Education and learning to support a just transition in Central Appalachia

Colleen Unroe
The Pennsylvania State University

Recommended Citation

EDUCATION AND LEARNING TO SUPPORT A JUST TRANSITION IN CENTRAL APPALACHIA

Colleen Unroe

Pennsylvania State University (USA)

ABSTRACT

This case study explores the learning and education of a community organization involved with multiple Just Transition initiatives in Eastern Kentucky where the economies were formerly dominated by the coal industry. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted of leaders within the organization in addition to exploring the educational materials. Although non-formal learning plays an important part, informal learning, activist exchanges, and communities of practice play a more fundamental role in the activist learning.

Keywords: Just Transition, social movement learning, informal learning, communities of practice, non-formal learning, Appalachia

INTRODUCTION

From September 20th to 27th, 2019, over 7.6 million people participated in Global Climate Strikes in 185 countries calling for an immediate phase-out of fossil fuels; this was the largest set of actions in the climate justice movement (350.org, n.d.). There is increasing recognition that communities formerly dependent on fossil fuels need support in transitioning away from fossil fuel dependency (Pollin & Callaci, 2019). Grassroots organizations are describing this work as Just Transition, "a strategy for reconciling the needs of workers with the imperative of environmental reform" (Abraham, 2017). Since the Central Appalachian region is becoming a post-industrial region, developing an economy past coal is more important than ever. Furthermore, the legacy of coal mining and resultant working-class masculinity shape the process of transformation of the economy. Adult education for social justice and environmentally sustainable development is a process of learning skills or competencies for social change (Brookfield & Holst, 2010), and therefore, is essential to support this transition. Scholars have yet to explore this kind of learning happening within organizations working for Just Transition in Central Appalachia. Since the transitioning of the Appalachian economy is multi-faceted, examining different educational strategies taken by a community organization and the learning that occurs as a result, is an important contribution to the academic literature of the field of Appalachian Studies and Adult Education.

Statement of the Problem

Changes in economic, environmental, and health conditions in the coal-producing region of Central Appalachia, which includes Eastern Kentucky, East Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and Southern West Virginia, have produced the need for education for a Just Transition. This region has long been associated with extreme poverty and unequal distribution of land where outside corporate interests colonized the region through resource exploitation (Caudill, 2001; Montrie, 2003). Increased mechanization of the coal industry reduced employment, increased productivity, and caused greater environmental damage during the last two decades (Carley, Evans, & Konisky, 2018). The coal industry negatively affects residents' health, miners' working conditions, and environment quality; these effects are increasing

(Ahern et al., 2011; Aken et al., 2009; Bell, 2013; Griffith, Norton, Alexander, Pollard, & LeDuc, 2012; Lindberg et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the local communities' strong identification with coal mining also continues (Bell & York, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical concepts frame my research study. First, I use Foley's (1999) concept of informal learning. Additionally, I use non-formal learning and activist exchanges explored in the literature on social movement learning. Third, since I consider the community organization to be a community of practice, I use situated learning as conceptualized by Lave and Wenger (1991). This helps me understand the informal and non-formal learning happening in Just Transition efforts promoted by a local community organization working on related initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

As a former community organizer in the region, I wanted to further understand the educational practices and learning related to Just Transition. This case study needed to be contextualized and embedded within a specific case because the coal industry's hegemony has dominated the region culturally and economically for over a century. Some of the defining characteristics of a case study included examining a "bounded social phenomenon," generating a "thick" description of the phenomenon and using multiple approaches to triangulate the conclusions (Snow & Trom, 2002, p. 147; Yin, 2003). Integrating multiple sources of data collection, including content analysis of social movement educational literature and curriculum, as well as qualitative interviews, was necessary to thoroughly address the research questions. Utilizing multiple sources of data is an important aspect of case study research (Snow & Trom, 2002). Additionally, participant observations of non-formal educational workshops and activities related to Just Transition also occurred.

The case study organization is a multi-issue, grassroots organization that has worked on environmental, economic, and social justice issues. This organization emphasizes leadership development of community leaders and has been at the forefront of community organizing in the region.

Research Questions

In communities with economies formally dominated by the coal industry, how does an organization promoting multiple Just Transition initiatives use education and learning to support engagement in this work? The sub-question I explore in this paper is as follows:

> How do informal and non-formal learning opportunities created by an organization attempt to promote a Just Transition in the region?

RESULTS

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted of members who were actively involved for over a year with at least one of the organization's Just Transition initiatives. These included people who primarily lived in the coal-producing parts of Eastern Kentucky. Ages ranged from people in their twenties to people in their seventies. Many of the interviewees either previously worked in the coal industry or had family members who did. Codes and themes were identified inductively through analysing the interviews.

Because coal mining has played such an important role within the region, communicating about the current reality and about the different possibilities has been challenging. A lot of people in the region think that coal is the only option; therefore, demonstrating that something else is possible is really important. Tiffany Kennedy-Pyette reflected, "I think a lot of people can't imagine another way yet because it's not something they've ever seen…The narrative that we've been coal country forever, and we will be coal country forever is going to be a hard one to break." Although non-formal learning plays an important role in shaping the understanding of organizational leaders about the importance of a just transition, the informal learning as well as the relationship building that takes place through their campaigns is even more instrumental in solidifying these members' commitment to environmental struggles.

Non-formal learning

Within social movements, various non-formal educational interventions occur in communities. Non-formal learning is sponsored by organizations but is typically short-term and voluntary (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Non-formal social movement education include workshops, teach-ins, lecture tours, and seminars (Dykstra & Law, 1994). The organization describes its non-formal education as leadership development, and it occurs at multiple levels within the group. County chapter-level workshops occur in addition to statewide trainings, like the annual meeting that is a weekend set of trainings occurs annually. The organization also has leadership cohorts that occur for six to nine months at a time. There is a mix of face-to-face trainings as well as webinars. The focus of the trainings varies from skills (i.e. talking to the media, telling your story, how to lobby) to political analysis. The approach of the training is rooted in popular education. The organization also supports its leaders to participate in other organizational trainings. Of the leaders who were interviewed, they cited Wellstone Action, Marshall Ganz through Power Shift, and the Alliance for Appalachia as being important trainings.

The non-formal training members participated in enabled them to have the skills to be effective activists and engage with political figures. "In Washington DC, I went in front of the Congressmen and Senators and argued our case against mountaintop removal and the climate change. It's been somewhat intimidating, some of the situations I got into, but thanks to the good training that I've had through the organization… I feel like I became a better public speaker" Carl Shoupe, a former coal miner, reflected. Another activist Stanley Sturgill, a retired mine inspector, reflected about sit-ins in elected officials' offices:

> Especially in [U.S. Representative] Hal Roger's office, we were instructed through [the organization], through classes of what we needed to do if we were arrested; we did that and that's how it got resolved eventually. In the Governor's office, we met prior to going to the Governor's office the night before and had a big meeting about it, what we wanted to present to the Governor. We had our requests on cards of what we were trying to do, trying to save our water, trying to save our mountains."

The non-formal trainings prior to engaging in action enabled the activists to be more confident.

The non-formal trainings also helped organizational leaders to learn communication skills and achieve what Freire (1970) describes conscientization, which helps people understand power dynamics contributing to oppression within the region. Teri Blanton reflected on how she learned to speak about the work differently:

> That's been years of training. The way you would frame the way you would talk about things would not alienate people on the one side and the other side. When you talk about coalfields and that's allowing

coal to be the dominate frame when we should be talking about healthy communities and clean water and stuff like that. Before, in like mountain communities as opposed to coalfields. You know, changing your words helps people see things in a different way.

People also reference popular education activities, like power mapping and the Privilege Walk, as helping them understand structural inequality.

Informal Learning

The concept of informal learning helps to explain the learning that occurs through engagement with social action. It is learning that is integrated into the work people are doing for social change or "learning in the struggle" (Foley, 1999, p. 39). Informal learning through experiences with the organization, including lobbying, engaging in campaigns, meeting with politicians, enables people to gain skills, build their political analysis, develop strategy, and take action to make change. Kevin Short described his experience as follows, "With [the organization], it was mainly just learning through experience."

Teri reflected on her experience confronting state environmental regulators after the Martin County Coal slurry disaster that resulted in 306 million gallons of coal slurry from an impoundment break through an abandoned underground mine:

> We went to Frankfort and we was slamming them. It's like, 'You let this happen!' because they did let it happen. They knew it was a disaster. They knew it was a danger to the communities below them. It's like one of my first times I'm slamming them in their own house, but I was thinking about it as being their own house at that point. Later on I learned it's not their house. It's my house; it's our house. But I think if I hadn't had a podium in front of me, I'd probably fell because that's how shaky I was.

Through this experience, she gained a skill and confronted power. She also started to change her perspective of the state and how she viewed elected officials.

Numerous leaders shared the importance of highlighting success stories, particularly related to Just Transition. One example that has been referenced frequently are the solar panels on the Kentucky Coal Mining Museum in Benham. Carl shared his experience and some of what he learned by being involved:

> We had this idea from the start to get the solar panels…It was difficult; the coal companies own all of this land here outside of the city limits. They wouldn't allow us to put these solar panels, ground mounts or anything on their property…so we said, 'Daggone, if we can't put it on their property, we'll just put it on the top of the coal museum.' We got about 20 plus [solar] panels up on top of the Benham coal museum.

People involved with this community energy project learned to adapt to the obstacles created by the coal industry and gain tactile knowledge about renewable energy.

Engaging with the rural electric cooperatives has been an important Just Transition initiative where people have pushed for reforms and also ran activists to join the board. "I ran for the utility board in Clay and other counties in RECC [Rural Electric Cooperative Corporation]. It's another way to keep the conversation going about energy and where it comes from and alternatives," Randy Wilson reflected. Through doing outreach around his campaign, he learned that people were more concerned about their electric bills than saving the coal industry or protecting the environment.

Another outcome of being involved is that people become more empowered. Teri reflected on this related to citizen lobbying:

> Lobbying is a great way of educating people about the issue. Once they know the issues that they're talking about, and they go talk to people that's supposed to be elected to represent them and then they walk out of there feeling self-confident because they knew more than the people that was there supposed to be representing them.

As a result, people can be more engaging with the organization and social movement activities.

Cross-community Exchanges

Cross-community exchanges allow for relationship building which is important because it enables people to learn about other people's stories, broaden their worldview, and expose them to different approaches to organizing. Much like in transnational organizing where local movement actors affirm "politically marginalized identities and to establish personal and strategic bonds of solidarity with others" through engagement with outside activists (Alvarez, 2000, p. 31), domestic activist exchanges creates solidarity. "Anytime you get together, and you coalesce around a theme and you share your stories. It's not just the skills; it's just being in a community and becoming a part of it. You start sharing yourself…and they're very encouraging and so, you know just get involved" Randy reflected.

Teri reflected on engaging with organizational members in Western Kentucky and how after learning about their experiences with CAFOs [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation] resulted in investing in their fights as well:

> This woman said something about, 'I check my baby's bed before it [sic] goes to bed, and it would be clean and then I wake up the next morning, and there's rat feces all over it.' And it's like, so how can you not want to work on that issue 'cause that woman just said there are rats crawling on her baby while it's [sic] sleeping.

Understanding other people's struggles created solidarity between different oppressed groups and the desire to support others. Teri went on to reflect by saying "and then once we started seeing outside of just your issue and then seeing how your issue affects this community over here. Even though you got yours fixed, you're going to help them over there."

Scott Shoupe, a former coal miner, reflected on an exchange he did with another region with an economy dominated by the coal industry:

> The couple small towns down in Wyoming that we went to were…like just mirror images of here. I mean to the point of they were built by coal and that's all that's ever been there and now they're just kind of stuck with their heads in the sand too on what we do next. You know, what is Just Transition? How do we set a Just Transition?

Carl also reflected the commonality with their struggles. "When you go out into these different communities and start talking about specific issues, you find out it's just a different location and different people, but really it's the same problems…It's the same basically all over, wherever you go." These shared experiences helped deepen leaders' understanding of oppression and solidarity to support other communities.

Community of Practice

Within a community of practice, newcomers learn from more experienced people through the process of engaging in activities and slowly become more versed in what it means to be a part of that particular community (Fox, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This organization could be considered a community of practice that enables new people to step into more involved roles. "I think [this organization] is a really special organization in that it does allow for

people to step into leadership and in those like unique ways, and lets people feel supported and doing new things," Tiffany shared. When Tiffany was reflecting on how she learned to do door-to-door canvasing related to the election, she said, "We just kinda went and did it, which is kind of like a thing. You just go and do things. But I watched the first few times, and then I would speak for part of it, kind of work my way in." Kevin shared another example of how he learned through a community of practice. "They participated in rallies, the teacher pension issue, and I got to see people firsthand speak on their values and in the meetings that we have monthly, see people speak from their heart." People also talked about specific people who were more experienced that helped them grow. "And I had Jerry as a teacher; you know so great," Teri shared. She went on to talk about how he helped her learn how to effectively speak to news reporters to get one's message across. By being a part of a community of practice, members learn from more experienced people involved.

The organization is also working to more deliberately create a community of practice through the creation of different leadership cohorts. The cohort consists of members from all over the state that meets face-to-face and virtually multiple times over nine months. Tiffany shared how the cohort helped her learn, "If I've had a question about something that I remembered somebody at the cohort had experience with, I'd message them and be like, 'Hey, could you tell me more about X, Y, Z thing?" This demonstrates that the organization is trying to deliberately create communities to support leadership development within the group.

CONCLUSIONS

Through non-formal and informal learning, organizational leaders deepened their political understanding, gained organizing skills, created solidarity, and took action. Relationship building through activist exchanges and communities of practice played an important role in their learning. This research is significant to the field of adult education because the identification of educational practices that result in effective action could serve as a model to improve education for other community organizations in Appalachia and other fossil-fuel dependent economies. For example, people could learn greater knowledge of issues, skills, and practices of organization and collective action, and critical consciousness (Niesz, Korora, Walkuski, & Foot, 2018). This analysis identifies ways that a community organization bolsters non-formal and informal learning through the creation of reflective practice and communities of practice. Furthermore, with the recent growth of the global climate justice movement and deindustrialization occurring across the globe, identifying effective educational practices can improve learning that enables people to better support policy reform and job creation needed to enable communities to shift away from fossil fuels.

REFERENCES

350.org (n.d.). 7.6 Million people demand action after week of climate strikes. https://350.org/7-million-people-demand-action-after-week-of-climate-strikes/

Abraham, J. (2017). Just transitions for the miners: Labor environmentalism in the Ruhr and Appalachian coalfields. New Political Science, 39(2), 218–240. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2017.1301313

Ahern, M. M., Hendryx, M., Conley, J., Fedorko, E., Ducatman, A., & Zullig, K. J. (2011). The association between mountaintop mining and birth defects among live births in central Appalachia, 1996-2003. Environmental Research, 111(6), 838–846. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2011.05.019

Aken, B. Van, Ph, D., Quaranta, J. D., Mack, B., Yu, H. L., Ducatman, A. M., & Ziemkiewicz, P. F. (2009). Environmental Contaminants in Coal Slurry Intended for Underground Injection in the State of West Virginia. Journal of Environmental Engineering, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)EE.1943-7870.0000874.

Alvarez, S. E. (2000). Translating the global effects of global of transnational on local feminist discourses and practices in Latin America. Meridians, 1(1), 29–67.

Bell, S. E. (2013). Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Bell, S. E., & York, R. (2010). Community economic identity: The coal industry and ideology construction in West Virginia. Rural Sociology, 75(1), 111–143.

Brookfield, S. D., & Holst, J. D. (2010). Radicalizing learning: Adult education for a just world. John Wiley & Sons.

Carley, S., Evans, T. P., & Konisky, D. M. (2018). Adaptation, culture, and the energy transition in American coal country. Energy Research and Social Science, 37(August 2017), 133–139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.10.007

Caudill, H. M. (2001). Night comes to the Cumberlands: A biography of a depressed area. Ashland, KY: Jesse Stuart Foundation.

Dykstra, C., & Law, M. (1994). Popular social movements as educative forces: Towards a theoretical framework. In 35th Annual Adult Education Research Conference (pp. 121–126). Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee.

Fox, S. (2000). Communities of practice, Foucault and Actor-network theory. Journal of Management Studies, 37(6), 853–868. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00207

Griffith, M. B., Norton, S. B., Alexander, L. C., Pollard, A. I., & LeDuc, S. D. (2012). The effects of mountaintop mines and valley fills on the physicochemical quality of stream ecosystems in the central Appalachians: a review. The Science of the Total Environment, 417–418, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2011.12.042

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge university press.

Lindberg, T. T., Bernhardt, E. S., Bier, R., Helton, A. M., Merola, R. B., Vengosh, A., & Di Giulio, R. T. (2011). Cumulative impacts of mountaintop mining on an Appalachian watershed. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 108(52), 20929–20934. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1112381108

Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2013). Adult learning: Linking theory and practice. John Wiley & Sons.

Montrie, C. (2003). To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Niesz, T., Korora, A. M., Walkuski, C. B., & Foot, R. E. (2018). Social movements and educational research: Toward a united field of scholarship. Teachers College Record, 120(030308), 1–41.

Pollin, R., & Callaci, B. (2019). The economics of Just Transition: A framework for supporting fossil fuel–dependent workers and communities in the United States. Labor Studies Journal, 44(2), 93–138. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X18787051

Snow, D. A., & Trom, D. (2002). The case study and the study of social movements. In B. Klandermans & S. Staggenborg (Eds.), Methods of social movement research. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Yin, R. K. (2003). Case Study Research: Design and Methods. (L. Bickman & D. J. Rog, Eds.), Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research (Third Edit). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.1097/FCH.0b013e31822dda9e