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# **Situated Learning in the Local Food Movement**

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**Abstract:** The praxis of food choice is examined from a situated learning lens to explore the meaning assigned to the practice of eating locally and commitment to social change.

## **Introduction**

Scholarship has amply documented learning as an outcome of social movement participation, but theoretical applications that make sense of how learning occurs in social movements are lacking and may provide insight to the role learning plays in the trajectory of participation (Foley, 2001; Hall & Turray, 2006; Walter, 2007). This study addressed this theoretical gap in adult education by examining the process of learning for social change. The concept of praxis as a process of experiential learning with reflection and action oriented toward social change informed the phenomena of interest addressed by this study (Freire, 1994). Whereas the practice of eating locally grown food constituted praxis for resisting a globalized, corporate-controlled food system in favor of a local food system to advance social, ecological, economical, and environmental changes.

The purpose of this research was two-fold: a) to examine what factors explained how local farm participants learn to eat locally grown foods and b) to explore how participants related this learning to a social consciousness about the food system and related activism. The practice of eating locally grown food was contrasted to the participant's historical practice, consistent with the social norm, of eating food that is conventionally grown and distributed within the dominant food system. The local and dominant food systems each provide food as a product but they differ in the quality of food and their underlying economic and social values. Negotiating these differences entailed learning a new way of thinking about food and its relationship to human nutrition, farming, and ecological sustainability. Further, fresh food brought participants to the local food system and through involvement they became more conscious of the dominant food system, their role within the food system, and a social change orientation emerged as they came to believe that local food is something worth fighting for on personal and societal levels.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical perspectives were deployed to explore participation and learning in the local food movement- situated learning theory (Brown & Duguid, 1996; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and theory of collective action (Melucci, 1989, 1996). Situated learning was the primary theory that informed this study to provide insight to how persons were learning to eat local food through community supported agriculture (CSA) farm participation. Learning from the situated learning perspective is a progressive, continuous process that is inseparable from social

practice. Grounding her work in ethnographic studies of learning in everyday activity, Lave (1988) demonstrated how individuals interact with their social and physical environments to solve problems, produce meaning, and socially construct understanding of activities and issues. Situated learning theory assumes: (a) learning is a continuous process that occurs through participation in the social and physical environment; (b) the context where the learning takes place is integral to the learning; (c) a relationship exists in the mind of the participant and the situation in which knowledge is used; (d) knowledge is socially constructed; and (e) historical and cultural elements influence situated learning.

Social movement analyses of local food have explored CSA farms, a component of the decentralized local food movement, and shed light on farm organizational channels (Lang, 2010; Ostrom, 1997). However, local food movement and CSA studies have not explored participant affects to shed more light on social and cultural dimensions of learning in practice. Social theorists have also noted a gap in understanding participant affects (Flacks, 2004; Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Hall & Turray, 2006; Polletta, 2004). The theory of collective action takes up this challenge and suggests ‘collective identity’ as an analytical tool for understanding decentralized collective action (Melucci 1989, 1996). Collective identity has been described as a “learning process which leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor that we can call a ‘social movement’” (Melucci, 1996, p. 75). The theory of collective action presupposes collective identity and suggests a set of social practices that: a) involve simultaneously a number of individuals or groups; b) exhibit similar morphological characteristics in contiguity of time and space; c) imply a social field of relationships; and d) exhibit the capacity of the people involved to make sense of what they are doing (Melucci, 1996). While collective action may be useful for understanding decentralized social movements, collective identity fails to describe the learning process. This study is significant to social movement theory in that situated learning is considered as the theoretical lens for understanding collective identity and participant affects. In addition, this study is significant in that it explores the emancipatory potential of situated learning from a social constructivist perspective whereas the participant is the unit of analyses in the praxis of food choice.

### **Methodology**

This study has practical implications for the everyday practice of eating and informing collective action toward reshaping the food system. A pragmatic, mixed methods approach was responsive to the practical aims of this study. The specific research questions examined include: 1) What meaning do CSA members assign to the concept of local food and what it means to eat locally?; 2) How do shareholders learn about the principles of the local food movement?; and 3) What about CSA explains a change in consciousness in being a food consumer to a participant in the local food movement and related activism?

This study utilized qualitative semi-structured interviews followed by cross-sectional survey research. There were an estimated 9,880 CSA members in a mid-Atlantic state in 2012. From this population, a purposeful sample (n = 11) was recruited for the qualitative interviews and a probability sample was recruited for the cross-sectional survey. Open coding and constant comparative techniques were used to identify codes that emerged from key words and phrases that frequently appear in the text and compare codes while identifying common patterns across the qualitative data, respectively. These findings were used to answer research questions and to inform the quantitative questionnaire.

The qualitative phase and hypothesis generation led to the identification of questionnaires that examined similar constructs. The Ohio Survey of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Issues (Bean, 2008) was the fundamental building block for the questionnaire due to its conceptual alignment with the qualitative phase and its tested psychometric properties. However, however the questionnaire was also informed by adult education theory and social movement theory to explore associations between shareholder learning, participation, and social change orientations related to local food. Across the eight participating farms, there were N = 1,022 CSA members that received the online survey link and n = 121 participant responses to the online survey for a response rate of 11.8%. Descriptive analyses were conducted to describe respondent a) tenure as a local food eater; b) the practice of eating locally grown food including motivation, commitment, foraging practices, and lifestyle changes; c) social change orientations in the local food movement. In addition, correlational statistical analyses were used to examine associations between local food movement members and non-members with learning, participation, and social change orientations. This study assumed significance at the standard probability level of 0.05, a recommended power of .8 with an ample sample size to detect a medium effect size ( $r = .3$ ).

### **Qualitative Findings**

Six key themes emerged from the qualitative phase. The first three themes were food centric and focused motivations for eating local food, the practice of foraging for local food, and managing vegetable volume, a phenomenon associated with CSA membership. Participants envisioned a hybrid food system, valued the ethic of localness in the food system, and expressed varied degrees of social action in the local food movement.

Participants were *motivated to taste new food and eat fresh food*. To meet this every day need for human existence, participants *foraged for local food*. They searched for food, primarily by word-of mouth, used tools like technology, and built relationships oriented toward meeting their motivations for local food. Participants *managed vegetable volume* by planning menus in advance, changing the way that they cooked and ate, and storing food for the winter. These changes involved self-directed learning aided by internet search engines or communications with farmers.

Whereas the first three themes were food-centric, the last three themes were related to social change orientations in the local food movement. Participants reflected on the dominant, industrialized food system and offered structural and social critique. Participants *envisioned a hybrid food system* that strengthened locally grown in the food system to the point that there would be equilibrium between local-global food sources available for all. Despite the first three food-centric themes, participants were clear that ‘local’ in the local food movement was just as important as the food. An *ethic of localness* emerged as participants connected with a sense of place, human relationships, and felt they were strengthening community economic sustainability.

The final theme that emerged was *social action in the local food movement*. Participants varied in how they conceptualized a collective entity in the local food movement. In the absence of a clear centralized organization, some had difficulty conceptualizing a social movement, per se. In contrast, others embraced the amorphous, decentralized collective entity in the local food movement. Participants indicated that their practice of purchasing and consuming locally grown and produced food constituted social action.

### **Quantitative Findings**

Descriptive analyses demonstrated variation in participant response to whether they identified as a member of the local food movement. Nearly two-thirds of participants agreed that they were members. These responses were compared with participants who disagreed or were undecided about whether they were members. A profile of local food movement members emerged from the quantitative phase as there were distinct and significant associations ( $p < .05$ ) with being a member and motivations, learning activities, meaning associated with practice, social change orientations, and commitment to social action. Key findings from these correlational analyses are reported here.

Being a local food movement member was associated with *motivations* that included caring about the land, water and energy resources; eating with the season; keeping economic resources in the community; and connecting with others. In contrast, there was no association with being a member and food-centric motivations as all respondents were motivated to eat local fresh and tasty food. The social nature of *learning activities* emerged among the members, whereas all respondents interacted with print, electronic, and broadcast media to learn about food. In contrast, members talked with others, particularly farmers, to learn about the principles of the local food movement. Members also talked with others about the practice of eating locally and encouraged others to adopt this practice. Local food movement members *assigned meaning to the practice of eating locally*. Members agreed that eating locally meant action to sustain local farms, action to strengthen the local economy, and caring for land, water, and energy resources. These findings suggest that local food movement members assign the meaning of their practice to both individual and collective social goals.

From a *social change* perspective, members agreed that the local food movement is grassroots change led by farmers and consumers to change the food system. Members also perceived that the local food movement includes efforts that focus on fair access to healthy and

affordable foods. Being a member was associated with cultural aspects of social movements such as believing in the ability of a grassroots organization to create food systems change, relating the personal decision to eat locally to social action, and feeling like this action relates to collective action in the movement. The potential for social change can be informed, in part, by the *commitment of members to social action*. Being a member was significantly associated with agreement that the commitment to eating locally grown and produced food was stronger than it was one year ago.

### **Conclusions**

This study examined the praxis of food choice for reflection and social change, specifically exploring constructs of situated learning theory including participant motivations, activities, tools, and skills, values, and the context of the community and relationships. Common food centric motivations, activities, tools, and skills were observed. However, members of the local food movement differed from other participants with regard to the meaning they assigned to the practice of eating locally, social learning activities, relationships, and their commitment sustain the practice of eating locally grown food through personal food choice.

These findings suggest that participants may engage with the local food system to obtain a high quality of food but persons who engage with farm communications, even electronically, were more likely to make meaning of their learning and participation or practice. Members were not limited to relationships with one farmer, but instead foraged across local farms to obtain food. Rather than a co-op, or a community that shared local food resources, participants were not engaged with other members of the community for the purpose of strengthening the local food system. The lack of direct engagement with others demonstrating similar practices did not limit member recognition of and appreciation for others acting similarly. Members felt like their actions were part of a collective change in the food system. With regard to learning, informal discussions were distinct learning activities associated with concern and commitment to the principles of the local food movement. These activities, however, could not be disassociated from the frequency of practice, the individual social value of connecting to place, or the collective social values of caring for others and the environment and strengthening the economic sustainability of the community. Moreover, members uniquely demonstrated a commitment to sustaining their food choice as action for social change.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

This study informs two theoretical lenses and offers practical utility to strengthen the local food movement. Firstly, the study adds an empirical mixed methods study with a *social constructivist orientation in situated learning* that identifies the participant as the unit of analysis. This approach is consistent with Lave's (1988) situated learning lens but stands in contrast to considerable scholarship in adult education that emphasizes a social constructionist orientation

and communities of practice as the unit of analysis. Situated learning theory offered utility to explore the learning process and the emancipatory potential of this learning in the local food movement. Somewhat surprisingly, rural socialization during childhood, tenure as a CSA member, and previous activist orientations were not associated with identifying as a local food movement member. This suggests that participant history, defined in this manner, was not central to being a member of the local food movement. Secondly, the insight from the participant lens provides utility for the theory of collective action by describing how participants *make sense of learning and participation* and suggests that the situated learning framework is useful for exploring collective identity.

Finally, these findings offer to practical utility for decentralized social movements that manifest in everyday action for social and cultural change by underscoring the *continuous learning process in practice* and simultaneous *orientations toward individual and collective social values*. If the local food movement depends on more people obtaining locally grown food, then a message that emphasizes the ethic of localness may be useful for those not motivated by expected differences in food quality. Further, local farms and places to buy local food (e.g., farmer's markets) should be considered as informal educational settings and farmers as teachers with the goal of engaging consumers in participatory discussions for learning about the principles of the local food movement.

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