

The 'accidental activist': learning, embodiment and action

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The 21st century has seen renewed interest in activism, community development and social change globally (Kenny 2006). This paper outlines the educational significance of the learning practices of activists as they engage within and against the state. In an era of adult education which emphasises lifelong learning and learning in the workplace, this article explores the holistic practices of activists as they learn from one another in a social context or 'on the job'. Adult activists act with agency, their learning is purposive; it is resolute and they are there and act for a reason. This learning is not only cognitive but also embodied; it is learning often associated with the emotions of passion, anger, desire and a commitment to social change. Drawing on current research in Australia, attention is given to an important but at times forgotten epistemology of adult learning.

Radical adult education

Learning through social action belongs to a discourse of 'emancipatory learning', 'social purpose education', 'critical pedagogy' and 'radical adult education'. As a body of knowledge it is also broadly referred to as 'popular education'. The term 'radical adult education' describes how people both individually and collectively learn through their engagement with community development activities or by their participation in social movements (Foley 1999, Horton & Freire 1990, Jesson & Newman 2004, Newman 1994, 2006). Jesson and Newman (2004) state "learning in the sense we use here means learning by people acting collectively to bring about radical and emancipatory social change" (Jesson & Newman 2004: 251). For the purpose of this article, the term radical adult education will be used to describe this way of learning.

Radical adult education is a tradition in the field of adult education which encompasses community development activity, activism and advocacy of social change (Foley 1999, Jesson & Newman 2004, Mayo 1999, Newman 2006). Branagan and Boughton (2003) argue that in Australia the study of learning in activism continues to be in its formative years and has only recently been recognised as 'real' adult education (p. 347). Activism is a process whereby individuals act to have an impact on significant social change. It generally requires some resistance toward state apparatus or state systems. Couch (2004) provides us with a broad definition of activism:

A role assumed by individuals or collective actors either to resist what they consider to be a political wrong or to bring about political change, through contained or transgressive tactics, excluding political violence. An activist may therefore be a member of a social movement, popular struggle, trade union, collective, network, NGO, or civic or religious organisation, a scholar or student, or an individual unaffiliated with any group. (p. 15)

Yet the pedagogy of activism has a long history in Australia, among which are the Marxist or workers' education groups of the twentieth century who came together to inform workers of their rights relating to employment and work (Boughton 2005). This was defined by the workers' education programs of the 'Marxist Schools' run by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). These workers' education groups brought together people from a variety of backgrounds to discuss workers rights and social justice issues. This formal yet underground pedagogy was based on nineteenth century Chartism influenced at the time by the International Communist Party (Boughton 2005). As Boughton (2005) argues, the tradition of worker education in the socialist and communist movements operated from the late nineteenth century until the post-war period of the twentieth century:

From the 1920s onwards, the major vehicles for this education movement were socialist and communist party schools. In Sydney, as in Melbourne and other centres all over Australia in the 1940s, the CPA opened an adult education centre, called the Marx school. For an annual fee, members and supporters enrolled to study historical materialism, scientific socialism, Marxism-Leninism – in a word, communism. (p. 101)

Similarly, the consciousness raising groups of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s in Australia and internationally were influenced by radical and socialist feminism. They contributed to the history of radical adult education in Australia by bringing together women in the 'women's consciousness raising groups' (Burgmann 2003: 111). The purpose here was not only to educate and to raise women's awareness about their own personal circumstances regarding oppression, although it did achieve this. It placed women's personal experience in a political context and encouraged women to take action on issues which concerned them. This informal pedagogy, with no concrete curriculum apart from an experiential form of feminism, was social learning though not acknowledged as such.

Burgmann (2003) points out the significance of the learning that took place for the women:

Consciousness raising groups were an important part of the women's liberation movement. They were groups of about a dozen women who shared theory, ideas and feelings with each other, enabling women to comprehend the social and collective nature of their individual problems. (p. 111)

The learning in both the workers' education and women's consciousness groups was ground-breaking in a number of ways. Learners were invited to participate in learning that raised their own political and personal consciousness. Yet there was also agency involved in this type of learning. Learning was thus purposeful in that it invited participants to act to change the world. In essence, this learning involved both personal and societal transformation (Freire 1972a).

Similarly, the learning spaces of neighbourhood houses, now an integral part of the Adult and Community Education (ACE) system in Australia, provided an avenue for women through socialisation to learn from one another about the world around them. In a study on women's experiences of involvement in neighbourhood houses, a discussion between four working class women who participated in the house "revealed a common experience of expanded knowledge and growing self-confidence as a result of their participation in the house" (Foley 1999: 54). Foley (1999) argues much of the learning that occurs in the houses is incidental and informal:

But the whole experience of a participant in a house is an important process of learning for women. Much of this learning is informal and incidental, it is embedded in other activities, and is often not articulated as learning by neighbourhood house members. (p. 54)

In effect these groups, by bringing individuals together to learn, are early spaces and sites of activists' learning. They are only a few examples of the early pedagogies of activism.

The pedagogy of activism

What do activists learn when they are engaged in radical adult education? Foley (1999) argues there are three dimensions to learning in struggle: an analysis of the political economy; the operation of micro-politics and ideology, and knowledge of discourses at play in society. Chase (2000) believes environmental activists acquire skills and knowledge in five areas: technical knowledge, political knowledge, personal growth, life skills, and knowledge of organisations. Whelan (2002), who analysed environmental activists' training needs, argues the pedagogy of activism is founded in adult learning principles and occurs through learning in social movements. This learning is often informal, as formal education amongst environmental activists is uncommon (p. 33). Jesson and Newman (2004: 261) describe three domains of activists' learning:

- instrumental learning – “will provide the skills and information to deal with practical matters, to use existing structures and systems such as government and legal processes, but the purpose is always to bring about change”;
- interpretive learning – “which has a focus on communication or understanding the human condition; the focus is on people, what they are and how they relate”; and
- critical learning – activists learn problem-solving skills, and through reflection new meaning is produced. “It helps us understand the psychological and cultural assumptions that constrain the way we see the world”.

Loughlin (1996), in contrast, argues there is a need for a holistic analysis of transformative learning. Too much attention, she

claims, is paid to cognitive ways of knowing. Her research amongst women, who had experienced emancipatory learning through their participation in women's consciousness raising groups, led her to conclude that learning came through informal processes that changed the individual's meaning perspectives. She argues there needs to be “an integration of rational and non-rational ways of knowing, which includes an analysis of values and value shifts that take place in the learner” (Loughlin 1996, p. 56).

Non-rational ways of knowing are explored in empirical research conducted by Kovan and Dirkx (2003), who interviewed environmental activists involved in small non-government organisations in the United States with regard to maintaining their commitment to activism and the role of learning in “maintaining their long-term commitment and passion” as activists (p. 103). The findings of their research are important because, while these activists noted the use of the intellect and systemic thinking as being important to their learning practices, there was also a spiritual dimension associated with their learning. Activists' knowing in this sense is deeply rooted in both the conscious and unconscious 'self' (Kovan & Dirkx 2003, p. 110). They view their involvement in activism as a 'calling'. Therefore, these activists' emancipation was entwined with a perception of a shift in the 'self'; there is a sense of fate, a sense of purpose to their learning. There is a strong sense of spirituality and emotional commitment that drives their activism. These activists believe that they are meant to be there.

Methodology

This study has been developed in the process of doctoral research at Victoria University, with the primary methodology developed from a qualitative research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, Stage & Manning 2003). While the overriding methodology is qualitative (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005), data have been collected by conducting

semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Australian activists in order to develop a series of case studies (Stake 2003, 2006). Purposeful selection of participants has occurred (Merriam 1998). Two groups of activists have been chosen in order to compare the differences and similarities in learning for those activists deemed to be 'circumstantial activists'. For example, those activists who have come to activism because of a series of life circumstances, and in contrast, the learning of 'lifelong activists', those activists who have maintained a commitment to social and political activism over a long period of time.

Individuals have been selected from a wide range of social movements, community development and political activities. Selection has included consideration for difference and diversity in terms of gender, age, ability and ethnicity. The option of confidentiality has been given to each participant in the research; where confidentiality is chosen, participants are given a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. The research has ethics clearance from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Using a case study approach, this article follows the stories of Terry Hicks, Hugo and Bahar to draw attention to the pedagogy of activism. Terry has given consent to use his actual name, Hugo and Bahar are both pseudonyms. At the time of writing, two-thirds of the data for the doctoral research had been collected. Data from the interviews have been chunked into themes using a matrix (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). This article considers three themes that are presently emerging from the research:

- adult activists develop skills on the job – their learning is mostly informal, and through the opportunity to practise and socialise with one another they become more expert at what they do,
- activists use both reason and reflection – not only do they learn to think critically about systems and structures in society, activists

are reflective practitioners, and they renew and re-make their practice through critical reflection; and

- activists' learning is an embodied and holistic practice – they use intelligence, the physical body as well as the emotions to learn. The emotions play a crucial role in their social agency and their desire to act.

Learning 'on the job' of activism

Terry's activism is 'accidental', thrown into a series of events that would dominate his life for more than five years from the time his son David was arrested in 2001 by the United States Government on suspected terrorism charges. Terry and his son David are both Australians. Whilst David was imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay, a United States military prison based in Cuba, Terry in response to these events advocates for his son's release and learns skills along the way, or 'on the job'. In the dialogue below, Terry is reflecting on the learning that has occurred for him. By being an advocate for his son, he learns through what he calls the 'process'; the process to which he refers is activism. He is reflecting on whether or not he has developed greater expertise or skill along the way in the practice of campaigning:

I don't know, I don't really know to be honest, it's just something you develop along the way through that process; whether you call it a skill or something that you do out of necessity. I've never really looked at it as a skill... Yeah, see the other thing is but who's to say five years down the track all of it won't be gone, I'll be back to normal, gone and forgotten, it's in the past. ...Although, I suppose what I have been through in the past five or so years could be put to other uses? (Terry)

Terry has started out as a newcomer on the periphery of practice – his learning has involved developing new knowledge and skills. He is learning about international systems of government, and developing new knowledge about legislation and laws relating to terrorism. He is

also learning to speak publicly for the first time, and then to perfect this role through practising the action of public speaking time and time again at forums across Australia. He explores this development of skill in the following quote:

Oh yeah, public speaking, I suppose if you look at that one, it's a skill, the other thing that you develop, what would you call it, is when you speak to a cross-section of very influential people. A lot of people would say they couldn't do that, talk to high profile people, but I come from the perspective that he's blood and bone like the rest of us. (Terry)

These skills and expertise are not formal knowledge gained in the classroom or seminar; they are skills and knowledge developed through the experience of situating himself in the processes and practices of activism. Learning occurs by having the opportunity to practise and to perfect what he is doing as an activist. By situating himself in the practices of activism, or in what Beckett & Hager (2002: 302) claim as the 'hot action of practice', Terry develops greater expertise. In the hot action of activism, in the art of making judgements about what to do next and how to go about doing it, Terry is becoming more expert at what he does.

A great deal has been written on learning in the workplace in recent years (Beckett & Hager 2002, Billett 2004, Boud & Garrrik 1999, Lave & Wenger 1991). It is widely understood that adults learn all of their lives and that a majority of this learning occurs in the workplace (Hodkinson & James 2003). Clearly, learning of a similar nature takes place in the unpaid work of social activists; that is, social learning or learning in a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). It is acknowledged that learning is an inherently social process situated in our daily interactions with one another. This is developed further by Lave and Wenger (1991) who claim:

A theory of social practice emphasises the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning,

cognition, learning and knowing. It emphasises the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and actions of persons-in-activity. This view also claims that learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world. (pp. 50–51)

While learning is based on our social interaction in the workplace, it is often informal and happens in daily interactions with one another as we work (Beckett & Hager 2002, Billett 2004, Boud & Garrick 1999). Individuals are able to develop their skills through participation in a community of practice; they develop through engagement with one another a shared repertoire of skilful practice. They may start as a newcomer on the periphery of practice, and through time and opportunity, move to full participation and engagement in learning (Wenger 1998). People learn from one another all the time, from the newcomer just acquiring new skill to the master practitioner or mentor who may pass on their knowledge, skills and experience to the novice in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). Terry's learning is social; it has occurred through his engagement with other activists and through his contact with support networks and key people that have assisted in his campaign:

Well, with the support groups, then that blew out, it [the campaign] went national and then international, you know, overseas. ... You get a lot of help through different people and ... in the early days, we had some help from David's first lawyer and the support groups out there are absolutely brilliant. (Terry)

Whilst activists learn on the job, they also develop critical thinking skills; this reflection on systems and structures that create inequality assists in further developing their expertise.

Critical thinking and reflection

Hugo has been involved in activism for most of his life. His family fled to Australia in 1975 in order to escape Pinochet's Chile. From a very young age, Hugo learned about socialism from his parents and relatives who were involved in the *résistance* movement against the Pinochet regime. Hugo joined the Labor party at the age of 12 and became involved in the party and more broadly the union movement. As an arts undergraduate student he was elected secretary of the Nation Student Tertiary Union and never completed his degree. What followed was a lifetime commitment and involvement to socialist politics and activism. In the following quote, Hugo discusses how important it is for activists to question and critique ideas; he views this as a 'part of the trade' of activism. When asked what skills he believes activists needed to be effective in their practices, he responded by exploring the importance of asking critical questions:

Definitely the asking questions thing is probably the main thing; tenacity, courage, but they tend to come with circumstance – yet I'm a believer that even the greatest coward will be courageous in certain circumstances; passion is probably the main thing, and you need to be self-conscious of what you are doing. (Hugo)

Hugo thinks the ability to think critically about systems and structures and how they connect to inequality in the world is essential; he links this view with what he refers to as being 'anti-systemic', but what he is actually referring to is critical thinking and his own reflexivity (Edwards, Ranson & Strain 2002).

You have probably caught me at a time when I am particularly reflective about this in fact; I'm waking up at night sometimes thinking about this. But yes, reflective, but I remember when first reading Descartes, at least this guy's got one thing right, at least if you keep asking questions you will get there. (Hugo)

Reflexivity or the meta-cognition of Hugo is skilful reflection on his own practices as an activist. Freire knew the learning associated

with critical reflection very well and referred to this in the term 'conscientisation' (Freire 1972b: 81). Through critical reflection, individuals would understand their own and others' oppression and seek to change it. Freire warned about what he termed fatalistic or naive consciousness and argued for a critical consciousness; this self-awareness would encourage people to act to change their circumstances (Jesson & Newman 2004). This 'conscious awakening' (Freire 1972b: 81), or learning to question or critique in order to understand the circumstances that create oppression, is what Hugo refers to as 'being anti-systemic'. Hugo has learned through his activism about politics and international systems of government:

I very much think ideas, what I would believe to be about structures and world systems, I learned through my direct action; it's not like I was going to seminars or anything, sometimes maybe. But it did embed for life the spirit of questioning for me, if nothing else you would never be happy with the first answer, and you know I am amazed just with my own teaching and stuff how many people are happy with the first answer or, if they are not happy, do nothing. (Hugo)

The ability to question situations and circumstances is a specific skill that activists develop in their practices. Being able to reflect on the discourses of inequality and to reframe or reconstruct these discourses assists activists with making meaning (Foley 2001). While critical thinking may require the use of reason, Brookfield (2005) argues critical thinking needs the power of theory, that is, an understanding of critical theory in the work of the Frankfurt School, and he brings together the connections between critical theory, activism and change in the following quote:

After all, critical theory and its contemporarily educational applications such as critical pedagogy are grounded in an activist desire to fight oppression, injustice, and bigotry and create a fairer, more compassionate world. Central to this tradition is a concern with highly practical projects – the practice of

penetrating ideology, countering hegemony, and working democratically. (p. 10)

In activists' learning, critical thinking and reflection are entwined in their developing knowledge. For these activists, learning is also embodied – they use the mind, the emotions and they also use the physical body to learn. This holistic competence contributes to powerful learning as knowledge extends beyond the use of cognition, but is embedded in activists' everyday practices.

Embodiment and activism

Passion and commitment, Bahar reveals, are important drivers for her activism. Bahar is employed as a community worker in the Turkish community. Everyday in both her paid and unpaid work Bahar is working on issues that affect the women in her community. From responding to women who have just been beaten to speaking at community forums about domestic violence, Bahar's practice is rich with skill and driven by emotions. In the following quote, Bahar discusses the importance of passion in driving her to act:

At the end of the day, you've gotta have that passion, it's got to come from the heart; if you don't have that passion, do not think of this work as a career. If you think about dollars, you shouldn't be there. All these people in the environment movement, they are not working because the trees are going to thank them, the oxygen is going to reward them – they are doing it in their own time because they want to, that's why they are doing it in their own time. (Bahar)

Why is the body and in particular the emotions so important in understanding the learning practices of activists? Adult activists' learning is embodied, their learning is holistic; they use reason, the physical body and the emotions to make meaning. Whilst their learning is associated with reason and cognition and they develop knowledge in this way, it is also deeply embedded in the emotions.

The activists in this study frequently refer to emotions such as passion, frustration and anger contributing to their purpose, drive and agency as activists. Their passion, frustration and desire for change, simply their desire for a better world, precipitate a motivation to act and to change it.

Adult educators have long known that there is intrinsic connection between the emotions and learning (Beckett & Hager 2002, Beckett & Morris 2004, Fenwick 2003). They know that, if learners make an emotional connection to the curriculum, their learning is much richer and deeper. O'Loughlin (2006) argues the historical tie of the emotions, their irrationality and women's expressive role have hindered our understanding of emotions and their importance in promoting learning:

The characterisation of emotion as irrational because of its supposedly compulsive and disruptive nature, but also because of its historical association with women and 'the feminine', is contested; likewise its depiction as threat to the functioning of cognition and rationality. The philosophers of the body, Nietzsche, Dewey and Merleau-Ponty, placed emotion at the very root of all intersubjective encounters. (p. 126)

Eyerman (2005) claims that the emotions are a source of motivation in social movements and emotions such as anger can actually drive activism. He goes on to state that "even the experience of fear and anxiety, not uncommon in the midst of protest, can be a strong force in collective actions" (p. 43).

The Cartesian tradition of education, thanks to Descartes, has long dominated educational thought. Historically it was believed that the body had no connection to the mind and the development of knowledge. This 'split' between the mind and body, has been influenced by the traditional approaches to pedagogy embedded in the foundations of behaviourism, which has been dominant in both Western European and Australian education systems. This point is

argued well by Beckett and Morris (2004) who believe the connection between mind and body continues to 'remain dualistic':

In Western European education, the highest status is reserved for the most abstract and immaterial learning, irrespective of its utility. The lowest status is accorded to concrete material learning, much of which we acquire in daily embodied actions. The utility of this latter learning has hitherto been under-recognised, although with 'lifelong learning' there is a chance for giving it greater prominence in adult education pedagogy and policy (p. 123).

Activists' learning is a case in point for rejecting this Cartesian tradition, because for activists the mind, body and emotions are intrinsically connected and all contribute to effective learning. This knowledgeable practice is often tacit and implied and not usually identified or articulated as learning (Foley 1999). This 'concrete material learning' or lower status knowledge is often viewed by educators as the 'junk' category of knowledge (Beckett 2008 in press, Schön 1987). There is a need to understand why some people have more knowledge than others, but rather than view the whole person as a site of knowledge as Schön (1987) states, "outstanding practitioners are not said to have more professional knowledge than others, but greater 'wisdom,' 'talent,' 'intuition' or 'artistry'" (p.13). Schön develops this point further:

Unfortunately, such terms as these serve not to open up inquiry but to close it off. They are used as junk categories, attaching names to phenomena that elude conventional strategies of explanation. So the dilemma of rigor or relevance here reasserts itself. On the basis of an underlying and largely unexamined epistemology of practice, we distance ourselves from the kinds of performance we need most to understand. (p. 13)

Beckett (2008 in press) outlines an 'Australian model' of 'integrated holistic competencies' in his epistemology of workplace learning (p. 1). He raises the importance of taking seriously embodied

knowledge and believes "low status knowledge, typically called 'intuition' or 'commonsense' or 'know how', is receiving long-overdue critical attention" (p. 2). Beckett's contribution to the literature on workplace learning is important because he focuses on the hitherto previously neglected area of the whole person or embodied competence at work.

For the activists in this study, learning is not only connected with cognition, but often preceded by emotions such as intuition, a feeling or a sense that they are on to something, tenacity fuelled by determination and a drive towards a goal or outcome that rarely sways – a desire or longing for knowledge in order to achieve change. There is purpose and utility associated with this desire, that is, the desire to change the world. These embodied feelings contribute to activists' agency and their motivation to learn. The environmental activists the study by Kovan & Dirkx (2003) similarly revealed that their primary motivation for activism was both intellectual and emotional, and they frequently referred to "being motivated by head, heart and spirit" (p. 109).

The holistic practices of activists include using the physical body to develop greater skill and expertise. Indeed, the use of the physical body is an important element in these activists' learning. For example, being a part of a picket line or a public protest, or scaling a large building in order to write a sign of protest, are examples of skilful use of the body; it requires balance, coordination and artistry. The act of physically climbing a tree as a part of a forest blockade is another example of how activists use their bodies in protest. The use of physical skill, music, dance and performance are frequently a part of the culture, colour and movement of activism (Couch 2004).

The 'accidental' activist

So what are the differences in learning for 'circumstantial' activists, those activists who are propelled to engage in activism due to a

series of life circumstances? In the case studies outlined in this article, Terry and Bahar are 'circumstantial' activists' and Hugo is a 'lifelong' activist. For Terry and Bahar a series of life circumstances has contributed to their learning practices as activists. Differently, Hugo was taught about politics from an early age by his parents' introduction of socialist politics via family discussions around the kitchen table. Circumstantial activists tend to have less formal training, whilst lifelong activists are likely to have participated and become engaged in activism through being socialised by parents who are political, or by being involved in student politics, or by practising activism in social movements. Circumstantial activists tend not necessarily to 'identify' as activists, whereas lifelong activists do. Both 'lifelong' and 'circumstantial' activists' learning is enhanced through socialisation in the workplace of activism; and both groups' learning is embodied – they use the mind, body and the emotions to learn.

A tentative conclusion

It is little wonder in the present environment of adult education that has given importance to lifelong learning and in particular learning in the workplace that the rich work of activists should provide us with insight into their holistic competence as practitioners. It has been argued that the learning practices of activists are not only social and informal but are also embodied. It is claimed that learning is embedded in the everyday interactions of practice with other activists, and is intrinsically connected to the mind, the physical body and the emotions. Passion, anger, frustration and a desire to change the world drive motivation and action. It is difficult to comprehend that an epistemology of learning, such as this, is so often neglected by adult educators as a legitimate form of knowing. It is important to question why there is a significant absence of discourse on 'radical adult education' in the mainstream literature on adult education in Australia, particularly when the learning practices of adult activists are educationally so rich. It is hoped that this article assists in giving their learning greater prominence.

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