Messy learning? Legitimate peripheral participation in a community campaign

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The term ‘messy learning’ draws attention to the unordered, fragmented, often unfinished, incidental and episodic learning that can occur through legitimate peripheral participation in campaigns. Messy learning is not messed up learning, mistaken, ill conceived or wrong, but highlights instead the rich but invariably partial mosaic of social movement learning. Messy learning can easily be misrecognised by educators and researchers who are unfamiliar with the realities of learning in struggle. In Bourdieu and Waquan’s (1992) terms misrecognition is a process which disguises how cultural arbitraries operate to legitimate dominant social values and positions. The formal institutions of education are particularly important in terms of influencing our expectations and, indeed, predispositions regarding what is valuable about education and learning – the emphasis on structure, coherence, individual benefits etc - but this context is far removed from the actuality of everyday learning and learning in campaigns. The important point is that we should be more open to how people learn - rather than how we think they should learn. As Pring (2000: 22) notes, ‘educational research must attend to what it means to learn, and that requires a careful analysis of the many different sorts of learning.’ Misrecognition can get in the way of this aspiration.

Legitimate peripheral participation

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation draws attention to the socially situated forms of learning that occur through participation in communities of practice which take place through the regular and structured forms of interaction amongst people. Moreover, individuals may have relationships with a wide range of overlapping or divergent communities of practice that intersect and may impact on each other.

Legitimate peripheral participation involves a broad view of learning which includes the formation of identity, cultural values and beliefs and understandings of society. In Lave and Wenger’s framework a key issue in relation to learning is access to the full range of activities, which enable people to become ‘full participants’ rather than merely peripheral participants. This should not devalue the importance of peripheral involvement – a point we argue in this paper - but it does suggest that it structures the learning process.

Social movements as communities of practice

From an educational interest in social movement learning some of the relevant characteristics are as follows: they are usually temporary formations that generate new knowledge and awareness. This ‘cognitive praxis’, in Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) terms, can be subdivided into three dimensions: the ‘cosmological’ (the big
picture / world view), the ‘organisational’ (ways of structuring relationships between people and between people and the environment) and the ‘technological’ (actual technologies but also the specialist and lay knowledge which inform them and their application). The cognitive praxis of the movement distinguishes it from its ‘enemies (Newman 1999) because they challenge conventional wisdom and this can create overt conflicts if entrenched interests are threatened.

Conflict, enemies, confrontation all suggest that a critical factor in participation in social movements is that they can involve ‘high stakes’, by which we mean the potentially negative consequences of participation for those who are active. High stakes can be a consequence of the goals of the movement or because of their ‘repertoire of political action’ (Tilley 2004). Newman (2005) distinguishes between three categories of action – conventional, confrontational and violent - that have a bearing on participation. Conventional action means behaviour such as lobbying, petitioning and so on that is widely regarded as peaceful and legitimate action in liberal democracies. This usually has low-stakes in terms of personal costs for participants. Confrontational action involves direct action which may have unforeseen outcomes for participants – a lawful strike, for example, may lead to arrest in some circumstances. Violent action crosses the line and involves damage to property or people. Taking such action involves breaking moral codes as well as legal ones and involves extreme high stakes. It is understandable that confrontational and violent action can deter participation, however, in the case of conventional action, what deters full participation particularly when people are motivated to act?

The research
We selectively draw on a small number of interviews with people involved, in varying degrees, with a community campaign that was labelled an environmental justice struggle by a few of the key activists involved. The campaign was aimed particularly at influencing the activity of a Norwegian multinational fish farming company, Marine Harvest, and their salmon farms in Little Loch Broom just off the Scoraig peninsula on the north-west coast of Scotland.

The community campaign began early in 2000 and has now passed its high point, particularly as Marine Harvest began switching some of its fish farms to the coast of Chile in 2007/8. This may be partially due to the success of the campaign but also, as campaigners acknowledge, a lot to do with the economics involved.

In terms of who can be counted as legitimate peripheral participants in the campaign this can be extended to the whole community living on Scoraig – at least. The geographical setting of the peninsula means that a degree of co-operation is part of the way-of-life; a ‘community of necessity’ as one interviewee remarked. Local people were largely opposed to the fish farming because of its blight on the landscape and one of the motivations for living there is its natural beauty and remoteness. Community life on the peninsula involves a small primary school and a Community Association, which is open to all the residents of the area. It is this association that spearheads the community campaign.

Our interview material cited below focuses on the experience of two key ‘full participants’ and four peripheral participants which we have selected from thirty
interviews undertaken in late 2007. The selection highlights the different levels of involvement rather than claiming to be representative.

**Full participation: Activist A (male)**

I believed, naively, that our community was somehow immune to intensive developments. The close interaction with the land and the reliance on the natural environment is the overriding quality of this way of life. A way of life that I find I am prepared to go to length to protect, now assuming an active role I probably would not have filled, had the community not been threatened by proposed impending developments.

Activist A was born on Scoraig and was elected chair of the Community Association, which led the campaign in 2000. He had no prior campaigning experience before the start of the struggle and his main livelihood is working as a roof repairer (when work is available) supplemented by crofting. He enrolled on a popular education course, Agents for Environmental Justice, in 2002 to develop the knowledge and skills that would assist his role in campaigning. As a key activist he became the main point of contact with external allies at FoES, the local council, the Highlands and Islands Development Board and government bodies such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

Activist A’s technical knowledge accumulated during the struggle:

There are around 350 fish farms in the Highlands and Islands, that is at least one in every inshore sealoch, the industry is worth £700 million to the Scottish economy and the product makes up 40% of Scotland’s entire food export. The Crown Estate makes £250 million per annum in lease rental, which goes straight over to Westminster, and a meagre 2% is reinvested into Scotland...Not only is the ownership of the Scottish seabed assumed by an English institution, but the majority of leaseholders are foreign-based multinational companies. (Agents for Environmental Justice and Scandrett et al 2003: 14)

However, what started as opposition to the damage posed by fish farms has led to a critique of who owns and controls the land (including the seabed). ‘The real problem’, he points out, ‘began twenty-five years ago when the Crown Estate earmarked hundreds of potential sites dotted over the entire west highland coast, to lease out to the growing fish farming industry’. Ownership and control of the seabed requires a new mode of productive organisation and living, which he sees as the ultimate goal of the campaign. He believes that the argument needs to be taken in the direction of community buyout schemes (a successful tactic crofters in other parts of Scotland have applied in order to buy out absent landlords and take rural property into collective ownership). This co-operative form of ownership of coastal waters would enable people who live and work in such places to control land and sea use. In this view, local communities are the ones that should control these natural resources because they are the ones who identify with the place and have a long-term commitment to it.
From full to peripheral participation
Activist B (female) makes a living with her partner from crofting, jam making and selling arts and crafts in nearby towns and tourist spots. The plan to locate a fish farm in full view of her home motivated her to get involved in campaigning – but her experience was not always positive.

Sometimes it became painful because most of the time we weren’t winning and then we won something, but for two years we lost, so it was a lovely time when you felt it had worked and had been worth it, but there were times when it was painful and you just wanted to put it out of your head.

Unequal resources that stack the cards in favour of powerful interests can lead to a dispiriting sense of never being able to overcome the ‘enemy’. Moreover, who the enemy is may shift as new interests come into the struggle. For example, the campaign had temporary success in blocking a planning application by Marine Harvest at a regional level with the Highland and Islands Authority in support of their case. The multinational was able to appeal the decision at the level of the Scottish Executive (now the Scottish Government), which in backing the growth of the ‘aquaculture industry’ found in favour of the company. The impact was felt as ‘It doesn’t matter how much vision or sound knowledge you throw at the system, it will still do what it wants. The power is in the hands of the developers, in the short term anyway.’

Dealing with the media can be a potentially damaging learning experience for those with little prior knowledge of how it works. Activist B refers to a television interview she gave which to this day she finds difficult to look at:

It wasn’t very good from what I understand. They left the impression that Scoraig is full of strange people but that’s what the media can do and that’s what you got to expect; you’ve got to be careful. There is no control over a TV and news report if you’re in it.

Along with Activist A she also joined the Agents for Environmental Justice course and this encouraged her to take up membership of FoES. She found the practical side of dealing with the media during the course particularly helpful but she was less interested in discussing the theory of environmental justice and would have preferred someone telling her what to do next in the campaign. But she acquired in-depth, technical knowledge of the issues involved in fish farming, the use of chemicals to treat fish lice, the impact of the fish pens on the local environment, the process of contesting planning applications and so on. Detailed knowledge of this type is perhaps to be expected because in order to sustain a campaign the arguments need to be learned and evidence accumulated, digested and circulated in a language that supporters and the public can grasp.

In addition, the campaign changed her cosmological world-view from one primarily based on living in what she assumed to be an idyllic, natural sanctuary, in tune with her environment to one that is structured by injustice and exploitation which she likens to a form of colonialism.
It made me think a lot and question things a lot more. I used to feel because I lived in a place so remote and isolated here that I wouldn’t be touched by the outside world. It would touch me but not so directly, not right in my face with the heavy pollution and heavy industry. The fish farm…would change this place….completely. The landscape would look the same but the noise, the stink, the pollution, the traffic in the sea and the wildlife would be affected…I think if there is oil, fish, money, there will be a ‘developer’ somewhere and it’s another way of colonialism. It made me think a lot more about this experience globally.

However, underplayed in Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) cognitive praxis framework is that creating new identities is not always uncomplicated and the social process is, after all, reflected in an individual’s sense of self. The comment below is important because what this individual learns is to stop campaigning:

I realised at the end of it I’m not a campaigner, I’m good at lots of things and I like talking, but I’m not a good campaigner because I’m up and down with my own heart. You can’t be like that can you, when you have to go to a meeting or an interview? It is harder than people think to be a good campaigner. Isn’t it?

This ‘unlearning’ of her role – in effect the reverse process of a transition from full to peripheral participation - does point to the very real and contradictory experiences that learning in campaigns can generate. This is significant because if education is to assist communities in struggle it will need to address not only how campaigns succeed, but also how people maintain the identity necessary to make their commitment worthwhile.

Peripheral participation in the campaign
There was nothing stopping more residents of Scoraig becoming fully active in the campaign, although not many did, despite being opposed to the fish farms. In the text that follows we focus on two aspects of the imbalance of power in the campaign that helped maintain a pattern of peripheral participation by deterring access to full engagement.

The dilemma of resistance
Despite being opposed to the fish farming, and acting to resist their development the comment below is from a women who also states that community resistance, ultimately, is self-defeating because of the need for ‘big business’.

No I don’t agree with it [fish farming] at all but I don’t see where we are going to get with it. It’s such a big business and just generally in Scotland there is not much income into the economy…It’s like the Blackpool illuminations, they use so much electricity, which is really bad for global warming, but they don’t stop it because of money; so you can’t really win. Well maybe you can, I hope I’m wrong.

Her analysis, juxtaposed in conflict with her hope, create a quandary that involves ultimately accepting the need to settle for less than she would like – because there is no alternative. This combination of an attitude of resistance, with an assessment of dependency on those with material wealth, is a real enough analysis of the circumstances. The result is a compromise which influences the degree of
participation in the campaign because it seems self-defeating to bite the hand that feeds people.

**Organisational outflanking**

The sociologist Mann (1986) makes the point that marginalising resistance to power reflects the ability of the powerful to outmanoeuvre or outflank less powerful groups. This capacity to ‘outflank’ resistance through superior resources and their deployment means winning consent is unnecessary. The comment below from an ex-miner now living on Scoraig as a fisherman seems to capture the sense of a strategic assessment:

> They’re such a big company [Marine Harvest] and fish farming is a big part of the Scottish economy. To try and stop something as powerful as a body of people like that, when you’re as small as we are, it’s a bit like pissing in the wind. I don’t want it there [the fish farm]…but what are you going to do about it? They’re going to do it, they’ve got the money to do it and they’ve got the lawyers to fight battles with people like us, and I thought probably it was a waste of time…

The enemy have the resources to hold their position by employing the professional services of groups who can outsmart inexperienced community members – the lawyers who can fight their battles in courts, or the public relations consultants who can handle the media, or the experts that can ‘prove’ their practices are safe - and so on. Becoming more actively involved is constrained by the organisational superiority of the opposition they face.

**Learning through peripheral participation**

We want to emphasise from the perspective of learning that peripheral participation is valuable. The ex-miner referred to earlier, for example, expresses a shift in his ‘world-view’ as a consequence of addressing the dilemma he feels between jobs and environmental destruction:

> One time I would have thought it was totally illogical to put people out of work. I would not have looked at the broader picture, whereas here you are looking at longer-term things. Like eventually they will kill all the sea dead, there will be no fish and they [his friends] will be out of work anyway and no one will have anything to eat…You have to look at the broader picture, whereas a few years ago I wouldn’t have done.

A good deal of technical knowledge was also learned about specific issues involved in the campaign particularly in relation to the damage caused by chemical pollutants and fish droppings in concentrated areas and to wild salmon:

> I know about fish farms and the chemicals they use and things. It’s definitely made me more aware about them.

Understanding the ways of power in relation to administrative control and technical expertise is also evident in the next comment from another informant.
What I learned is that there are people trained to deal with people like us, and it is their job to come to the community where they can have an answer for every question and away they go again.

Consultations, inquiries, report - the due process of deliberative decision-making – can simply obfuscate the different interests and issues that end up tying people in knots. This is particularly the case when the discourse of science in environmental disputes positions the expert as the voice of credible knowledge whereas local knowledge is devalued because it is parochial. Ignoring local knowledge and wisdom is a further dimension of Bourdieu and Waquant’s argument about misrecognition. Moreover, the resources of the powerful make it more likely that they can draw on such expertise, more so than campaigns with limited resources.

**Conclusion**

Access to the campaign as a community of practice is shaped by the conflicts that the campaign generates which, in turn, influences the degree of participation people were willing to undertake. In two cases it stimulated the demand for more systematic study to develop campaigning skills. The critical factors influencing access to full participation derived from the logic of challenging those in power who hold resources that people need and the opportunity costs of resistance against powerful interests.

Our analysis identifies the uneven degrees of learning structured by the experience of full and peripheral participation. It is evident that world-views were changing, technical knowledge had sharply increased, and that new forms of organisation and relations had germinated. The epistemology of the campaign and its pedagogy are linked but also distinct. The learning experiences were messy in the sense that they were fragmented, episodic, selective and contingent as well as involving depth and systematic attempts to know more. Messy learning should not be overlooked, or dismissed as second rate, compared to the ordered, structured, rational approach to curriculum that educationalists recognise and value.

Messy learning articulated with the messy experience of struggle and the problems it generated for people’s lives – it is highly contextual but generated powerful learning for those involved. The material we have presented recognises that people are differentially placed in the learning/ action process and the ways they learn reflect these differences. Learning in campaigning is not something planned – at least for a good deal of the time - but integral to the situation as it develops. Our problem as educators is to recognise this and, if we choose, to find points of collaboration that can become a resource for furthering learning for action.

**References**


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