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THEORIZING EMBODIED, COLLECTIVE, AND SOCIETAL LEARNING THROUGH PREFIGURATIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

This paper theorizes adult learning as a multi-leveled, emergent process of interactions between individuals, groups, and societal systems. We theorize from the context of prefigurative social movements that are enacting values of direct democracy, solidarity economics, and equity. We analyze Occupy encampments as sites in which individuals, movement groups, and society learn as complex adaptive systems. The theorizing of these learning processes has implications for adult education theory, research, and practice.

Keywords: Social movement learning, systems thinking, adult learning theory, prefigurative movements

Theorizing of social movement learning has developed significantly in recent years (Walker & Butterwick, 2021). This paper builds particularly on research on embodied aspects of protest participation (Drew, 201; Firth, 2016) and the frameworks of Scandrett et al. (2010) and Kluttz and Walters (2018) that seek to understand multi-leveled and interactive learning. Kluttz and Walters found learning is happening amongst individuals and organizations at the micro, meso, and macro levels of climate justice movements as interactive processes within and between these nested levels. They conclude by recognizing the need to better understand the relationship between levels of learning. In this paper, we further that understanding by exploring how individuals, social movement groups, and society interact in emergent ways that affect learning at each level, particularly in the context of prefigurative movement groups.

We begin by defining learning drawing on the theoretical framework of complexity thinking. We use the case of Occupy encampments to theorize from literature and practice about learning occurring in embodied and emergent ways through the interactions of individual participants, the Occupy encampments themselves, and societal-level processes. We conclude with implications for theory, research, and practice.

Learning as an Emergent Process

Lange's (2018) synthesis of key ideas from quantum physics, living systems theory, Indigenous philosophies, and Eastern spirituality describes matter as a bound form of energy. "In this way then, the existence of matter and energy cannot be separated, leading to a *performative* view, of matter performing itself into being" (p. 286, italics in original). This ontological perspective is key to conceptualizing learning as a similarly emergent process between actors in nested levels of complex systems. These levels range from the cellular/bodily system, up through individual, collective, societal, and planetary levels (Davis et al., 2015). Learning is the process by which the living system "performs itself into being" via interactions with other parts of the complex system.

> Learning is thus cast as continuous invention and exploration, produced through the relations among consciousness, identity, action and interaction, objects and structural dynamics of complex systems. New possibilities for action are constantly emerging among the interactions of complex systems, and cognition occurs in the possibility for unpredictable shared action (Fenwick, 2003, p. 131).

This paper describes learning at three levels through these interactive processes with actors at other levels to broaden theorizing and connect it to bodily and social processes.

While it is difficult to identify where an emergent process starts, we begin with neoliberal policies that led to suffering which prompted individuals to action and shaped prefigurative organizing approaches. We explore how learning amongst and within Occupy encampments was shaped by this larger context and individuals participating, followed by learning shaped at the individual and societal levels.

Context for the Development of the Occupy Movement

Legacies of colonialism and decades of neoliberal policies led to the rise of a new kind of social movement. These *prefigurative* movements "…embody their ultimate goals and their vision of a future society through their ongoing social practices, social relations, decision-making philosophy and culture" (Monticelli, 2018, p. 509). This approach developed out of necessity as neoliberal governments no longer responded to the needs of their citizens, leading grassroots groups to believe that self-organization and prefiguration were "the only way to transform society as it develops new relationships and practices that embody the world that is desired" (Sitrin, 2016, p. 147). Occupy encampments that started in New York City and spread to 1500 cities globally provide one example of prefigurative groups (Van Gelder, 2011).

Many individuals were motivated to join the encampments because they were suffering from the effects of neoliberal policies. Full-time Occupiers were frequently underemployed or unemployed due to austerity policies (Milkman et al., 2012; Petrick, 2017). La Botz et al. (2012) describe that when the housing bubble burst in 2008 and the Great Recession ensued,

> ... widespread misery, the willingness of the political elite to provide trillions to bail out the financier-lenders, while doing nothing whatever for the great mass of household-borrowers, brought deep disillusionment and an instant discrediting of the system, along with a profound anger… It was this sudden far-reaching, but hitherto largely unexpressed alienation on the part of broad sections of the working class from a political-economic system that was offering them only worsening economic conditions and deepening humiliation that opened the way for Occupy. (p. 4)

This gutting of the social safety net and austerity policies led social movement groups to develop new ways of organizing and created the conditions that compelled thousands of people to join encampments, thus leading to new forms of learning.

Learning within Occupy Encampments

In contrast to dominant neoliberal dogma, Occupiers prefigured the values of direct democracy, solidarity economy, and equity.[1] Participants learned collectively through enactment, manifesting new collective identities and movement infrastructure.

[1] We agree with critique of Occupy's failure to recognize indigenous land rights and the exclusionary nature of some encampments and processes (Amirault, 2014). This criticism must be acknowledged,

Occupiers participated in direct democracy, making decisions with a consensus process following open deliberation. Communication was horizontal, using general assemblies and the "people's microphone," learned in response to city loudspeaker restrictions (Szolucha, 2013). Occupiers set up their encampments so that physical needs were met through communal kitchens, laundry, and distribution of donated goods (Juris, 2012). This required adapting to changing physical conditions, governmental restrictions, and changing populations within the encampments. Discourse focused on the 1%/99% divide, which highlighted how the wealthiest have rigged the financial, economic, and political systems to their benefit. This countered the individual-focused "blame the victim" discourse of neoliberalism, aiding people's understanding of the causes of their oppression (Hall, 2012).

Learning in the encampments was affected by the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of participating individuals. For example, some brought extensive organizing experience, knowledge of how to cook for large groups, medical knowledge and skills, and experience with civil disobedience (Juris, 2012). Inclusivity within encampments can be traced in part to the attitudes of individuals participating there, as well as physical constraints of a given location (Amirault, 2014).

The catalyzing context of neoliberal policies on movement formation also influenced specific practices in terms of limitations placed on actions of the encampments and police repression. Policies in cities varied, but the policies were part of a system designed to maintain the power of those currently in power, through criminalizing and repressing participation and depicting participants negatively in media. Many of the US encampments were ended by eviction.

In terms of learning, many encampment participants felt increased agency, enabling Occupiers to see themselves as part of a larger movement fighting an intentionally designed, oppressive system—forging new collective identities for participants and supporters (van Gelder, 2011; Hall, 2012; Permut, 2016).

Different encampments learned from each other's experiences. The movement-building learning and legacies of infrastructure are summarized by a long-time activist:

> Occupy Wall Street created a bunch of movement infrastructure in the form of new associations, new organizations, new models for thinking about social movements, new communications strategies, new movement spaces, and in that way, it left more than was there before it started. And the more that it left there has been useful to subsequent movements (Jesse Myerson, quoted in Stewart, 2019, p. 15).

Occupy arose from the context of neoliberal policies and learning within encampments was shaped by participants' knowledge, experience, and commitment to prefiguring the values and processes they hoped to see reflected in the broader world. Movement knowledge was developed through the encampments and shared globally with other movement groups.

Learning at the Individual Level

Through the physical occupation of spaces and enactment of counter-hegemonic social systems, Occupy participants learned about the values and systems that undergird contemporary alienation and simultaneously learned alternatives. The physicality of the occupation was an integral part of individual learning in which participants put their bodies in public space, vulnerable to weather and human actions (e.g., police repression). Their willingness to take these risks was catalyzed by the aforementioned effects of neoliberalism.

while simultaneously acknowledging ways in which the movement did model more equitable processes.

The encampments countered oppressive systems in ways that had physical and emotional benefits. The camps provided for basic physical needs and reduced many participants' feelings of alienation by creating a sense of solidarity. Additionally, the encampments cultivated a sense of agency and identity with the movement. "Participants often expressed a sense of efficacy to influence the United States through their participation in the Occupy movement" (Permut, 2016, p. 185).

Enactment enabled participants' learning of skills, sense of membership, and agency. This experience reduced alienation and empowered participation in activism.

Learning at the Level of Society

Conceptualizing learning at the societal level means that the fundamental assumptions of hegemonic civilization are being challenged and changed. There are three interrelated, on-going shifts that Occupy contributed to: enacting new ways of democratic decision-making, promoting economic structures founded on values of the common good and equity, and changing societal discourse (Amenta & Polletta, 2019; Brissette, 2016).

Decision-making in Occupy encampments strengthened shifts toward less hierarchical processes, reflecting an understanding that current structures such as nation-states and electoral democratic processes are inequitable and unable to respond well to global crises (Brissette, 2016; Hax & Tsitsos, 2016; Szolucha, 2013). "It is not a protest, but a prototype for a new way of living…[Occupiers] are working to upgrade that binary, winner-takes-all, 13th century political operating system" (Rushkoff, 2011, n.p.).

Occupy also modeled equitable distribution of resources within encampments. Learning from these practices informed several progressive political campaigns and movements (La Botz et al., 2012) as well as strengthened cooperative and worker-owned enterprise structures (Hax & Tsitsos, 2016).

> Occupy was the birthplace of some left-wing ideas that have gained mainstream traction: Its "*99 percent*" mantra, which decried the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few at the expense of the many, has endured. It animated the rise of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and the resurgence of the Democratic Socialists of America, and it is in ways responsible for some of the most prominent ideas in the Democratic Party right now: free college, a $15 minimum wage, and combating climate change (Stewart, 2019, italics in original).

The clearest legacy of Occupy is its discursive effect in the US to highlight wealth inequality through the 1%/99% slogans. This phrasing is now a common part of public discourse and enables people to see how neoliberal policies continue to concentrate wealth in few hands (Amirault, 2014; Milkman et al., 2012).

> ...[I]n a matter of months, the Occupy movement had changed the national conversation from the Tea Party's rightwing agenda of tax-cuts and budget cuts to discussions of the inordinate salaries and bonuses of the bankers and CEOs, the financial contributions of the wealthy to the politicians, and above all, the economic crisis facing tens of millions of Americans (La Botz et al., 2012, p. 1).

In summary, understanding the processes of prefigurative social movements as emergent shows how learning at each level is shaped by and shapes the others. There are multiple ways the dominant values of neoliberalism have impacted individuals and organizing approaches. This led many to become involved with Occupy encampments, through which they experienced different values being enacted. Participants learned as individuals within the encampments in ways that developed aspects of physical health, a sense of solidarity, and new identities. Occupy groups learned from each other horizontally around the globe

and their knowledge has been utilized in subsequent movements. Finally, the encampments have contributed to some societal-level shifts that can be conceptualized as learning, such as models of direct decision-making, solidarity economics, and diffusion of new collective stories.

Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

To adapt and thrive in today's uncertain times, the task facing humans is to approach our world from a systems perspective (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2018). Developing a systems-based theory of learning can guide research and practice in adult education.

Current theory does not adequately describe a synthesized understanding of mind, body, and spirit, nor larger societal level impacts on individuals and groups. Further theorizing can deepen our understanding of the multiple, interactive ways communal enactment of values impacts individual's bodies, sense of self, and sense of membership (Drew, 2014; Firth, 2016). At the group level, complexity theory suggests that the collective dynamics of movements emerge from shared patterns of thought and behavior which respond to societal structures and discourses. Systems-based theories could enable stronger theorizing of learning in other collective contexts such as higher education. Adult educators can also contribute to understanding processes of social change by theorizing how larger societal dynamics enable and constrain learning across levels.

Adult education research could benefit from integrative approaches such as prefigurative action research, which "emphasizes the relationship between action research and the creation of alternatives to the existing social order" (Kagan & Burton, 2000, p.1). Our review of research on Occupy suggests a need for greater understanding of the embodied aspects of learning, especially in terms of internalization of larger societal narratives, impacts of trauma, and the effects of enacting collective values. Our effort to describe interactions between levels offers a map for further research while demonstrating the messiness and magnitude of such research. Still, understanding these dynamics will help adult educators in conceptualizing how learning happens in other settings, especially others that have emancipatory potential. Davis et al. (2012) offer promising models for such research.

There is a role for adult educators in facilitating learning at all three levels (Holst, 2018), with particular promise in teaching systems thinking and exploring prefigurative educational spaces. The field of adult education has much to gain by developing our understanding of learning as an emergent process in ways that can help lead to wider social change.

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