

## **Popular Education methodology, activist academics and emergent social movements: Agents for Environmental Justice**

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University-based activists constantly find themselves at an interface between the institution that employs them and the social movements to which they are committed. The university is itself a site of struggle and contestation over pedagogy, curriculum, academic freedom, intellectual property, labour processes and political economy. In recent decades these processes have been subjected to the demands of capital in new and intensified ways. Universities throughout the world have faced outright privatisation or various forms of commodification, individualisation, labour discipline, managerialism and curriculum controls. Within these constraints however, academics still enjoy a degree of autonomy for political action not experienced in many other forms of public sector employment. For social movement activists employed in the sector, this brings opportunities (but also considerable risks, that the social movements themselves become embroiled in contestations that can serve to weaken their engagement in political struggle). Moreover, academics also have the opportunity to be critically self-reflective in public on their endeavours, through publication and conferences. The contested role of activist academics within – or outwith – the university is certainly not new and remains a perennial discussion, constantly responding to changing contexts, especially as universities mediate a neoliberal political economy in diverse cultural and policy contexts (see, for example Cresswell, Karimova and Brock 2013). This paper is a short and critical reflection on the author's engagement with attempts to use pedagogical skills and curricular resources for the benefit of social movements by drawing on popular education methodologies in education and research outwith and within a university in Scotland.

It seems to be the experience of many emergent social movements in the post-industrial capitalist world that locally experienced oppressions periodically erupt into specific campaigns but largely remain fragmented and the potential for these to connect into social movement projects is often not realised. In the terminology of social movement process used by Nilsen and Cox (2013), local rationalities develop into militant particularism and occasionally a campaign, but the development of building a social movement project remains frustrated. The term 'emergent' is used, not to imply any inevitability in the progression of this process, but rather to emphasise that options, opportunities and strategic discernment is distinctive when struggles are distributed amongst fragmented local or particular conflicts whose interconnections and commonalities are not fully realised. The step from local conflict to movement building is partially organisational but significantly also pedagogical, since it involves a development of critical consciousness through praxis of the limitations of the campaign within existing hegemonic arrangements. The question posed here is whether

activists located in higher education (and, to some extent professional NGOs) can play a role in supporting this social movement process through their pedagogical practice.

Agents for Environmental Justice was an initiative of Friends of the Earth Scotland, an environmental NGO and part of a confederation with a strong activist base in many countries (Doherty and Doyle 2014), in collaboration with Queen Margaret University, a small Higher Education institution in Edinburgh. Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES) had taken advantage of new opportunities for democratic interventions opened up by the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999, to pursue a campaign for environmental justice whilst at the same time working on a popular education project with communities directly affected by environmental pollution, degradation and neglect, poverty, discrimination and exclusion. For several years, FoES had been providing training and *ad hoc* advice to largely working class, poor and geographically isolated communities fighting against damaging developments and pollution incidents, and was exploring how this could be offered in a more sustained and systematic way. Communities facing a range of social oppressions are disproportionately also affected by pollution and are often denied access to the physical and cultural resources required to oppose it. Effective environmental justice movements have emerged where affected communities have linked together and mobilised around a common cause (see for example Bullard 2005). With the establishment of a Scottish Parliament, the opportunity arose to influence policy being developed by political elites, while at the same time contribute to the emergent social movement comprising community action campaigns against local environmental pollution.

The methodology of popular education provided the pedagogical response to the issues and learning needs of the communities, enhancing their capacity to tackle environmental injustices. It is argued that popular education should be regarded as a methodology which cannot be reduced to particular pedagogical methods. As Kane (2001) points out, popular education methods such as participatory, group-based and active learning approaches, if detached from their methodological roots in an analysis of relations of oppression, can be used by reactionary groups in support of colonial and neoliberal projects. Derived from the innovations of Paulo Freire (1972) the methodology of popular education moreover takes an explicitly political position in favour of popular movements and the interests of popular struggle. In practice this involves education that is led by, or stands alongside, the oppressed, the poor and the exploited. Through popular education methodology, the collective interests of the exploited engage in dialogue with those who have access to the knowledge that may be useful for popular liberation, but which has been denied to, or distorted against, the oppressed.

A widely used definition of popular education is that it is “popular, as distinct from merely populist, in the sense that it is:

- rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people
- overtly political and critical of the status quo
- committed to progressive social and political change.

The process of popular education has the following general characteristics:

- its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle
- its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development
- it attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action” (Crowther, Galloway and Martin 2005:1).

For FoES and the community environmental justice campaigners, popular education was thus able to start from the skills and experience that local activists had already gained through self-directed learning, whilst also contributing skills and knowledge to strengthen this capacity collectively within the community and indeed between community campaigns. The methodology was also able to connect the necessity to react to polluting incidents with the importance of taking action to improve conditions globally for the long term: what Agyeman, Bullard and Evans (2003) have called ‘just sustainability’.

The ‘Agents for Environmental Justice’ project also drew on the tradition of ‘community agents’ in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in the global South, as well as in rural Scotland. Such agents are local activists usually supported by development agencies or NGOs to mobilise for community development and action in their own localities. Community agents are not necessarily in support of popular movements but the model can be applied to this context. Here, individual activists from communities engaged in struggle were selected for intensive education with a view to enhancing their capacity to analyse their adversaries and mobilise against them. As Freire has noted, the motivation for participation is rooted in struggle: “For what and for whom do I study? And against what and against whom? . . . It is not by resignation but by the capacity for indignation in the face of injustice that we are affirmed (2001:73-74)”.

By adopting a self-consciously popular education methodology, academic and other sources of knowledge was assessed in terms of its relevance to the struggles of communities involved in promoting environmental justice. Whilst academics and FoES professionals brought their specialist knowledge to this assessment process, so community activists (agents) brought with them a selection from another body of knowledge, derived from the experience of living in a community with environmental pollution and being involved in a struggle against those who are responsible. Teaching staff from FoES and the university worked with the agents to generate a dialogue between their experiential

knowledge and the prepared curriculum in the educational process, thereby ensuring that learning was relevant to social action. In this process the main objective was that the community's reality was changed by the social action leading to an improved environment for the community. Change also took place within FoES in as much as the interests and struggles of local communities were incorporated into its campaign priorities, its understanding of environmental justice and ultimately contributed to the body of knowledge of environmentalism (Scandrett 2007). The potential was also present for the academic institution to be changed through the experience of being accountable to popular struggle through popular education dialogue.

This provided a certain challenge to the processes of quality control within the university, which was required for the accreditation of the education to the level of Higher Education Certificate – the equivalent of first year of undergraduate study at a Scottish university, recognised internationally for direct entry to the second year of appropriate Higher Education degree courses. Academic quality control in Scotland is assessed on the basis of academic rigour but also centrally imposed criteria of 'graduate attributes', which reflect government policies and professional interests.

Whilst the educational demand was driven by communities fighting environmental injustice, mediated by FoES activists and supported by committed academics, some slippage was perhaps inevitable in the negotiations with the standardisation processes seeking to impose a model of education which is linear, canonical and instrumental to the purposes of a Scottish political economy which has been described as 'neoliberalism meets social democracy' (Scott and Mooney 2009). This included retaining a degree of individualisation which undermined aspects of the collectivity of popular education - Freire warned that "one of the methods of manipulation is to inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for individual success" (1972:149). However, during the programme, the students themselves spontaneously organised collectively and insisted on the temporary exclusion of educators in order to develop a set of demands. These demands, ranging from the food and accommodation to the curriculum and assessment, formed the basis of negotiations with educators until an acceptable resolution was achieved. Such spontaneous mobilisation of students (or 'invented participation') could not have been prepared for, and challenged the 'Student-Staff Consultative Committee' model of ('invited') student participation sanctioned by the university.

The communities in which two of the agents were active were later included in a study of how activists learn through participating in the movement, especially the role played by information and communication technologies (Crowther et al., 2009). Our research suggests that much of the learning by those in leadership positions in the campaigns (as our agents were), took place through their activism, but in a rather haphazard form. These activists reported the importance of accessing particular kinds of knowledge at certain times, the value of access to academics, environmental campaigners, trades unionists or a

variety of professionals, identifying sources of information on the internet and the conjuncture of particular circumstances in which connections are made and insights emerge. Within this range of learning situations, the academic environmental justice course featured little. However, the processes of organisation, selection and critique which were obtained on the course did feature in the haphazard learning.

Scandrett, Crowther and McGregor (2012) have referred to popular education methodology in the absence of structured pedagogical methods, where a dialogue occurs between groups experiencing and resisting oppression, and specialist and academic knowledge. Academic knowledge is not intrinsically either elite or critical but becomes one or the other on the basis of engagement in dialogue with organised resistance to oppression. Employing the distinction between popular education methodology and method provides a useful analytical critique to the incorporation of pedagogies derived from popular education within the mainstream curriculum or processes of domestication. Popular education pedagogical methods can provide structures for facilitating the process of dialogue between knowledges of the academy and of popular struggle when based on popular education methodology. But so also can other social processes that are based on popular education methodology, such as organising protests, discerning strategies and allies, resolving intra-movement conflicts, negotiating relationships with NGOs and other actors ('discursive encounters', Baviskar 2005) even applying for funding. The application of more structured popular education methods during some parts of the social movement process can facilitate critical learning processes well beyond this application.

The research into the agents for environmental justice project raised some interesting contradictions. At the end of each presentation of the course, an external researcher conducted independent evaluation of the student/agents' experiences. Students generally reported that they had found the structured educational component useful and positive, albeit with helpful criticisms and suggestions. However, later research suggests that when asked about their learning experience in the movement, the course was of less value than the unsystematic support given by sympathetic intellectuals at particularly crucial times. These insights can be compared with the findings of Johnston (2005) who, investigating the political activities of academics involved in popular education, discovered that where these academics are active in social movements or protest groups it is seldom as educators. They are asked to conduct literature searches, interpret others' data, access and digest policy documents, write briefing papers etc, but seldom provide explicit education. Protest groups do make use of the expertise of sympathetic academics but not necessarily on the academics' terms.

This is not to dismiss the possibility of popular education in the university, but to contextualise it. The point of popular education is that those engaged in struggles against oppression set the terms of their own learning, but popular education is more than supporting haphazard learning. There were certainly

occasions during the environmental justice course in which the content of the curriculum was resisted as irrelevant by students at the point of delivery and then valued retrospectively later. For example, one of the students' 'demands' resulting from their mobilisation was to reject some curricular content which involved a critical analysis of the economics of environmental externalities, which students found difficult and irrelevant to their immediate struggles. During negotiations, educators insisted on the importance of this analysis as a means of interpreting the common origins of diverse and apparently unconnected environmental justice struggles. This negotiation was itself educative and at the end of the course, one of the graduates noted his appreciation of this episode and the insistence of the educators to retain this content. Popular education methodology involves a dialogue between academic knowledge and engagement in struggle which, for the academic activist requires a sustained commitment. This may come in the application of structured popular education methods but may also come in other ways. At the same time academics who sustain a commitment to movements of struggle may be required to serve different functions whilst others – campaigners, trades unionists, other movement activists - with more relevant knowledge, may be recruited as 'teachers'.

As political opportunities changed, Friends of the Earth Scotland directed its attention away from pollution impacted communities, and the policy environment of the University constrained further work of this kind on environmental justice. There have been some important developments of campaign building amongst key sectors focusing on incinerators, open cast coal, land use planning and, more recently, unconventional gas extraction (including fracking). However the environmental justice movement in Scotland remains fragmented and emergent. Arguably, for the decade in which FoES and QMU collaborated to work with communities impacted by environmental injustices, academic activists, along with the environmental NGO, played a key role in supporting the building of the movement through the use of popular education methods but also the application of popular education methodology.

Within the university, the collaboration with FoES was used as a model to develop new curricula with other social movement organisations, with mixed success. A successful course involved collaboration with Scottish Women's Aid, the national campaigning organisation reflecting the movement of local women's aid groups that provide services for women escaping domestic abuse. The course *Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence* has been offered successfully for seven years to a mixture of honours year university-based students of Psychology and Sociology along with practitioners, professionals and activists in campaigning and service providing organisations related to gender justice and gender-based violence. The course curriculum derives from the experience of the feminist movement and thereby aims to synthesise practice and theory through a pedagogy delivered by educators from SWA and QMU (Orr, Scandrett and Whiting 2013). Whilst this course has undoubtedly provided an educational resource of value to the women's movement, it has done so at a point where the movement itself is mature and relatively successful

in its strategy of incorporation into established institutions of state, quite a different place in the 'war of position' from the emergent environmental justice movement. In this case, the role of pedagogy will inevitably be different and has tended to include testing the limitations of this 'incorporation' strategy and discerning new opportunities for hegemonic change.

Collaborations with other social movements have include those that are emergent, for example *Mad People's History and Identity*, jointly with CAPS advocacy group of mental health service users, and *Critical Race Dialogues* with a range of anti-racist activists. However, attempts to combine such courses into an undergraduate or postgraduate programme which might use popular education to build alliances across diverse movements have not succeeded. Courses whose objectives include movement building and activist resourcing are ultimately treated by the institution in market terms, as a source of income directly or as a distinctive 'brand' to promote the university in the competitive marketplace. Unsurprisingly, courses have been successful where they can attract external funding or fees, and collaborations with social movement organisations are regarded as little more than a 'business model' which carries a high level of risk. Activist-academics often reproduce this discourse in order to justify their participation in this work. However, the experience of the environmental justice course demonstrates that within the marketised institution it is possible for university-based activists to respond to emergent social movements with a pedagogy that can contribute to a social movement process.

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