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# **Analysis of Online Non-formal Education of Social Movement Organization**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to reveal what kinds of cognition, practices, epistemology, and identity activists encourage people to take through online education of the social movement organization, Rebellion Academy UK.

*Keywords:* Online learning, social movement learning, radical environmental adult education, Extinction Rebellion UK

Social media and social network services have been regarded as significant spaces for social movement scholars to encourage political participation (Valenzuela, 2013; Zeitzoff, 2017). Current social movement learning studies have also addressed social media and social network services as education and learning spaces in which people learn about issues, communicate with others, learn social media skills, and educate others about the issues (Kluttz & Walter, 2018; Larri & Whitehouse, 2019; Ollis, 2021; Sandlin & Walther, 2009; Vea, 2020; Walter, 2007; Walters, 2021). Yet, the research on online non-formal education of social movement organizations is less prevalent.

This research fills this gap as a case study and explores the role of online education in social movement learning. I aim to reveal what kinds of cognition, practices, epistemology, and identity activists in climate movement organizations encourage people to take through online education. In addition, how each element reinforces and relies on others through online courses which are italicized.

## **Background**

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is one of the most significant environmental protest movements having an international network (Smiles & Edwards, 2021). Formed in October 2018, XR UK organized three significant protests in London during 2019, with its first International Rebellion in April 2019. This event was thus named because XR groups founded in almost 30 countries participated, making the public aware of the group's existence (Mace, 2019). XR UK states two major demands: Tell the truth, Act now, and Decide together addressing climate and ecological crisis (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-c). XR organizes both local and UK-wide events categorized into action, activity, emotional support, meeting, talk, and in-person and online training (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-b).

UK Rebellion Academy is a part of XR UK training of and “an online learning platform where you can work through online trainings in your own time to learn more about Extinction Rebellion or prepare you for different roles” (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-d). It consists of various courses from Introduction to Extinction Rebellion to Mass Mobilization Resources. They categorize courses into core courses, courses for action rebels, movement rebels, grassroots rebels, and supporter rebels. One course can belong to various categories and has different tags. Each course includes the following elements: Intro/Aims, Learning material, Case studies, Your turn, Review-reflect-resources, and Take the quiz to complete the lesson. Courses include hyperlinks to the XR webpage, videos, images, texts, audio, shared Google documents, etc. They

have been uploaded and updated since 2021. I enrolled in 47 online courses in 2022 and analyzed them.

### **Framework**

Curnow et al.(2019) argue that “politicization is a sociocultural learning process; not merely a process of conceptual development or cognitive change, but simultaneous development of concepts, practices, epistemologies, and identities” (p. 717). They explain conceptual development as a cognitive or skill acquisition process, especially focusing on political concept development. They use both practice and participation as coordinating concepts to signal the group’s activity or interactional practice. In terms of epistemology, they use the epistemological shift with the example of the shift for some people of color from a normative (White, settler) epistemology toward an acknowledgment of their own ways of knowing which refers to feminist epistemologies and relational epistemology. Identity is defined as “an individual and collective process of becoming, refining a sense of self in relation to others” (p. 738). Learners identify themselves as Reasonables, Radicals, feminists, environmentalists, Black individuals, or activists.

### **Cognition**

#### ***Climate and ecological emergency***

XR is active in informing the public about the severity of climate and ecological crises, since it is an organization of climate change movements. They describe what the greenhouse effect is, what will happen globally in ecology, and how serious it is with feedback loops and tipping points.

#### ***Political situation***

Political concept development is frequently thought of as raising consciousness about social justice (Curnow et al., 2019). It is expansive learning as people “moved from critiquing individual experiences to making claims about collective, patterned relations of power” and “moved from local to global critiques of racialization, patriarchy, and colonialism” (Curnow et al., 2019, p. 725).

XR explains the power structures in our society and the role of the government in propping up other institutions. They describe how the norms, systems, and institutions uphold the status quo. They also describe the significance of urging the government, fossil fuel, the fashion industry, and the public to change. They emphasize their goal to challenge not only specific destruction systems such as governments or cooperations but also the general system. *The history of non-violent direct action might explain why they choose non-violent direct action.*

They also address the importance of understanding the structural nature of oppressions such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and the oppression of young people and emphasize thinking about how these oppressions impact people differently given our systemic injustice.

They state explicitly that personal action on its own will fail and argue that the only way to avert this crisis is to act together. They urge governments, international organizations, and corporations to act to avert climate and ecological crises. They point out why acts, regulations, Intergovernmental Panel, protocols, and agreements have not worked with the current electoral system and capitalism. They declare that change will only work if we all do it.

#### ***Organizational and technical skills***

They also provide courses about how to plan and design actions such as protests to reach their target audience and make the most effective use of the opportunities created by doing that

action. For example, they teach how to use Mattermost which is an open-source platform for secure communication and collaboration across teams and tools.

## **Practice**

XR defines itself as an action-based mass movement. They explicitly claim that disruptive, law-breaking, and law-bending action defines XR. It is what sets XR apart from other green non-governmental organizations and campaign groups and political parties who share many of their aims and values.

### ***Non-violent direct action (NVDA) and Civil disobedience***

One of the fundamental practices of XR is nonviolent direct action (NVDA). It is to disrupt business-as-usual and force people, institutions, and authorities to notice the climate and ecological emergency. Direct action is “the use of strikes, demonstrations, or other public forms of protest rather than negotiation to achieve one’s demands. Such actions may be highly disruptive and may be illegal, and the disruption to the police and the legal system may be part of the strategy”. Civil disobedience is “a form of direct action where citizens refuse to comply with certain laws as part of a protest”. It includes resistance and de-escalation. The purpose of civil disobedience is “economic disruption to shake the current political system and civil disruption to raise awareness” (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-a) *As seen in this statement, civil disobedience has a purpose to raise awareness of the issue.*

They use civil disobedience by intentionally and peacefully breaking the law and consequently risking arrest to force the government to act on their demands. The reason why they chose it is that other forms of protest have been tried and are too easily ignored by governments. *This can be understood as people know the history of civil disobedience and the political situation.* They believe civil disobedience is necessary to disrupt business as usual and force the government to notice us. Traditional systems like petitions or writing to Parliament members are not their strategy. They state the disciplines of civil disobedience: “We are completely nonviolent, our actions are done in full public view and we take responsibility for them.” (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-a).

In the meantime, they emphasize that the majority of people in XR will not get arrested. There are many roles that do not require a risk of arrest or require a very low risk of arrest. They welcome non-arrestable people into the movement, as long as they agree to civil disobedience.

Related to NVDA and civil disobedience, they include courses about how to support arrested people, in back-office team and police station support team. It also includes how to prepare for an arrest and gain support during civil disobedience.

## **Epistemology**

In what they present as their vision (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-a), they stated that they embrace all people no matter the age, ethics, religion, gender, and human or non-human: “Extinction Rebellion is young, old, black, white, Indigenous, of all faiths and none, of all genders and sexualities and none: being alive on earth now is all the qualification required.” In the meantime, they emphasize Indigenous epistemologies by indicating that Indigenous people “have long evoked an Earth manifesto, saying we are the land: as earth-guardians, we are nature defending itself; land is alive, unfathomably deep, and there is intelligence within nature, thinking, spirited and alive.” They also rest on epistemologies rooted in relationality and reciprocity in that they refer to the African concept Ubuntu which “shows our humanity results from being in connection with each other.” They also specify their position “against patriarchy’s domination and control of women and the Earth, against heterosexism that condemns the beauty of diverse love, against the militarism that destroys living lands, wages war for oil and kills those

who protect the green world.” Their epistemology can be found well in XR's regenerative culture, a culture they advocate and support in both their group and society. It “cares for the planet”, and improves “individuals, communities, our soil, water and air” “on all levels”.

*These epistemologies rely on cognitive criticism of and reflection on the dominant epistemologies such as White, settler, capitalism, and anthropocentrism. They also construct XR's identities as feminists, antiracists, Radicals, etc.*

## **Identity**

### ***Rebel***

XR wants people to join the rebellion. XR categorizes rebels into 4 pathways (3): action, movement, grassroots, and supporter. An action rebel is someone who wants to be involved in arrestable or non-arrestable actions, either by participating in the action or taking on a support role at the action. It could be considered action rebels as protesters. A movement rebel is someone who might not be willing to get arrested, but still desires to be a part in actions, plans, and strategies. This could be someone who helps in the Back Office, or stewards actions. Grassroots rebels are people who want to get involved in local projects. This could be done by joining local working groups or doing local outreach. A supporter rebel doesn't necessarily want to be involved. However, they support what Extinction Rebellion is doing, and would like to learn and talk about it and get people talking. This includes people who are not XR members but support XR and are willing to participate in the future.

### ***XR groups***

To rebel, they encourage people to form or join groups. XR groups are divided into 1) UK groups and local groups and 2) working groups and affinity groups. UK groups steward the movement on a UK-wide scale. They consist of several working groups with a specific purpose and collaborate to serve the broader purpose of their demands. Local groups look after movement locally and are divided into working groups and affinity groups. Working groups “take on specific roles and projects, for example, media and messages, arts, finance, etc.”, and affinity groups are “groups of around 10 to 12 rebels who support each other to take action. This can include attending actions together, planning actions together, discussing future actions, reflecting on past actions, discussing strategies, looking after each other, and providing space for each other to talk and to be listened to.”

*This shows that practice and identity are intertwined. The role that XR signifies implies practices, while these roles are identities as well. Memberships of subgroups are also identities and can be identified by their practices.*

## **Implications and Future Directions**

This study explores an online learning space of the organization in the climate justice movement having a foothold in the United Kingdom. As social movement organizations develop education courses, they could contain the political-conceptual shift, the practice, the epistemology, and the identity that they pursue, and all of these elements would be interwoven. This assumption is based on what Curnow et al. (2019) revealed in their research on social movement learning. This is evident in this study.

This research can show how radical environmental adult education can be in the online learning space through social movement organizations. Radical environmental adult education includes “making explicit the links between the environment, society, economics, politics, and culture; utilizing engaged and participatory learning process not limited to individual behavior change and information transmission; focusing on root causes and critical questioning of

market/consumer driven capitalism and globalization; and learning that is community oriented and contextually shaped” (Griswold, 2017, p. 9). XR educates the links between environment, society, economics, politics, and culture through the political concepts and epistemology XR pursues. In addition, XR encourages participation and collective practice based on the community and addresses the underlying reasons for climate and ecological crises. It would be the answer to the arguments that “the pedagogic and the political must be intertwined. And pedagogic choices can implement political objectives” (Clover, 2002, p. 322).

Further analysis of the learning experiences with this education would reveal how this education brings the political concept development, practice in the community, epistemology shift, and identity formation as well.

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