

“A Masters for activists”: learning from each other’s struggles:

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Abstract

This teaching note discusses the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. This is a practitioner course in social movement practice, now in its fourth year of operation. The note explains the MA’s origins, discusses how it works in practice and explores some unresolved challenges. It concludes with some reflections on the role of such educational projects in relation to movements.

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A tractor, an arrest, a recording¹

On March 31st 2011, a woman was occupying a tractor on a remote road in the Erris peninsula, NW Ireland while another was filming from the grass verge. This was nothing unusual: the activities of Shell, operator on a controversial gas pipeline project, are routinely disrupted and blockaded by local residents and solidarity activists. Police asked the woman on the tractor to get down; after she had done so and they had walked some distance down the road the police arrested them. The camera was taken by a police officer who left in another police car.

Later that day, the women were released without charge and their property was returned to them, including the camera which one, Jerrie Ann Sullivan, was also using in fieldwork for her dissertation on the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism (CEESA) at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. The camera had been in use when it was seized and the police had failed to switch it off, thus recording the conversations between police as they joked about raping and deporting protestors.

Intense discussions followed that weekend among campaigners who had heard the recordings. Aggression and violence, as well as sexually aggressive comments, were widespread in the policing of the protests, and had been the subject of formal complaint in the past to no avail. That Monday, Jerrie Ann and a friend who was also taking the course asked to take one of their classes to share what had happened with their colleagues and ask them for advice. The group was shocked at the conversation and supportive of the campaign, but also

¹ Thanks are due to Jerrie Ann Sullivan for her comments and corrections on an earlier version of this article. Any mistakes or misrepresentations are entirely my own responsibility.

stressed to Jerrie Ann that she should not feel under any obligation to put herself through the media circus that was bound to ensue.

Trying to shift the blame

Jerrie Ann decided that she did want to make the recording public, and the Shell to Sea campaign posted the relevant section on Indymedia and elsewhere, with a transcript². The recording went viral, tapping into widespread experiences of police behaviour around vulnerable groups but also shocking women's groups who had hitherto been silent on the issue and had been proud of their record in delivering training to the police around issues of rape and domestic violence.

The state, naturally enough, attempted to reframe the issue. An inquiry was launched "in the public interest", while the address Jerrie Ann had provided to police was leaked to tabloid journalists. The police ombudsman, GSOC, soon turned its attention to Jerrie Ann and her university lecturers, demanding the camera. Campaigners had virtually no confidence in GSOC by this point, as more than 100 complaints about the policing of the protests in the two years following its establishment had failed to lead to any repercussions either for individual police officers or to any review of policing practices. Even more importantly, the camera also included confidential interview data – a discussion with activists about the campaign.

At this point threats of legal action and criminal proceedings descended on Jerrie Ann and her supervisors on the MA, together with pressure from a university manager to hand over the camera. Jerrie Ann and her supervisors noted that both university and sociological codes of conduct, as well as explicit written arrangements with research participants, meant that the confidentiality of her research data had to be paramount. GSOC refused all offers to have this data deleted by a mutually acceptable third party and continued to pursue a strategy of threats; in the end the data was deleted in the presence of a number of academics and the recording of the police handed over. Following an interim report from GSOC which was severely criticised for its misleading nature (Shell to Sea 2012), GSOC eventually backed down and threats of legal action were withdrawn.

Jerrie Ann completed her thesis despite these attacks and has continued to be involved in campaigning against the pipeline. Her work shares the learning of community members and solidarity campaigners against the gas pipeline with similar rural communities now facing the threat of fracking in Ireland. This kind of engaged research fits within the broader perspective of the CEESA MA: to use radical education and research methods to support activists in developing their own practice. The complexities and conflicts involved in the story of the "Rosspoint recording", meanwhile, highlight the difficulties in keeping such

² <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/99445>

research within neat boxes: the challenge to power does not always come where we expect it to.

Creating a space for radical education

The MA had a long prehistory. An activist researcher in the Sociology department had prepared a proposal for a movement-oriented BA in Environment and Community in the late 1990s at another institution, which had never been used. Lecturers in Adult and Community Education (ACE) had been considering options for an MA for their graduates which would be broader than a strict vocational qualification. In the mid-2000s both departments found themselves needing more Masters courses, and interested staff from both departments came together to explore the possibility for a course oriented towards social movements and social change. In a series of meetings people involved came up with a lot of innovative ideas and processes that helped to give the course a coherent shape.

The initial team shared a commitment to the fundamental importance of movement knowledge and to radical / popular education processes. With backgrounds in the alliance-building experiences of working-class community activism and the anti-capitalist “movement of movements”, individual participants also had strong starting links with feminism, ecology movements, a range of left traditions and international solidarity. A core goal was to carry out joint activities and develop longer-term relationships with movement projects that would benefit both.

Over the two years that it took to connect a team of people interested in making the project work and to build support for it at various levels, various principles became clear. The course would be a practitioner course, not a purely academic one; but it would be at Masters level in practitioner terms – not providing an ABC of activism to newcomers but rather working with people who already had practical experience in the area and wanted to take time out for reflection and development (a personal statement and interview are key elements in the application process.)

Out of the box

In the context of the emerging financial crisis – and the collapse of “partnership” (funding and policy access) between the Irish state and social movement groups – the course would aim not to provide training to enable graduates to be *employed* as providers of the narrowly-technical skills involved in working with elites (media, legal, funding, policy work etc.) for the kind of funded organisations which were dying off all around. Instead it would acknowledge this situation clearly and help people to think strategically about the new situation – supporting people to create organisations and develop movements in a radically-changed environment.

Furthermore – and almost uniquely – it would not replicate the existing fragmentation of the social movement landscape, with courses focussing on women’s studies, environmental advocacy, labour organising, peace studies, development work and the like. In many ways, the ever-narrower channelling of organising traditions and models of social change within individual movements is a product of isolation from one another, and of movements captured not only by organisational elites but also by the government departments, EU funding streams and other institutional frameworks which shape the movements.

“Learning from each other’s struggles” – the unofficial motto of the course – is all about *not* taking it as read that the existing history of a specific movement, in an individual country, as it is now understood by organisational elites, is necessarily a good guide to what that movement could or should be doing. In many ways, too, alliance-building is weakened by forms of training which repeat uncritical origin myths about why one movement should be hostile to another. In the year in which participants spend in a small-group setting together, they come to have a much clearer understanding of each other’s needs and experiences, movement cultures and ways of talking – the building-blocks for alliances that go beyond existing comfort zones.

The course’s slightly awkward title reflects a combination of the two departments’ particular strengths in popular education and social movements and the shared value of equality – as well, of course, as an understanding that equality cannot be reached without the collective action of the exploited, oppressed and marginalised, and that a bottom-up approach which connects theory and practice represents the only way to achieve this after the collapse of top-down models of change.

Paradoxically, the title also expresses the politics of neoliberalism: it was proposed as *Community Education, Equality and Praxis*, but the university committee struck out “praxis” as incomprehensible to likely participants and in effect commented “if you are teaching people about activism, just say so”. Where an earlier kind of university would have stifled at least public expression of what such a course was about, the neoliberal approach is to view activists as just another niche market: if staff know what they need and how to reach them, the thinking runs, let them at it.

Activist pedagogy in practice

Perhaps the single most important element of the course’s pedagogy is the small-group encounter between activists from different generations, movements, political traditions, class and ethnic backgrounds. The deep learning provoked by this, the close work with the small number of staff (all themselves practitioners in social movements and / or community education) and the wide range of other practitioners encountered as visiting speakers, on fieldtrips, at course events and in the activism which regularly bursts into the not-very-sealed classroom environment seem to have a range of effects.

The diversity of the group is striking: already in its second year recruitment had gone far beyond staff members' existing networks and movement connections. Participants to date have come from movements as distant as Tahrir Square and Mississippi popular education, refugees from dictatorship and women's refuge workers, anti-austerity and anti-war campaigns, disability rights and GLBTQ activism, development work and trade unions, community organising and popular education, feminist and environmental struggles, international solidarity and migrants' self-organising.

While participants come to have a much better sense of the other people they will need to build alliances with for long-lasting structural change for equality, they also come to have a clearer sense of themselves and their own political socialisation, giving them a chance to reflect on this outside of the stress of routine organising – whether they come to an easier identification with a pre-existing position or rethink their place in movements. Even more importantly perhaps, for those who are not already long-term activists, is a sense of being able to take themselves seriously as movement and community practitioners for the long haul; that this can be a perfectly viable way to be in the world (whether or not it is also a source of income) and one which can earn the respect of one's peers and elders.

As might be expected, the course uses a wide range of pedagogical tools, both to cater for the diversity in culture and educational backgrounds and to equip participants with a greater sense of flexibility in their own practice. The general orientation is naturally towards participatory and democratic classroom practice, and comparable assessment methods, although more traditional techniques are also used when necessary.

At the core of the curriculum is the practitioner thesis – a substantial piece of work ideally designed to support the development of one's own movement or pedagogical practice and presented in a format meaningful to other practitioners in the field (if necessary, this format may be “sandwiched” between more conventional academic elements). An archive of these theses is being developed to support the wider dissemination of this learning.

The core classroom element is the “community of praxis” module which is designed to allow the learners to present their own practice to one another and express their own needs and struggles as practitioners on the course. Along with this come modules in equality and social justice; power and politics; radical education; and feminist theory and practice – which started out as optional but became a core element because of its transformative effect on many participants. A range of options running from macro-sociology (market, state and social movements) via critical media and environmental justice to participatory action research complete the for-credit material, which is supplemented by workshops, fieldtrips, visiting speakers, events organised by students, engagement in the wider movement scene and meditation for personal sustainability.

Challenges: does education make a difference?

The course is now concluding its fourth year, in the course of which some 60 activists and community educators have taken part. It has also contributed to the development of a wider community of engaged social movements research linking the university with movements and communities outside, hosting a wide range of workshops and public events with participants ranging from autonomist theorist John Holloway to media activist Firoze Manji and from lifelong campaigner Selma James to popular educator Eurig Scandrett. Good relationships have been built with a number of key movement organisations and individuals, giving the course a grounding and recognition within a much wider community of practice in Ireland and beyond.

Participatory action research is in process to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the course; at present it seems fair to say that the course is more effective at supporting individuals in articulating their own positions, deepening their commitment and learning how to act more strategically than it is in making alliances, although there are some loose networks developing.

Students say that they greatly value the opportunity to learn through discussion with peers, the experience of a more democratic and egalitarian classroom environment and the widening of their intellectual and practitioner horizons. The practice of engaging in real reflection and discussion on self, power and praxis within such a diverse group is clearly an effective one – for staff as well as students.

It also seems perhaps most valuable for those who are embedded within a clearly-defined movement or community but still open to learning. Students who have not previously engaged with movements and have not sought this engagement have not always moved as far as might be hoped. Conversely, those who are already tightly-linked to a specific political party or movement organisation have often been resistant to the course's critical and questioning components and have sought to turn the classroom into a space to defend their organisations.

However those who are clear that they are committed to the struggle for equality and social transformation but are still open to debates and reflection on strategy, method, goals and group dynamics seem to be able to use the course to develop these concerns for themselves. In this sense, without being the property of any single movement or organisation, the course acts to support the development of a reflective community of practice in the struggle for social justice.

Course website: <http://ceesa-ma.blogspot.com>

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