Learning in social action:
The informal and social learning dimensions of circumstantial and lifelong activists

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This paper explores the informal and social learning dimensions of activists as they learn skills and knowledge through participating in social action. In doing this I draw on Lave and Wenger's epistemology of situated learning and Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus'. I argue activists learn an array of community development skills in the social environment of activism. I claim activists' learning is cognitive, embodied and situated in practice. This paper is based on empirical research in Australia, where in-depth interviews were conducted with activists to uncover their important pedagogy. It explores the learning dimensions of two groups of activists. 'Lifelong activists' who have generally been involved in student politics and have participated in activism over many years, and 'circumstantial activists' who become involved in protest due to a series of life circumstances. This paper claims that while both groups' learning is social and informal, lifelong activists tend to develop their skills

incrementally by being involved in the fertile site of student politics. On the other hand, circumstantial activists, not having had the benefit of early immersion in a community of practice, are rapid learners. They are frequently taken out of their comfort zone as activists and need to acquire new knowledge and skills urgently in order to practise effectively. Some circumstantial activists remain on the periphery of activism and never fully immerse themselves in the practices of activism. I argue there is much to be gained from understanding learning in social action, an epistemology of adult learning which deserves greater prominence in current adult education discourse.

Key terms: Activism and learning, social learning, informal learning, communities of practice, habitus

Defining activism

Activism is educationally rich and historically situated in the post-enlightenment tradition of humanism. Community development and activism 'is a part of the project of modernity, [and] draws attention to the state in its creation of disadvantage' (Kenny 2006: 94–95). Kenny (2006: 385) argues that activism is a strand of community development whereby people 'strive continually to understand where the strategic opportunities for action lie'. Resistance towards state apparatus in Australian society is not new as Australia is a western democracy with a long history of trade unionism (Burgmann 2003). Social movements and social change in Australia have long been an important part of the political and social landscape (Maddison & Scalmer 2006). However, even as Australia was being colonised by Britain in the eighteenth century, there was resistance to invasion by Australian Aborigines, the Indigenous Australians (Burgmann 2003). Since the nineteenth century, activism in Australia has been connected to social movements encompassing

issues such as women's suffrage, women's liberation, Indigenous land rights, civil rights and reconciliation. Activism has also been associated with the peace and anti-nuclear movements, the anti-war protests of Vietnam and Iraq, the environmental movement in its various forms, and the anti-corporate globalisation movements. As Couch (2009) argues:

> From the salt mines to Seattle, throughout history, movements such as these have challenged and deposed dictators, stopped armies, undermined corporations, established basic human rights and halted entire industries, all without the use of violence (2009: 4).

For the purposes of this research, the scope of activism is shaped by the broad theories of community development which take into account practices such as policy development, community campaigning, community building, neighbourhood development, popular education and active involvement in social movements. However, there are different spaces and places of activism which are not always connected to social and political movements (Brown & Pickerill 2009, Jasper 2009). For example, circumstantial activists protest but do not always participate actively in social movements. Theorists such as Kenny (2006: 202–203) have argued that the 'activist model' of community development in Australia has its roots in 'left' movements for social change such as feminism, socialism and environmentalism. Community development includes resistance towards the state and often includes direct action (Kenny 1999, 2006). The broad ontology of community development is always a project of progressive social change. This can occur through small acts of resistance to government policy to large public protests organised by established social movements (Kenny 2006). Kenny argues activists such as Alinsky were informed by the theory of community development. Alinsky's (1971) activism brought people together in order to mobilise for social change, a primary project of

community development theory and practice. Alinsky's activism was always a project of education. Many community workers are involved in social movements and campaign groups for social change; they are activists in nature because their everyday work in communities is focused on resistance of some kind (Ife & Tesoriero 2006). Mayo (2001) argues social movements can learn a great deal from the theory and practice of community development: issues such as how to build a group and how to maintain a network of people. Activists need to have outstanding communication skills. They need to know how to resist change within the system as well as outside the system. It is argued these skills are all informed by community development theory and practice:

> Whatever the difference in their perspectives ... community development workers and activists need to share an increasingly sophisticated common core of knowledge and skills (p. 101).

I take the position in this paper that progressive activism and community development are inextricably connected. Resistance occurs in many ways through the mobilisation of mass social movements and in the work of local and small community campaigns of resistance towards the state. I argue that activism which is informed by even the smallest acts of resistance in the everyday work of community workers is just as significant and important as the mass mobilisation of thousands of people in direct protest.

Less well-understood is the notion of circumstantial activism which is not included in present social movement learning theory. It is recognised that there are many activists who protest, but who do not necessarily relate to or have connections with formal political organisations or social movements (Brown & Pickerill 2009, Jasper 2009). This is a significant gap in the theory and practice of social movements. If we can understand the motivation and learning practices of circumstantial activists, social movements would be better placed to encourage and nurture participation of this distinct

group of activists, building movement members and the capacity for greater social change.

Methodology

This empirical research was conducted in Australia, the primary methodology being qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln 2000) and case study research (Stake 1995, 2003, 2006). The methods used to obtain the data were in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Eight circumstantial activists and nine lifelong activists, a total of seventeen activists, were interviewed to explore their learning dimensions. A selection of the interviews were developed into case studies (Stake 2003, 2006). Research participants were purposively selected in order to reflect the diversity of current social issues both in Australia and internationally. Activists in the study were involved in issues to do with international human rights and civil liberties, refugee rights, disability rights, Indigenous politics, labour and the environment movements and issues of urban development, some of the most important social issues of our time. The research was given approval by the Ethics Committee of Victoria University. Activists who participated in the research were given the option of confidentiality, when this option was chosen, a pseudonym was used. Through this paper when a name is *italicised*, the participant has chosen to remain anonymous. The primary findings of the research activists' learning practices are embodied—the whole person is central to how they make meaning. Both groups of activists' learning is critically cognitive, driven by the emotions, and is both social and informal. Lifelong activists develop their skill and knowledge through a long immersion in a community of practice with other activists. Circumstantial activists on the other hand are rapid learners. They are frequently taken out of the comfort zones and onto a learning edge, because they need to develop knowledge and skills often very quickly in order to be effective in their activism. The major findings of the research relate to the holistic way activists develop knowledge and skill—including

mind, body and emotions in learning. The primary focus of this paper is the social and informal learning dimensions of activists' pedagogy.

Social learning: communities of practice

Over the past twenty years, few traditions of learning have dominated adult education discourse in the same way as Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated leaning. Their development of a theory of adult learning which situates learning in social and community sites has contributed to understanding knowledge formation through informal learning. Lave and Wenger's work is a socio-cultural interpretation of learning that positions and locates learning within the social environment of work or communities. Lave (1991: 64) argues that this learning

> … is neither wholly subjective, nor fully encompassed in social interaction, and it is not constituted separately from the social world (with its own structures and meanings) of which it is part.

Most epistemologies of learning are based on assumptions about people, the world and their relations to it. We internalise knowledge or we receive it in a variety of ways, and we learn to absorb this information and assimilate it (Lave & Wenger 1991). However, many adults bring to their learning a level of existing knowledge through having lived a long life full of complexity, with the result that some learning may not transfer, but rather synthesise with existing knowledge. Lave (1996) analysed the learning that takes place between the newcomer/old-timer in the processes of apprenticeship. Her study of apprentices learning the craft of tailoring in the early 1970s in Liberia is useful for understanding the way circumstantial (newcomer) activists develop their craft and become masterful. In this site of learning, Lave observed the work of 250 masters and apprentices in the space called 'Tailors' Alley' (p. 151). The research examined how the processes of apprenticeship allowed young tailors to become more masterful at their craft. Lave (1996) critiqued rational

learning in formal education and the 'narrow' focus of informal learning, which exemplifies the development of skill, but ignores many of the moral discourses that constitute and impact on our learning. What Lave is chiefly concerned about, however, is whether teaching and the transmission of knowledge is a necessary condition for learning (p. 151). She is critical of dualist approaches to pedagogy central to most traditions of learning because of their relativist focus on cognition, as this approach to pedagogy often alienates people who are the most marginalised. She points out that there needs to be a theory of learning which does not entrench 'social inequality in our society' (p. 149). Lave is referring to our reliance on cognition for understanding ways of knowing, and in a sense, her work is similar to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) existential examination of somatic knowledge developed though perception and being in the world. What Lave and Wenger (1991) argued for is a view of learning that goes beyond a mere transfer of knowledge. They claimed the focus on transition models of education do not account for the nature of the learner in their social world, and are largely 'cerebral' (p. 47). As Lave (1996) observed in the Liberian apprentices' daily work, they were learning about the social and cultural worlds around them. They were learning about class distinctions and the 'divisions in Liberian society' which were being played out in the daily 'business of dressing' (p. 151). They were learning about their craft, learning to live, learning to make an income—in essence, they were learning to become master tailors. They were learning about the status they would receive when they eventually became masters of their trade. In effect, the apprentices were learning about the historical and cultural world around them (Lave 1996).

The epistemology of popular education has revealed, mainly through the writing of humanist educators such as Freire (1972), that in the site of struggle learning will always occur. Neighbourhoods and communities are often sites of education where we learn to acculturate hegemony and resist hegemonic practices in society

(Gramsci 1971, Gramsci & Forgacs 1988). The practices of activism are usually closely connected to communities, community development and social movements. Sites of community and social movements are the spaces and places where activists learn through socialisation with one another, by learning in 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 31). Learning in activism is a naturally social process; through time, and the opportunity to observe and interact with others, activists become more expert at what they do. Recently, in Melbourne, the St Kilda foreshore became the site of struggle triggered by the developers' proposal for a high-density shopping complex. *Eva's* activism exemplifies learning in the site of struggle through her involvement in a local community campaign to resist the developers. Her learning included understanding the processes and machinations of government, 'I've learned more about how the Council actually work in terms of ... the role of the paid officers and the CEO as compared to the elected representatives'. Yet she says her biggest area of learning has been in understanding group dynamics and understanding processes of local government. She was learning about resistance and her own agency to act through resistance, as well as learning about the politics of local and state governments.

Activists' learning occurs through immersing themselves into a practice with other organisers, confirming Lave and Wenger's (1991: 93) supposition 'that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a condition for effective learning'.

The dynamics of social interaction and conversation in the practices of activism can lead to fruitful learning. Every day activists connect through discussing their desires, needs, wants and aspirations. This is sometimes done unconsciously, but also done most purposefully while looking for a solution to a particular issue or problem. Those passing conversations about political processes, impending legislation or organising campaigns are all potential learning experiences. As they swap stories of practice, they are also revealing their concern

for the future of this knowledge and being able to pass it on to future generations of activists (Maddison & Scalmer 2006).

As Whelan (2005) reminds us, there is a great deal to be learned in social action, even when a campaign fails. Both Cam Walker[1] and *Jonathan* believe they learned most of their skill and knowledge on the job of activism; they learned how to manage large-scale events and to stage thousands of protesters to be able to march through city streets. They learned how to brief police, and stage musical and theatrical events in the midst of protest. *Jonathan* learned how to be a part of a human blockade in Palestine on the border of Israel—he learned about danger in protest, but also about the solidarity that comes from social action and being with other activists who were committed to a long journey of resistance. Cam Walker learned about the long haul from his action in the Franklin River blockade. Felicity Marlowe[2] learned a great deal of her skill through being involved in numerous protests, through her involvement in the student union and the Democratic Socialist Party, but more recently through her lobbying for social change parental rights for lesbians.

Like the tailors in Liberia, activists learn a range of skills through working with one another, although this is not always recognised as learning or knowledge by the activists themselves (Foley 1999, Newman 1994, 2006). They learn about the world around them, they learn about systems of government, key advisors and key politicians, they learn to hone their communication skills, to speak in public and they learn to engage with and use the media (Branagan & Boughton 2003, Jesson & Newman 2004). More experienced activists learn to become event managers; by learning how to plan a large rally, they deal with planners, police, local government, traders and large crowds of protesters, and they effectively navigate and negotiate these events in the same way that any major events planner would do. Like the Liberian apprentice tailors, activists learn through the daily practice of everyday activities, many of which develop their foundational

community development skills (Kenny 1994, 2006, Mayo 2005), including skills for networking, group work, planning and facilitation, social policy and research.

Lifelong activists' community of practice in student politics

Most of the lifelong activists had some involvement in student politics and it appears from this research that the situated site of student unions and student politics represented a community of practice for activists. These activists found that the student unions replicated the workings of the Australian political system. They learned about conservative and progressive politics and the role of factions in political parties. They learned to be strategic to caucus and compromise on decisions. They developed knowledge about the constraints and benefits of a two-party system of government and also learned how to resist collectively a policy by taking a strong and firm position on an issue. They learned communication skills such as how to develop an argument, how to persuade others, how to speak in public and how to use the media. They developed a reified[3] (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) practice through observing and interacting with other student activists in the union. Jorge Jorquera says he learned about 'pickets and protests and all of the tenacity that goes with direct action'. Felicity Marlowe believes she learned everything that she needed to know about politics from her experience of student politics at university: 'Student politics teaches you everything you ever needed to know about how state and federal politics work, I reckon, and it's all about factions!' For most of the lifelong activists, this social space of learning marked the commencement of a long journey of political understanding and apprenticeship in activism. This experience differed from that of the circumstantial activists who learnt rapidly and in more diverse communities. The student unions allowed individuals to test and rehearse their values, beliefs and ideology. These activists had the opportunity to incrementally develop their values, beliefs and

ideology, while they were learning about politics and protest in this community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998).

Apprenticeship learning for both groups of activists

Activists learn from other activists all of the time, particularly though the support and guidance of experienced activists, and the theory of social learning highlights this relationship between the 'old-timers and the newcomers' (Lave 1996, Lave & Wenger 1991). Experienced activists play a role in assisting newcomer activists to develop their initial skills and become masterful or more expert in turn. Almost all of the activists in this study had at least one mentor. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), newcomers start out on the periphery of practice and, as they develop more experience, they become more masterful at their practice, and through socialisation pass on their skills to others (Wenger 1998). *Grace* had a significant mentor in her early days of activism. There was a person whose skilful handling of meetings she would observe in order to learn how to steer the agenda and discussion to get a desirable outcome. She recalls a meeting where she saw her 'experienced colleague stop a community member from de-railing the project':

> Now I went away from that meeting and dissected that. How did she do that in a way that did not demean him? We still got our outcome but he was left in no uncertain terms that he was not going to derail the process. I knew I did not have the skill to do that, and I'm not sure that I still would now. But I remember just sitting back watching the whole conversation unfold at this meeting and thinking, 'Wow, she is so good at this!' So I recognise that she had skills that I definitely did not have, and I guess by osmosis you learn the ways of dealing with complex and delicate situations.

Similarly, *Rose* had a number of skilful mentors who encouraged her to become involved in a lot of community groups and policy processes, thereby developing her skills through socialisation. This

sharing of expertise opened up to her a whole network of activists, community development workers and educators, and through this process *Rose* was becoming immersed in the pedagogy of activism.

This research has found activists use mentors and older, more experienced activists to learn from; they work in and with communities and social movements to develop their skills. The majority of their skills develops through situating themselves with other activists in a learning community of practice. Cam Walker 'went in search of all sorts environmental groups that he could work with'— he needed a social space where other activists congregated for him to learn his trade. He needed to know that there were other people out there who had a commitment to social change and the environment so that he could commune, socialise and take action with them. Jorge Jorquera states that he 'loves learning in collectives', and he loves to 'impart and share other people's knowledge'. For activists, the social space of activism, and the sociality that occurs within this field of practice, creates an agency and urgency to act. Through the use of the social space, activists' practices are mirrored and experience is gained; there is a communality which develops and a commonality of practice that occurs within the social space (Lave & Wenger 1991). Activists are becoming acculturated into a practice by experiencing that practice with others.

Rapid learning and circumstantial activists

It is important here to explore the rapid learning of circumstantial activists as they go about their everyday practices with an agency to learn that is sometimes urgent. Terry Hicks[4], with no experience whatsoever in public speaking or dealing with the media, walks out into the street at the front of his house in suburban Adelaide and holds a media conference.

> The police shut off the end of the street to come into the house. This of course gave us insight into how they all work. After about

a week and a half, I went out and spoke to the media and of course then them [the Federal police and ASIO]. It was as easy as that.

He said he was lucky that through his experiences of using the media, he learned early on in the campaign to get his message out short and simple and, most importantly, to not claim that he had more knowledge than he did, or that he was an expert in international law or terrorism. This skill, learned in action, contributes to his toolkit of practice. These skills developed on the job are being synthesised with other skills and knowledge and are contributing to a developing epistemology of practice.

Eva attends a public meeting about the proposed development at her local government chambers with hundreds of residents, activists, politicians and media attending. The meeting is tense, it is disruptive, some people are angry, and some people wanted a resolution. The meeting erupts with people yelling, it is explosive, and the council members threaten to walk out and start to do so. *Eva*, who describes herself as someone who is uncomfortable putting herself in this type of situation, stands on a chair in the middle of the meeting and calls for the protesters to settle down, to calm down so that the meeting could recommence. She claims in this situation she was anxious, her action was something that she did which was 'completely spontaneous', she is out of her comfort zone as a learner, and she is developing skill through trusting her judgement in this social space.

Bahar, frustrated with the subjugation of the women around her, speaks to the Imam about male violence in the Turkish Muslim community. She challenges him to offer teachings about women's freedom and equality. She says it is not good enough to only have a 15-minute lesson once a year about the role of women, and there needed to be more education about women's rights for the men who attended the mosque. This action is empowering for her, a Muslim woman whose identity ascribed to her body by wearing the veil symbolises oppression to the Western world. It is a powerful

action because *Bahar* is challenging the patriarchal systems in her community and, by doing this, is promoting change to the customary gender roles.

Beckett and Hager (2002) claim we need to take more seriously judgements made in the heat of practice; instinctive feelings such as gut reactions and intuition help learners to make judgements and assists them to develop expertise. *Bahar's* social action at her mosque is learning in action by making judgements within a context of conflict. *Eva* is learning about how to engage with the crowd and speak in public; she is learning about the emotional environment of protest, in the hot action of activism, she is learning how to make judgements amidst the environment of protest, and in doing this she develops further skill and expertise (Beckett 2008, Beckett & Hager 2000). Terry's 'hot action' holding a media conference was risky, yet he made judgements in action; these judgements in practice would lead him to develop considerable expertise in his future use of the media.

Power and the social learning model

Learning in a community of practice cannot be considered without understanding the contested nature of the term 'community'. Community is a nebulous term often meaning social closeness or a close-knit community in a geographic location. Wenger's (1998) view of community is often harmonious, yet human relationships are complex, especially in the workplace where specific roles are constructed, produced and reproduced through hierarchical subjectivities of being a worker, team-leader, coordinator or a manager. Conflict occurs in the communities, people are bullied, and their performance is monitored and managed. The epistemology of communities of practice rarely discusses why particular groups may have access to a community of practice or why they may feel excluded from it. An individual's exclusion from a community may make

them peripheral to the practice. In turn, they may feel marginalised from the practice they are engaging in and therefore learn very little (Hodges 1998). Similarly, workplaces and communities may perpetuate unethical behaviours and values (Hodkinson et al. 2004). Mentors and masters can pass on poor practice to newcomers and thwart their ability to learn, or their learning can be closed off by existing power relations (Foucault 1980). Bourdieu's (1977) 'habitus' is a useful guide here for understanding the enculturation of activists' practices in a social space.

Certain dispositions, certain practices are expected and passed down in communities. That is, certain approaches to a social issue are embedded in the practices of activism that occur through the creation of habitus. Lifelong activists such as *Kerry* are already a part of an existing habitus of Indigenous politics, tied to a history of dispossession and imperialism. The creation of a habitus of connecting 'country' to culture and educating Australian society about this reifies her practices within the habitus. In Indigenous politics there are certain discourses, actions, practices and processes that are expected and adopted through social action and are ready to be passed on. While these dispositions may vary from community to community or from social movement to social movement, there is nevertheless a certain habitus that is unique to this social field of practice (Bourdieu 1998). Habitus can maintain a practice or alternatively can constrain or inhibit it. *Kerry*'s initial awakening about her culture and Indigenous politics was empowering because she was told to learn about her history and this gave her motivation to become actively involved in Indigenous politics. She has learned a great deal from socialising with other Kooris and observing both good and poor practice:

> I think it's through socialising, sitting around and having the conversation with a mob of people, a mob of black fellas, and

going, 'Yeah, well we did that down there and we did this here' and 'Oh, those bastards over there, they never listen...'. Yeah. See and I don't ... I think it's just being passionate. And if you're passionate enough to share what you know, then you share it in a way that people feel it coming from your heart and coming from your soul, and they get to understand those things.

Felicity's learning, however, was constrained by the gendered practices of the Democratic Socialist Party which compelled her to reject specific aspects of the practices she observed. Terry's perceived concerns about the so-called radical practices of some activists were sufficient for him to distance himself from organised social movements and groups.

Circumstantial activists' identity and peripherality

Circumstantial activists do not always identify themselves as activists and they do not tend to identify as members of social movements, although they may have other identificatory expressions of why they are involved in protest. For example, some identify as a concerned parent or a concerned resident. As Terry Hicks states, 'I'm just an ordinary bloke ... I'm not an activist, [I'm] a concerned parent'. *Grace* finds the practices of so called radical activists disconcerting. She does not identify with the term activist and claims she feels quite uncomfortable with it, feeling there is 'a radical connotation to it'. *John* identifies as an environmental activist but not a 'greenie'. Whilst some circumstantial activists participate in social movements, it is piecemeal and not always ongoing. For some activists, the identificatory dispositions of the group are alienating to them and thwart their full immersion in the movement. They remain on the periphery of the practice and never fully become engaged in social movements. If learning is a process of becoming, then social movements need to be more inclusive to these newcomers to protest, especially if they want to engage new movement members and potentially create larger and stronger social movements.

Conclusion

This paper on the informal and social learning dimensions of activists has revealed the broad range of places and spaces where activists learn from one another through socialisation. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning in 'communities of practice' and Bourdieu's 'habitus', I uncover the knowledge and skill development that occurs as activists learn from one another. I argue activists learn an array of community development skills in the practices of protest. Lifelong activists tend to develop their knowledge and skills incrementally, over a long period of time, by being immersed in student politics and social movements. Differently, circumstantial activists are rapid learners, and they come to activism through a series of life circumstances; at times, a crisis has precipitated their involvement in activism. They need to learn rapidly in order to be effective as activists.

The paper has outlined some of the differences in learning and identity formation between the circumstantial and lifelong activists in this study. The importance of the research cannot be under-estimated, particularly as it gives insight into the skill and knowledge that activists need to practise effectively. This research has implications for campaign groups, community organisations, non-government organisations, social movements and adult education in general. The significance of activists' epistemology should be recognised in a world where social and political action will be needed more than ever before. This is especially so if we take seriously our custodian role for a world and a planet that will need to sustain future generations. It is hoped this paper contributes to recognising and understanding their important pedagogy.

Endnotes

1   Cam Walker is the Campaign Coordinator for Friends of the Earth, Australia. He has worked with FOE since 1989. He has been involved in all aspects of the organisation and campaigned on dozens of issues, from forests to toxic waste, Indigenous affairs, to sustainability and climate change.

2   Felicity Marlowe was involved in student politics in the 1990s at Melbourne University. She was elected National State Education Officer in 1997. Felicity was previously a member of the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP). She has a Bachelor of Education, and worked as a student rights officer at RMIT in Melbourne and as a research officer and youth worker for same sex attracted young people. She has been involved in social movements relating to East Timor, gay and lesbian rights, and the anti-corporate globalisation movement. Her more recent activism has focused on working towards fertility rights for lesbians.

3   'Reification' as used by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) relates to identity formation in a community of practice. They claim participants (in a community of practice) often negotiated a shared repertoire of practice with one another, as they immerse themselves in a social practice. Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it produces a lived experience of participation in specific communities.

4   Terry Hicks is the father of David Hicks who was arrested by the Taliban in 2001 and handed over to the United States military, then detained on suspected terrorism charges at Guantanamo Bay, a United States military prison in Cuba. Terry campaigned for more than five years for David's release.

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