The ‘circumstantial’ activist: holistic practice, learning and social activism

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Introduction

How do adult activists’ learn when they are engaged in social action? Activists act with agency, their learning is purposive, it is resolute, and they act for a reason. This learning is not only cognitive but also embodied (Beckett and Morris, 2004), it is learning often associated with the emotions of passion, anger and intuition. Central to learning in activism is the emotions or embodied ways of knowing sometimes referred to as the ‘junk’ category of knowledge (Schön, 1987). The holistic practices of activists includes developing the ability to think critically (Brookfield, 2005), usually associated with so called high order knowledge or the use of reason. Learning moves beyond Cartesian origins of knowledge or the split between mind and body, and in this sense, activists are indeed holistic practitioners. They develop greater expertise by participating in the work of activism, and over time, through the opportunity to practice and socialise ‘on the job’ with other activists they become more expert at what they do.

Research methodology

This Australian research has been conducted using a qualitative research paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005; Stage and Manning, 2003). Data has been collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with Australian activists, in order to develop a series of case studies (Stake, 2003; Stake, 2006). Purposeful selection of participants has occurred (Merriam, 1998) with two groups of activists being chosen to participate in the research. Firstly, there are ‘circumstantial’ activists who through a series of life circumstances pursue social change of some significance. In comparison to this group the learning of ‘lifelong’ activists, who have been involved in social change projects for a significant period of time. This research explores the similarities and the differences in learning for these individuals in comparison to their more politically savvy peers.

The participants involved in the research have been given the option of confidentiality and when confidentiality is chosen, participants are given a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. Using a case study approach, this paper follows the stories of Terry Hicks (actual name) and Hugo (a pseudonym) and considers three themes that are presently emerging from the research. Firstly, adult activists develop skills ‘on the job’, through the opportunity to practice and socialise with one another they become more expert at what they do. Secondly, activists’ learning is an embodied holistic practice; they use cognition, 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. Thirdly, ‘circumstantial’ activists develop an ongoing commitment and engagement in social issues which extends beyond their initial involvement in activism.
Learning and social activism

Learning through social action is a discourse which belongs to a tradition in education often referred to as ‘radical adult education’ (Boughton, 2005; Boughton et al., 2004; Branagan and Boughton, 2003; Foley, 1999; Newman, 1994; 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. Yet the tradition of radical adult education has a long history, which extends from the early sites of education in the workers education groups or the ‘Marxist schools’ (Boughton, 2005, pp.101).

Similarly social movements such as the women’s movement in its various ‘waves’ were early sites of learning for women, particularly in the ‘women’s consciousness raising groups’ (Burgmann, 2003). As Malcolm and O’Rourke (2002) remind us ‘the traditions of radical adult education claim a special relationship with movements for progressive social change’ (pp.1). This group with its mainly informal, yet underground pedagogy, with no concrete curriculum apart from an experiential form of feminism, is an early site of learning which contributed to both individual and societal transformation (Freire, 1972). These are only two examples of early sites of activism.

In what way do activists’ learn when they are engaged in social action? 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 as well as 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 (pp.33). Jesson and Newman (2004) outline three domains of activists learning:

- Instrumental learning is about understanding government systems and structures to bring about social change.
- Interpretive learning the focus here is on communication and people, learning to work with others on an issue of concern and
- Critical learning - activists learn to solve problems they learn to critically reflect on their own ‘psychological and cultural assumptions’ and produce new meaning through this reflection (p.61).

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. Loughlin in her research of women’s participation in consciousness raising groups 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 pp.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 the role of learning in ‘maintaining their long-term commitment and passion as activists’ (pp.101). The findings of this research are important because whilst these activists noted the use of the intellect and systemic thinking in being important to their practices as activists, there was also a spiritual dimension associated with their learning. Activists’ knowing in this sense is deeply embedded in both the conscious and unconscious ‘self’. They view their involvement in
activism as a ‘calling’, there is a sense of fate, a sense of purpose, indeed there is a sense of agency associated with their activism (Kovan and Dirkx, 2003. pp.110). These activists believe that they are meant to be there.

Learning ‘on the job’ of activism

Terry’s activism is ‘accidental’; he was thrown into a series of events that would dominate his life for more than five years from the time his son was arrested in 2001 by the United State’s Government on suspected terrorism charges. Terry, in response to these events learns skills along the way or ‘on the job’. In the dialogue below Terry is reflecting on the learning that has occurred for him as he campaigned for his son to be released from prison. By being an advocate for his son he learns through what he calls the ‘process’ the process that he is referring to is activism, although he doesn’t yet identify as an activist. 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

The last 15 years have seen learning in the workplace rise to particular prominence in adult education. We are now aware that learning is an inherently social process embedded in our daily interactions at work (Beckett and Hager, 2002; Billet, 2004; Boud and Garrrik, 1999). Whilst learning occurs through our daily social interactions with one another as we work, it is often informal and tacit and not always articulated or perceived as learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) in their book Situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation outline the significance of learning that occurs as people interact with one another in the workplace. According to Lave and Wenger the situated site of the work place is ripe for informal learning to occur. Lave and Wenger claim ‘that learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice’ (pp.17). Individuals may start out as a newcomer on the periphery of practice, and eventually move on to full involvement and engagement in learning as they become more ‘absorbed in the culture of practice’ (pp.95). People learn from one another all of the time from the ‘master practitioner’ who passes on their knowledge, experience and skill to the novice in a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, pp.94-95).

Terry has started out as a newcomer on the periphery of practice and he is developing new knowledge and skills. He is learning about international systems of government, he is 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
These skills and expertise are not formal knowledge gained in the classroom or seminar; they are skills and knowledge developed through the experience of situated himself in the processes and practices of activism and by having the opportunity to practice and to perfect what he is doing as an activist. By situating himself in the practices of activism, or in what Beckett and Hager (2002) claim as the 'hot action of practice', Terry develops greater expertise. In the hot action of activism, in the art of making judgments about what to do next and how to go about doing it, Terry is becoming more expert at what he does.

The activists in this study frequently refer to learning skills and developing new knowledge through their social participation with other activists. Whilst activists learn on the job, their practices are also embodied; their feelings such as intuition, passion and anger, indeed their emotions, play a crucial role in how they make meaning.

**Embodied learning**

Hugo is a lifelong activist, 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 former Pinochet regime. Hugo joined the Labor Party at the age of twelve and became involved in the party and more broadly the union movement. As an Arts undergraduate student he was elected secretary of the Queensland branch of the National Union of Students and never completed his degree. What followed was a lifetime commitment and involvement with Latin American and socialist politics. In the following quote Hugo explores the relationship between his family’s experiences and his own activism:

... You know as children we spent our childhood sitting around the kitchen table listening to our parents talk politics. I think this is interesting because what they’ve told us wasn’t pedagogical; it was really about their stories that were heartfelt and sad, and bitter. ... It’s not like we were taking in Marx or anything like that directly, it was mainly emotions and how we were affected by those stories. I mean psychologically speaking; it is quite amazing a lot of us were obviously the average kid who wanted to do something for their parents, well for us it became a political thing like that, finishing a journey they could not complete. - Hugo

His parents’ life stories, told to Hugo in childhood were ‘heartfelt, sad and bitter’, have contributed to Hugo’s motivation to act and participate in activism. Adult activists’ learning is embodied, whilst their learning is associated with reason and cognition and they do learn to think critically (Brookfield, 2005). Their practices include reflection (Schön, 1983) and through this meta-cognition, this reflexivity, they develop further knowledge. Hugo identifies passion, courage and asking questions as skills that are needed in order to be effective in activism:

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 argues in the quote below that you need to be ‘self conscious’ as an activist, and you need to be reflective.

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 guys got one thing right, at least if you keep asking questions you will get there. - Hugo

The Cartesian tradition of education, because of Descartes has long dominated educational thought. The notion that the development of knowledge is separate to the body has been influenced by the traditional approaches to pedagogy embedded in the foundations of behaviourism in Western European education particularly, and similarly in the Australian context. Furthermore according to Beckett and Morris (2004) it continues to ‘remain dualistic’ (pp.122). Activists’ learning rejects this Cartesian tradition; 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 sometimes referred to as the ‘junk’ category of knowledge (Schön, 1987). We want to understand why people have more knowledge than others, but unless the knowledge is abstract and tangible it is often given lower status, or the practitioner is referred to as having greater ‘wisdom’ or ‘talent’. Schön (1987) 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 (pp.13).

David Beckett, (2008, in press) ascribes an ‘Australian model’ of ‘integrated holistic competencies’ in the development of workplace expertise (pp.1). Beckett raises the importance of taking seriously embodied knowledge and believes ‘low status knowledge, typically called ‘intuition’; or ‘commonsense’, or ‘know how’, is now receiving long-overdue critical attention’ (pp.2).

The activists in this study frequently referred to the connection between the mind and the emotions. This learning is not only about the use of reason, but 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. It involves a desire or longing for knowledge in order to achieve change. There is purpose and utility associated with this knowledge that is the desire to act to change the world.

Activists also use the 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 in 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 use of physical skill, music, dance and performance are frequently a part of the culture, colour and movement of activism (Couch, 2004).
Differences and similarities

So what are the differences between the learning of circumstantial activists those activists who engage in activism due to a series of life circumstances and the learning of lifelong activists? In the case studies outlined in this article Terry is a circumstantial activist, and whilst a series of life circumstances have initially contributed to his engagement in activism, Terry believes he will now always be interested in human rights. Circumstantial activists tend to not always identify as activists, whereas lifelong activists generally do. Lifelong activists like Hugo have generally become engaged in activism by being socialised by parents who are political, or by being engaged in student politics, or through their involvement in social movements. Lifelong activists tend to have participated in more formal education and training than circumstantial activists. In this sense they are lifelong learners, their participation in learning is a process whereby knowledge and skills are continually updated through their links with other activists and social movements. Lifelong activists are prolific learners and have much to contribute to the theory and practice of lifelong learning (Chappell et al., 2003).

Both lifelong and circumstantial activists’ learning occurs through socialisation in the workplace of activism and both groups learning is holistic, that is, they use the mind, body and 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 richness of activists’ learning should provide us with insight into their holistic work as practitioners. I have argued that the holistic practices of these activists are not only social but embedded in the everyday interactions of practice, whereby learning is inherently connected to the emotions and is driven by passion, a desire to change the world and a need to promote social justice. It is difficult to comprehend that an epistemology of learning such as this is so often neglected by educators as a legitimate form of knowing, particularly when the practices of adult activism is educationally so rich. It is hoped that this article assists in further promoting their learning.

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