop from within a wide variety of settings. For example, free spaces have been shown to emerge *de novo* from within places that are not explicitly designed or intended to support sustained social interactions, such as abandoned buildings and houses or public

parks/squares that have been occupied by activist groups. Alternatively, and more commonly, free spaces emerge when activist groups engage in a conscious re-purposing of sites that are already intended to promote social interaction, such as student organisations, professional associations, cafes, bars, bookstores, churches/mosques, sport clubs, civic associations, or community centres. Interestingly, even highly repressive settings such as prisons have been shown to act as free spaces for some radical activist groups, as evidenced by the Black Panthers (Berger, 2014), and Irish Republican Army (O'Hearn, 2009). In short, free spaces are significant because they provide the kinds of social dynamics through which dominated and disempowered groups 'are able to penetrate the prevailing common sense that keeps most people passive in the face of injustice' (Polletta, & Kretschmer, 2013, p. 1).

A generalised lack of repressive surveillance and control is critical to the formation of effective free spaces. On the one hand, low levels of external control allow for the development of a social site whereby people can interact in ways that forge interpersonal ties based on communicative openness and trust as well as emotional reciprocity and mutual recognition of interests. Such interpersonal dynamics are integral to the formation of movement-based meanings, narratives and identities. On the other hand, relatively strong levels of autonomy are also very conducive to the creation of social sites that allow people to collectively cultivate counter-hegemonic agendas and projects. In this context, a relative freedom from oppressive external control is essential for devising the repertoire of strategies and tactics that social movements need in order to engage with opponents as well as to realise short and long-term aims. In sum, free spaces are crucial to promoting social movement activities because they engender processes of social reproduction linked to the development of affective and instrumental ties between individuals.

Under certain conditions, formalised popular education programs can act as free spaces that actively facilitate the reproduction of social movement activities. Important questions to ask in this regard include: Do the practitioners and participants of an adult education program wield high degrees of self-determination in the design and execution of pedagogical activities? Does the educational program demonstrate horizontal structures of interaction that allow for inclusive forms of collaboration and contribution by all participants? Are didactic activities largely free of restrictive forms of external surveillance and regulation? Does the

educational program have unambiguously critical and emancipatory orientations? Do practitioners and participants perceive themselves as persons collectively engaged in the work of social transformation?

The potential for a popular education organisation to function as a free space is strong when practitioners and participants are able to link the tangible concerns and realities of community-members to the building of counter-hegemonic educational projects that tie up with the emancipatory agendas of broader-level social movements. However, if and when the didactic resources and practices of a given adult education program are largely pre-packaged, standardised and persistently require the approval of external actors with close links to established authorities in society, then the potential for such a site to act as an effective vehicle for social movements is highly questionable. Such circumstances can translate into a loss of autonomy for participants in the educational process, thus constraining their agency and thwarting the potential to forge strategic links to social movements. Of course, autonomy is not a zero-sum situation. The dynamics of internal autonomy and external control must always be carefully investigated, rather than presumed up front. In many parts of Western and Northern Europe, for instance, it is possible to find adult education organisations that are funded entirely by state-based agencies, but which retain overtly 'radical' educational agendas rooted in emancipatory traditions of popular education. While such programs may certainly seek to bolster the power and influence of social movements in society, their 'true' capacity to function as empowering free spaces needs to be questioned and carefully analysed.

Conclusion

I started this essay by pointing out that the strategic link between social movements and adult education is well known by scholars, but surprisingly under-examined and under-theorised. As a way to bridge the divide between these areas of scholarship, I suggested that the concept of free space can be productively applied to the study of adult education in order to determine the extent to which a given site of adult education is actually capable of promoting the reproduction of social movement agendas in society. Within this context, an important task for the researcher lies in understanding how internal dynamics of self-determination and 'autonomy, as well as external dynamics of surveillance and social control variously promote or inhibit the creation of strategic

linkages to social movements. If a given site of popular education can be conceptualised as a free space, then the task of the researcher moves toward understanding how exactly the processes of learning and knowledge-making at play within a given site of adult education influence the capacities and influence of broader-level social movements in society.

Endnotes

¹For the purposes of my discussion I will use the term ‘popular education’ rather than ‘adult education’. By ‘popular education’, I mean forms of adult education that are grounded in ‘radical’ traditions of collaborative community-centered learning and emancipatory pedagogies oriented toward combatting inequality and injustice.

²Both title and key word searches were conducted by the author in August 2019. The two journals were ‘Social Movement Studies’ and ‘Mobilization: An International Quarterly’.

³This figure is based on an on-line search of the journals conducted by the author in August 2019.

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