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Learning About/For Sustainability as Contested Space: Contemporary Characterizations of Adult Education in the Sustainable Agriculture Movement

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Abstract: *We illustrate how various forms of adult education, and the interests they serve, help create spaces for learning in the sustainable agriculture movement as a neglected dimension of adult education research. Implications for further exploring the learning dimensions of social movements are discussed.*

Purpose

The relationship between adult education and social movements is a lengthy one. Adult educators worldwide have been aligned with some of the foremost social movements of the 20th and 21st centuries, including movements that take on peace, labor, anti-racist, anti-globalization, environmental, *feminist, sexuality, and civil* rights issues. For many of us concerned with this thread of adult education, the mobilization activity associated with social movements is a key educational concern ranging from the in/non-formal or incidental in nature, to organized or intentional learning. According to Hall (2006), the tradition of adult and community education is a major contributor to social movement learning theory. Literature ranging from Finger (1989) and Foley (1999) to Freire (1970), Allman (1999), and Walters and Manicom (1996) has been influential in illustrating how learning and knowledge production are crucial to successfully facilitating social and cultural transformation. For Crowther (2006a) and Hall (2006), adult educators continue to deepen our understanding of learning within the context of social movements through such lenses as social learning (Kilgore, 1999; Wildemeersch & Jansen, 1997), cognitive praxis (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), political praxis (Holst, 2002), and postmodern politics (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997).

Adult educators who are associated with radical and popular education agendas have drawn upon these and other analytical lenses for the purpose of engendering social and cultural equity through exploration of, and involvement in mobilizing grassroots activism. In this view, social movement learning tends to be focused on the nature of social action, on the way knowledge is produced and controlled, and the ways in which social actors learn for or about social resistance and change. Not all social movements are informed by similar forces, however. Epistemological and political differences alter our focus when gauging the dynamics of social movements. Modernist and postmodernist frameworks, for example, provide us with varying characterizations of social movements and social movement learning. Much debate also exists among radical adult educators about the different types of social movements and how their differences impact our understanding of the exercise of power in learning (Holst, 2002).

While these ideas are gaining attention from both critical and mainstream viewpoints in adult and lifelong learning literature, much remains to be discovered about the ways in which social movements “open up spaces for learning” which in turn is essential for further understanding the role of adult education in social movements (Crowther, 2006a, p. 171). Clearly, these educational spaces are as diverse and distinct as the movements that they are

grown from. To understand how such spaces open, grow, shrink, and close, adult educators need to more closely explore how learning occurs in various locations and relationships.

A social movement that has been received with ambivalence within adult education literature focuses on resistance to the globalization of the food and agriculture system in North America. This movement has arisen concurrently with—and sometimes at odds with—production-focused ecological movements identified variously as alternative agriculture, organic agriculture, and ecological agriculture. Along a continuum of neo-liberal to radical, the thread that is closely associated with explicit resistance to the material and discursive effects of the globalized agro-food regime is sustainable agriculture, which includes a solid commitment to social justice (Allen, 2004). In this context, we illustrate how various forms of adult education, and the interests they serve, help create spaces for learning in the sustainable agriculture movement as a neglected dimension of adult education research. Drawing upon Eyerman and Jamison (1991), therefore, our paper illustrates how a configuration of grassroots activity from community-based organizations combined with programs within institutions of higher education have become a vital engine for developing and expanding the social justice and critical “habits” of sustainable agriculture through the knowledge they create (i.e., cognitive praxis). We do this by articulating three “cognitive spaces” for learning and knowledge production, which, collectively, create a community of learning that is instrumental to the movement’s identity and direction. We draw upon Holst (2002) to refer to how these spaces are ideologically positioned for democratic action (i.e., political praxis). Together, we emphasize how learning about/for sustainability is not uniform but a rapidly developing and often contested space in relation to where “knowledge comes from, who controls it, who benefits from it and what it means for social action” (Crowther, 2006b, p. 134).

Sustainable Agriculture Movement: A North American Snapshot

Rooted in earlier populist and environmental movements, the North American sustainable agriculture movement has paired with social critics during last half of the 20th century as it grappled with the ascendancy of Green Revolution, which was fueled by reductionist *approaches to agriculture* and food production based on neoclassical economics and scientific rationality (Lyson, 2004). Critics argue that post-1950 Green Revolution practices such as high external chemical inputs to fertilize and control weeds and pests, biotechnology, and vertical integration of firms and markets are associated with wide-scale resource depletion and environmental contamination, the marginalization of farming families and rural communities, farmer/farm worker exploitation, and community food insecurity (Allen, 2004). While the boundaries of the sustainable agriculture movement are diffuse across time and space, there is an advocacy contingent that radically opposes the rapid industrialization, corporate governance, and adverse social and ecological consequences of the current *globalized food and agriculture regime*. The focus of the movement has consistently extended to the critique of policies on food and farming systems domestically and their impacts worldwide. While the movement is not uniform, the contingent generally agrees that inequitable distribution of power ensuing from the dominant paradigm is a pervasive theme to coordinate organizing and political advocacy (Hinrichs, 2007).

The sustainable agriculture movement is analogous with the New Social Movements (NMS) that have emerged since the rise of the New Left in Western Europe and the United States that operate to establish opportunities for democratic action through civil society as compared to the emphasis on centralized, governmental organization manifested by older

working-class movements (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Wainwright, 1994). In this view, the interface between adult education and the sustainable agriculture movement can be seen in a variety of significant ways ranging from farming to consumer issues through such lens as environmentalism, food security, labor, feminism, and corporate accountability at the local and institutional levels. This interface is thus rife with opportunity for learning about sustainability and how to achieve it.

A central educational characteristic of this social movement is the creation of learning opportunities for the exchange of new and experiential knowledge for and about sustainable agriculture. For Hassanein (1999) and others (Lockeretz & Anderson, 1993), this movement has not only provided the groundwork for social advocacy and resistance to the industrialization model from the grassroots activity of farmers, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and critical academics, but it has helped to create alternative forms of knowledge and networks that depend on alternative knowledge; and finally, standards of practice that operate outside of formal systems of research and education. Our interest is with the ways in which these processes—through adult and community education practice—have helped to create learning spaces. We limit the remainder of this discussion, however, to only three “spaces” of learning and knowledge production that illustrate how entities and collaborations of adult education—formal and informal—help develop agro-food sustainability as a counter-hegemonic possibility to the dominant, globalized food system.

Defining Sustainability

The most familiar “space” for learning is associated with the way the sustainable agriculture participants have stimulated the search for the meaning of sustainability. That is, the movement generates new constructs of and arguments for sustainability and sustainable agricultural development through the organized efforts of nongovernmental organizations, farmer-driven networks, public interest group advocacy, and scholarship within higher education (Pretty, 2005). While many definitions of sustainable agriculture exist, many refer to Lyson’s (2004) civic agriculture framework to identify a model of agriculture that is premised on the production, distribution, and consumption of local and regional food that is economically, ecologically, and socially viable. Meanings of agricultural sustainability, however, have fractured and destabilized in recent years to take on new and often co-opted meanings emerging from such antagonistic interests as *corporate organics* to “green” *biotechnology*. *It is with this rupture that new forms of learning about sustainability are starting to emerge, which is largely fueled by the persistent advocacy of grassroots practitioners and scholars promoting the counter meanings of localism and community foodsheds* (Allen, 2004). This is significant in that while this space is filled by “dynamic interactions between groups and organizations” its collective identity is the creation of a powerful discourse of sustainability that operates to disturb and destabilize the status quo (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 55).

Standards of Practice

The second “space” contributes to the creation of new standards of practice for sustainable outcomes that work to challenge the dominant, rationalized and technocratic system of education and research from within and outside formal institutions using alternative technologies and economic models (Ikerd, 2008). According to Hassanein (2003), such knowledge is created as both the means and ends for pragmatic learning for food system transformation. Recent collaborations between the leftist oriented nongovernmental sector and

more conservatively positioned institutions of higher education have started to dispute conventional science and educational agendas through what Kloppenburg (1991, p. 519) describes as a form of “environmental and agrarian activism.” For Hassanein (1999) and Poincelot, Francis, and Bird (2006), however, there exists a considerable struggle to obtain legitimacy from outside these alliances, which limits the dissemination of innovative production and marketing practices.

Democratization of Knowledge

Lastly, and perhaps most central to adult educators, is the way in which movement activity attempts to democratize knowledge at local and institutional levels by emphasizing the value of stakeholder participation, voice, and social learning (Chambers, 1997; Hassanein, 1999; Kloppenburg, 1991; Röling & Wagemakers, 1998). Often driven by educator advocacy and implementation, either programmatically or by funding mandates, new emphasis on multidisciplinary stakeholder participation and social learning approaches show promise for the generation and exchange of knowledge useful to sustainable agriculturalists and professional educators who work with them (Poincelot, Francis, & Bird, 2006). One significant outcome of this activity is the creation of new curriculum and majors, non-formal certification programs, professional organizations, and funding programs; however, these opportunities are still largely marginalized by traditional voices within the land-grant university and Extension system (Butler & Flora, 2006).

At Iowa State University, a set of nested university centers and programs has created both momentum and “space” for the production and circulation of sustainable agricultural knowledge as it is described here. Foremost, there is the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, which has been a seedbed of contention between traditionalist and social movement-informed critics (see Hinrichs, Gillespie, & Feenstra, 2004). The University has permitted the following additions, which enlarged the opportunities greatly, and attracted students and faculty to the institution: the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture, the Wallace Chair for Sustainable Agriculture, and a cooperative farmer-led on-farm research effort modeled after the national Sustainable Agriculture Education Program in conjunction with a long-standing farmer member organization, the Practical Farmers of Iowa. At this date, students are able to find places to have the conversations that matter about social change and social movements, including supporting a Certificate in Social Change. Learning also occurs through faculty-driven activism in addressing distress and inequity in Iowa related to a rapid increase in seasonal and permanent residents recently arrived from Mexico. While none of these gains are easily maintained, they are only possible through the plentiful opportunities for adult education with faculty, staff, students, community partners, and others around key social change issues.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Hall (2006) argues that while social movements have been analyzed in sociological terms, there has been less attention given to social movement learning and education. Adult educators, however, are firmly rooted to the history of learning in social movements. Our review contributes to this history by providing insight into how various forms of adult education create spaces of learning in the sustainable agriculture movement. Although these spaces are politically and cognitively sensitive, they are promising spaces. The sustainable agriculture movement is a vast stretch concerned with social change, developing in the North and the South in different

ways; and undeniably sports players and groups that fall outside boundaries of social justice that most adult educators deem requisite. We are certain, therefore, that this brief illustration of knowledge production and learning is imperative to further understand how social movements are much more than sites of activism and social resistance; instead, they are “powerful ‘schools’ of learning that can reach, and communicate with, far more people than are normally in adult learning provision” (Crowther, 2006b, p. 146).

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