Learning in movements:
how do we think about what we are doing?

Laurence Cox

Abstract

This practice note discusses why movements have a need to learn and the kinds of problems that present them with this need, both in identifying the need for movement and when movement institutions fail to have the effects intended. It discusses who owns the means of intellectual production that movements rely on and the differing capacities movements have around learning. It asks how we can place movement logics rather than media or academic ones at the centre of our learning, and concludes with three brief examples.

Keywords: social movements; learning and knowledge production; radical education; popular education; social movement training; social movement strategy

What can we do?

I spend a lot of time talking to activists in different social movements and countries. Rather too often, they say one of two things about what they do. Either they are completely enthused by the experience and almost messianic about the value of how they do things in their group, organisation or movement – or they are cynical and bitter, convinced at some level that the forces arrayed against them are too powerful, too clever, too ruthless and so on and that their own movements stand little real chance in comparison.

What both of these feelings represent is a sense that "what we do" is pretty much given. It may be perfect, or it may be hopeless – but there is little real space for change. Often the group or organisation itself is totally identified with a particular way of doing things, so that real discussion is a threat to your friendships, your chance to engage in activism, your position in the community or (for professionals) your job; often, too, there is just not that much discussion, just some more or less formal training in "how to do the thing that we do" and some informal socialisation into "here's the story we tell ourselves about it".

Of course having a firm belief in a certain model is fine when it works and the movement is getting where we want to. And sometimes cynicism is the only way people can remain active and hold fast to their core beliefs in hard times. It's also true that sometimes our main focus has to be simply getting as many people as possible involved (who may then in turn work out better ways of doing things), and that sometimes the forces arrayed against us are so large that just

keeping going is the most we can hope for. But there is a wide space in between where our choices *matter* – and that means understanding what those choices are and what effect they might have.

Of course, getting to this point – of taking action in movements – is itself a big step for many people. The everyday strategies people rely on to solve their problems only sometimes involve action in movements; often because those problems can be solved (or at least managed) individually without challenging the strategies, the interests or the routines of the powerful, the wealthy and the culturally privileged.

For people who don't already have a picture of the world shaped around struggle, it can be quite a shift to recognise that they are in a situation where meeting their needs meaningfully would be a threat to wider structures, so that they have to rely on working together with others in a similar situation to force that change through, against opposition from above. Making this shift – recognising what the situation is and acting accordingly – is a crucial learning process for people who have not yet done so, and often a very uneven one.

In other cases, around less personal problems, it can take time to unlearn the ideologies which tell us that all will be well if only enough individuals change their behaviour, if only education or technology are more widely distributed, if only the right people are in power – and to recognise that this is one of the difficult problems that cannot be solved this way. We can all watch this happening in relation to climate change – and see just how difficult the learning often is.

There is of course quite an extensive literature on learning and knowledge production in social movements (eg Choudry et al 2010, Hall et al 2012, Cox 2014). This practice note is not so much aimed to contribute to empirical academic research on the subject or pedagogical reflection as an extended version of some of the conversations I have with movement participants about learning and knowledge in movements.

When "just doing something" isn't enough

Stepping into this space of relying on each other rather than on pseudo-scientific theories of social change, on the magical effects of education or the IT industry, or on individual politicians or other brokers is not an easy move to make. It involves strategies that rely on our numbers, our capacity to disrupt and our capacity for creativity rather than on formal power, on economic resources or on cultural privilege.

There is a reason why this process is called struggle – it is not simply the conflict with an opponent, in a wargaming model where the nature of the situation is unambiguous and everyone has perfect insight into how it works. Rather, we are changing our own understanding of the world, our relationships with each other

and our relationships with people we may previously have deferred to, worked for or obeyed.

Few people start this process with a wide range of possible strategies to choose from. States, education systems, media production, religious organisations and other bodies transmit accounts not only of how to work "through the proper channels", but also of what "unofficial action" might mean. Sometimes – as in mythologised accounts of e.g. Gandhi or Martin Luther King – these are constructed as politically safe (if personally risky), more or less legitimate ways of seeking to affect the system. At other times – as in mythologised accounts of revolution – they may be constructed so as to discourage such action as inherently futile, bound to lead to tyranny or bloodshed.

This does not mean, of course, that people do not try these models out. It means, rather, that when they act out narratives provided by dominant institutions of how to challenge such institutions, what actually happens may well be different from what they intend. Extinction Rebellion (XR) in England has recently provided some rather painful examples of this[1].

At other times people's models of action may come from popular memories of how to struggle, or they may be mediated by existing organisations and networks. This is one of the most important things social movements – at these different levels – can do: to transmit popular learning about struggle. At the same time, the pressures that movements are under – and movement-internal logics of various kinds – mean that what they transmit is often selective and stylised.

Even when their sources are good, in other words, the stories we tell within movements and communities in struggle about how to win have a hypothetical quality to them; simply knowing these stories, and even being in movements that draw on them, does not mean that we are winning. We may simply be "fighting the last war", or acting out stories that keep us going in hard times.

Learning for social change

In the broader picture, the simple existence of a movement points simultaneously to future possibility and to present failure: almost by definition, we are in movements from below because we are not (yet) able to win the change we seek. What we can transmit with a fair degree of confidence is "this is how to do this kind of thing" – how to win a strike, how to organise a direct action, how to run a periodical, how to fundraise. These are things we do regularly and which happen within a manageable timescale, where we can sit down afterwards, talk it through, and think what to do next time.

---

[1] https://whysocialmovementsmatter.com/news/2019/10/3/dear-xr-why-not-be-more-honest-with-your-participants

Large-scale social change, though, doesn't work like that. It is full of unintended consequences, of apparent victories which do not have the effects we expected, of intra-movement processes which leave many participants struggling for some of the same things they wanted before but unable to articulate why "success" as seen by movement leaders doesn't mean the change they hoped for in their own lives.

There may well be cases where our forms and models are fine and the challenge is "just add water": if enough people fill those models and forms with life, we will win. And of course it is often true – given people's creativity even when they don't recognise or acknowledge it themselves – that if enough people are in movement, they can win many things.

But not everything, and not all the time: our own period and earlier periods have many examples of massively popular movements that were nonetheless defeated, whether dramatically or by not being able to win and not able to sustain mobilisation past a certain point. At present in both France and Hong Kong we see elites acting on the assumption that if they keep going long enough, movements will be exhausted or will lose popular support. We do not yet know if they are right.

It is also of course not true that if we are "right" in our strategy that we will infallibly win. But it *is* true that a better strategy can raise the chances of winning on the most crucial issues, against the strongest opponents, and without having absolutely overwhelming numbers – in the messy spaces where movements in the current period are often fighting.

Movement learning – learning at the level of a movement, about how to bring about substantial social change – is itself a struggle, but a necessary one. Simply acting out an inherited narrative – whether inherited from dominant institutions, popular cultures or movement institutions – is a recipe for a lot of effort and suffering.

Learning in this perspective is a way to not simply keep banging our heads off a brick wall. It can also be a way of not having to reinvent the wheel on our own and in the middle of a struggle – at the cost of lives ruined through repression, broken organisations and relationships, movements and communities pushed into defeat, individuals turned to cynicism or easier personal rewards. There will be enough of all of these in any case; but the more we can learn about movements and social change, the more we can keep the days of fire and the years of hard slog to the necessary minimum, and come out on the other side with more of our own people still intact, and still active.

So "just do something", according to taken-for-granted models, is not enough: and this is a second key learning moment.

If from the perspective of activist educators there are logical learning sequences, everyone – each group, each movement – finds itself in a specific place around this learning, perhaps conscious of some things that its existing strategy or analysis doesn't enable it to solve (without, often, realising that this is the real

problem) and maybe aware that as a movement it needs to find allies and even remake itself in order to really tackle the problem (without, perhaps, being able to see an immediate way to do that).

Thinking strategically about means and ends

A central question here is: "Is the thing we are putting our time, energy and suffering into actually in line with the reason we started the struggle?" One of the few really robust findings of research on social movements and revolutions is that the means have a powerful tendency to become an end in themselves. We create movement organisations, institutions, cultures, power relationships, routines, forms of action and so on together, and doing so (naturally) tends to perpetuate them, separately from the question of whether they are really leading (or capable, under better and plausible circumstances, of leading) to the change we want to see. So asking this question is difficult.

It is much easier for *movement organisations* to think strategically – in other words, broadly taking the way they have defined "how to win" for granted and to think how best to achieve that goal, often within a framework of organisational patriotism that identifies the organisation with the movement. But the question that often needs to be asked is whether perpetuating the organisation is really the same thing as advancing the movement.

It is also relatively easy for organisations to "train" their members, both at the technical level ("here is how to do this thing") and in terms of socialisation – what histories (if any) they tell them, what other organisations or movements they mention, what songs they sing, what stories they tell.

In this sense, movement organisations have momentum – they have a relatively powerful tendency to keep on doing the same thing and to keep variations and debates within a manageable space, defined by "what this organisation is", "what it does" and "how it does it". This is not a bad thing – movements need organisations, and we need organisations to have some coherence – but it does mean that past a certain point our learning of how to do whatever that organisation does in a particular way can easily become the real barrier to recognising when that activity – or that organisation – isn't doing the thing we got involved for, and perhaps isn't capable of doing so. Notoriously, trade unions, NGOs and political parties have a strong tendency to become ends in themselves in just this way.

Within neoliberalism in particular, our organisations (and at times our movements) come to operate fundamentally as niche markets, disconnected from or competing with other movements and organisations. Without much discussion, participants in a given movement or organisation draw on *these* kinds of training (and academic allies), invite *these* kinds of speakers, consume *these* kinds of media, hear about *these* other movement stories – and do all this rather than other possibilities which come to define other movement cultures

and knowledge. In this sense, being an autonomist or a 350.org activist (for example) can easily be structured in ways that are not fundamentally different from being a fan of Scandinavian death metal or alt-country music.

This is painfully clear when it comes to international solidarity. Lacking language skills, personal connections or direct relationships of cooperation, activists in one part of the world are fed stories not just about one country rather than another (Venezuela rather than Rojava), but also from this perspective rather than that one (MAS leadership rather than indigenous organisations), often blatantly focussed on our own local needs to have something to say about what's in the news rather than any serious attempt to understand what is happening elsewhere. *Interface* is structured the way it is in part to attempt to avoid this, and particularly to avoid giving a small number of metropolitan, Anglophone "stock exchanges of struggle" power in this process. The problem is not just what this means, say, for solidarity activism: it is also that it systematically misleads the nominal givers of solidarity as to what might work in their own contexts, by telling them selected and translated morality stories.

The point of saying this is not to condemn all movement activity as pointless: it is to ask how far our own organisational and movement structures are driven by this kind of logic, and how far we make systematic and effective efforts to avoid it.

Who owns the means of intellectual production?

Even "bad" movement organisations' learning processes, though, are at least *movement* ones, driven by movement logics of various kinds. In the twilight of neoliberalism, such movement processes and structures are routinely dwarfed by other logics – notably those of commercial publishing, social media celebrity and academic production (as well, of course, as political parties and the state). At the extreme, in the middle of the UK election and US impeachment processes, a substantial proportion of what movement activists shared on my own Twitter feed consisted of articles from the *Guardian* and a handful of other liberal news outlets. Outrage, and energy, is diverted into responding to an agenda which our movements have not set and only have little effect on.

More broadly, what Alan Sears (2014) calls the "infrastructure of dissent" has probably never been so weak in a century. It is not just that the days are long gone when (for example) the German SPD had 29 daily newspapers and a vast array of trade unions, women's and youth groups, sports associations and all sorts of other associated institutions.

It is also, and much more recently, that the days are largely gone when activists talked to one another across multiple movements on Indymedia, in Social Forums or in summit protests. A commercial social media has imposed new logics, privileging both the construction of tighter boundaries around organisations and an orientation towards a largely passive wider audience, no

longer "lurkers" who might be brought to participate, but quantified sources of likes and shares.

In many if not most countries, our movements control far less of what Marx calls the means of mental production – publishing houses, communications sites, educational structures, discussion spaces – than they have done in living memory. The difficulty is not that we have less work to do – it is that the people who do this work are less accountable to our movements, and more affected byother logics.

This is fairly clear in the case of the mainstream media; what seemed like the long march of alternative media in the post-1968 period or the alter-globalisation movement has been largely reversed in recent years in favour of explicitly commercial media, even when these have roots in movements and treat people who care about movement issues as their market.

Similarly, while we might have activist academics in many countries and disciplines, it is significant that they usually *are* in disciplines, in other words employed under circumstances not of their own choosing; rarely in fields created by or in response to movements (as sometimes in the aftermath of 1968) and operated collectively on the basis of a shared commitment to struggle.

So too with radical celebrity: half a century of attempts at movement ownership of who is identified as symbolising particular struggles has had only partial success, not least because of the relative weakness of our movements' media and education.

Taken together, this all means that what Gramsci calls "organic intellectual" relationships of thinking, speaking, teaching, researching and reflecting have to swim against much more powerful currents of "traditional intellectual" relationships. Not only at an individual level but in terms of institutions and processes, the most effective relationships are not set up by or for movements but reflect the forms of power, money and cultural privilege we are typically trying to challenge.

Commercial media, social media celebrity and academia differ in significant ways from movement institutions. The latter traditionally set out to agitate, to educate and to organise. The dominant institutions have virtually no interest in organising: when commercial media discuss organising it is almost always only to celebrate or condemn. It can hardly be the insider / practical question: "how could we do this better?" Social media, too, offers us a politics of opinion in which what is rewarded is the verbal taking of sides rather than effective action. As has been widely noted, it is a space of symbolism – which is of course important, but not when symbols are confused for change, as so much of the wider culture encourages us to do.

Academia, for its part, routinely privileges "deep analysis" (in its radical forms, often deep and pessimistic analysis) to show at length (and using language designed to exclude) just how intractable a particular problem is, and by implication how clever those are who see it as so deep-seated that it can hardly

be solved by human action. It does not reward – beyond the most trivial, technical / tactical – serious discussion of how popular movements from below can in fact win against these (economic, political, cultural structures).

Differing movement capacities

It is important to note that different movements, and different organisations, have different capacities in this respect. Vanguardist, NGO and "populist" approaches both misunderstand this point – assuming that most people have very limited capacity and therefore preferring to hand thinking over to more or less professional movement elites. And yet some of the most remarkable social movement experiments – from the Zapatistas to Rojava, from the Civil Rights Movement to early second-wave feminism and from Abahlali baseMjondolo to Irish working-class community activism – are simultaneously large-scale learning spaces.

In fact real revolutions are almost always large-scale popular learning moments: very large proportions of the population become politically active, and not only "take sides" in a general sense but make much more specific choices about how to pursue their preferred strategy. They debate, organise, publish, polemicise and fight each other, not only the opponent.

Proponents of "unity at all costs" (which in practice means supporting the leadership of dominant organisations) are horrified by this, but there is no way of understanding the conflicts of, say, the Russian Revolution or Indian independence, of European resistance to fascism or postcolonial Latin America without understanding this. If "mobilisation" is in part the learning that simply relying on the powers that be, on providence or on traditional models of leadership and clientelism will not bring the desired change, then "radicalisation" is in part the learning that inherited organisations and political traditions are not capable of doing so either.

Outside revolutionary moments, *some* movements, organisations and political traditions have a greater interest in discussion, theory, history and education, while some are more programmatically anti-intellectual. In others again, participation involves going through the motions of thinking, learning and discussion but only in ritualised forms where the "right" outcomes are known in advance and the task of cadres is to steer newcomers through an approved sequence of thought.

All else being equal, diversity stimulates learning: constructing a "we" from disparate parts means trying to find common ground, ideally around a more radical critique of the underlying causes of multiple problems. This can also be the case across geographical distance – but, as the twentieth century taught us painfully, only when that distance also includes some kind of freedom. Membership of a national organisation, or a top-down international body, can mean a one-sided adaptation of local realities to the needs of the centre (which are equally specific even when cloaked in universal rhetoric).

Participatory practices – those which try to "start where people are" but not leave them there, and build a conscious agreement to work together out of people's multiple starting points (even within a single community) – also tend to have a more educational / reflective shape. Authoritarianism, obviously, only needs education and discussion as a form of control and "training"; something which can be as true in NGOs and trade unions as on the far left.

What can we do?

So how can we manage to sustain serious thinking about what we are doing, and find a way towards winning on the largest and most intractable issues?

One obvious answer is that it depends how "we" are situated – what our possibilities and needs are in our own specific context. If we don't think hard about these, we will get nowhere: there is no one-size-fits-all account of how movements learn, or how they should learn – because learning is a universal human activity, historically and culturally shaped, so that different movements start in different places.

Another, equally obvious, answer is that often activists are thinking and learning about their practice but without acknowledging this to others or at times to themselves. People may feel themselves to be loyal followers of a "line" while in practice being very creative in their adjustments to a specific situation, the needs of participants, etc. Some of the skills involved in both bridge and formal leadership may even benefit from a certain degree of self-deception in this regard.

Voting with your feet, or splitting, can often represent the practical outcome of learning where an organisation (or movement) is unable or unwilling to engage with what those departing have to say – their unacknowledged experiences, the discontents of the organisation, their strategic dissent and so on.

Experiment – trying one thing, then another, in order of relative obviousness – can also be an unspoken form of learning. Participants may be able to justify their current strategy with the same fluency that they previously defended something radically different, with no sense of incongruity. To return to XR: before their two weeks of direct action in London this October, the organisation was faced with massive critique from many quarters about its naïve view of the Metropolitan Police. Following the aggressive strategy pursued by the Met, XR began to present itself as victim without acknowledging that it had in fact been wrong in the past. Something has been learned; but do participants know what?

Placing movement logics at the centre

It is important that these kinds of arguments are not used simply to justify a transition from activism to academia, the importation of trainers and consultants or an orientation to follow the themes developed in the commercial

and social media. The purpose of movement education and discussion, like that of other movement activities – fundraising, communication, political representation or whatever – should not become a goal in itself or subject to the logics and interests of its specialists.

Rather, the challenge is how movements *as movements*, as well as organisations and networks within them, can recognise both their own "knowledge needs" (what they, and participants, need to know) as well as the various "knowledge interests" (what people see as valuable, worthy of respect, etc.) at play. Typically, of course, movements and organisations are contested spaces: internally conservative (often, historically dominant) factions are likely to resist pressures to learn, while pressures for change often (not always) reflect the learning of emergent groups. One particularly problematic outcome is to seek to contain educational and theoretical concerns by marginalising them from day-to-day politics, as a playground for those who enjoy such things but irrelevant to most members.

When movements arrive at a dead end, or are simply going through the motions, or have been defeated, how can they develop their own capacity to learn, discuss and change, so that they can meet at least some of these knowledge needs in ways that participants recognise as meaningful – and move towards being able to win? Movements and organisations which are already successfully doing this, to whatever degree, are in a far better situation than those which struggle to ask themselves this question.

One important option at present, given how few of the "means of intellectual production" we control, is to see whether and how far it is possible to divert such means from elsewhere. Short of revolution, we are rarely in a position to seize those means, but a certain amount of piracy is often possible.

The logics of academia, of commercial publishing, of celebrity and so on can perhaps be pirated for a purpose, in different ways. A key challenge here is creating relationships of genuine dialogue and at least informal accountability. At one extreme, it is of course true that an individual in any of these spheres can construct an individual ethics for themselves in which they seek to make their own work benefit the movement in one way or another – the ethical component being a practical realisation that power is so centred in an institution that movements cannot realistically exercise significant influence on the writer, celebrity or academic beyond what the latter freely grants.

A second possibility is to construct an audience or market relationship. Radical media in practice tend to have the choice of doing this or being dependent on a political party (or similarly specific organisation); publishers are often secondarily dependent on students as a market, hence on the academics who can assign certain books. This is of course also true for other kinds of artists like musicians; in some cases, like theatre, there may also be some public or private money available for work with certain kinds of audiences or performers. These kinds of activity tend towards producer – audience relationships.

Genuine partnerships, then, are a real challenge. They are not impossible – every day I come across examples – but they are often very situationally-specific, in other words worked out in complex practice and often quite precarious. Probably the best starting point I have come across is where movements, organisations, or groups of activists within them have set out consciously to either create their own space in these other worlds, or to identify allies they can work with.

Learning from each other's struggles

I want to finish by discussing the biggest kind of challenge, and one which potentially outstrips any individual movement: how can we change the world, together? In other words, what do we know about social transformation beyond but including our individual struggles, movements and communities? How can we find things to do which are meaningful in terms of these more manageable contexts but which add a wider dimension, of deep structural change on many dimensions?

In a world of TED talks, 90-minute workshops and social media, we often fail to really discuss the question "how would we know?" What basis do we have for thinking that a particular approach or model really has anything to offer? Too many books offer a blank-slate, managerial or scientistic model which seems attractively simple and gives consumers something they can talk to others about – but without representing anything more than "what seems convincing to me". Too many trainings, perhaps, reflect an ideological concern with how the world should be that has not yet grown into the sort of experience and practical understanding needed to reflect how to turn "ought" into "is". And too many workshops transmit a learning that has been useful for growing a movement which has yet to win significant victories.

Some of the deepest learning available, then, comes from a serious understanding of the movements which have been successful at changing our world historically: but "serious" then means critical, aware of the failures and disappointments of that experience. Movements which have not yet won in their own terms but have managed to survive and develop over decades rather than years, too, have something important to tell us. In particular, where movements have managed to disrupt hegemonic relationships or sustain genuinely revolutionary processes, we need to pay attention.

There are probably few simple "lessons" that can be lifted, say, from the experience of Rojava or the Zapatistas, of the struggles that won independence from empire or welfare states, from the long history of the workers' and women's movements: but a three-dimensional understanding of any of these can help us think through the problems our own movements face, better.

I want to close, though, with short discussions of three fairly ambitious movement learning projects based on a different strategy, of dialogue between

experienced activists. These all rely on difference – diversity of issues and
actors, of geographical situation and of organising traditions – to help
participants think through what they know and to learn from others at this
strategic level.

Interface

This journal can be understood as a small contribution to this project. If in our
individual movements, our local situations and our specific political and
intellectual traditions, we have come to think about the struggle for social
change in particular ways, what do we stand to learn from listening to people in
other places, fighting around other issues and using a different language?

What we ask of our writers is to attempt to explain what they think their
movements (or the movements they work with) have learned, or what
challenges they feel they face, to this wider world of activists, movements and
communities in struggle. This means a double process of articulation – of
movements and activists coming to articulate things to themselves in the
process of discussion, theorising, researching their struggles – and of the writers
finding ways of talking about all of this in ways that can be read by others
unfamiliar with their specific situation and language.

Doing this isn't everyone's cup of tea – but it can allow strategically-minded
organisers in particular a way of stepping out of their own situation, to explain it
to others or to think about a different set of problems. There is not, after all, a
Book containing all the answers we need for the problems we find ourselves up
against – but we can learn from each other, together.

It is a constant struggle to make *Interface* happen, despite an incredible group
of activist researchers, all making great voluntary efforts and with little formal
recognition or support – and a constant struggle to avoid it falling victim to the
gravitational force that often makes such things become a vehicle for a specific
generation or group of friends (it is a source of pride that only one of the current
team of editors was there at the foundation).

That same gravitational force tends to pull towards the global North – and,
today, very powerfully, towards the use of "global English" rather than the
multilingualism many of us have come from and attempted to employ in the
journal. We also have to make efforts not to become dominated by a single
political position, academic discipline or movement interest: but these are more
easily changed with a bit of thought and effort.

As an unpaid and largely unfunded effort our costs are very low – or rather, they
consist of our own time and energy. That also means, however, that we do not
need (and cannot produce) the same relationships with readers that commercial
media involve – although we did carry out a positive Facebook survey a couple
of years back. What is possible in our situation is to have a close relationship
between authors – as producers, as referees and sometimes as future editors –

and editors; a low-status, unresourced journal depends on this kind of community and movement between positions. And of course the research represented by our articles itself represents a close relationship between the researcher and a wider movement.

We no longer have a standing request for new participants, but that doesn't mean we don't need people; it just means that it's quite an effort to bring new people on board a complex project like this in a way that's fair to them and to us. Still we are (always!) looking for activist researchers (in movement or academic institutions, or independent scholars), especially for those regions where we are not strongly present. And we would be incredibly grateful for IT or graphic support from people who don't need us to all become techies. But it is all unpaid!

"Social Movements / Activist Research" book series

A new project in a related area is Pluto Press' "Social Movements / Activist Research" book series, edited by myself and Alf Gunvald Nilsen[2]. In some ways this extends the logic of *Interface* to book length: we aim to publish research carried out "from and for" movements, not simply on or about the movements. In other words, the idea is to support the articulation of movement thinking, discussion and learning processes in book form – so they can be shared beyond that specific movement. A key audience here is actors in other movements and traditions elsewhere, who we hope will find this a worthwhile way to think about their own practice, as well of course as radical intellectuals of various kinds.

It is a complex editing challenge to help authors frame what they want to say in a way that goes beyond their own movement but does not fall back simply on expressing outrage about the issues and experiences that the movement has grown around, or on celebrating the movement's existence: in most cases, neither is particularly helpful to the movement, and certainly not in the form of books that (like most such books) will sell hundreds or at most thousands of copies.

The challenge, again, is to articulate movements' own learning and discussion processes in ways that can be understood by people involved in other movements, people who express their thought in different political and intellectual traditions, people in different regions of the world. This, though, is an important part of how – at this late time in human history – we can come collectively to own our different movement histories, rather than simply acting out our own locally specific traditions.

The first few books in the series are in the review process as I write and with luck we will see one or more on the shelves by the end of 2020.

---

[2] https://ceesa-ma.blogspot.com/2019/10/announcing-new-social-movementsactivist.html

Ecology of social movements

A final project, along rather different lines, is the "Ecology of social movements" course run at the Ulex activist training centre in the foothills of the Catalan Pyrenees[3]. Now in its third year, Ulex brings together a wide range of activist facilitators and participants from radical social movements across Europe for residential courses organised on a solidarity economy basis. Key to Ulex' effectiveness is a popular education model geared towards starting from activists' and organisations' own felt needs and lived experiences and moving further from there, without a predetermined ideological endpoint.

Courses and events at Ulex cover themes like "Sustaining resistance"; "Climate justice strategy and movement building"; Transformative collaboration"; "Community organising and social transformation"; "Resourcing resilience: working with trauma"; and "Thinking diversity radically".

The "Ecology of social movements" course is an advanced movement-building course rather than organisational development training. Participants are already experienced members of their own organisations, or have stepped out of such roles – the challenge for them is not to learn how to do the thing they do, but rather to articulate and reflect on their organisation's situation in the wider ecology of its movement and social context. What does it contribute to the wider movement; how well is it doing this; and where do the blockages and challenges lie? How does that wider movement sit within a yet wider ecology of movements, and in the longer history of struggles for social change?

Participants learn from each other, directly and indirectly, as much as from their own efforts. (Often groups send two participants in different situations, which is proving a very powerful learning tool, and a good way of helping what is learned to translate back into their organisation and the wider movement.) In the one- or two-week residential situation, it is possible to use the interactions between participants, and with the facilitators, for participants to think more deeply about what it means to be part of a wider movement, and to translate simple discontent and frustration into a rethink of organisational and movement strategy.

What now?

These personal experiences are quite specific ones: and there is no perfect, fixed form that social movement learning can take. Rather, we keep on exploring and experimenting, trying to find useful and meaningful ways of helping develop reflection around our own struggles. Like compost-making, a lot of learning is in a sense the by-product or result of action, fed back in not only to the specific organisation but to individuals, communities and cultures - whether enabling

---

[3] http://ulexproject.org/courses_events/the-ecology-of-social-movements-2-2/

the same plant to grow further or making it possible for a new season's seeds to flourish.

From a radical point of view, the challenge is an extraordinary one: our species, and for that matter the planet, *cannot* trust capitalism, patriarchy, the racialised global order or the state to shape our future – and we cannot rely on academia, commercial media or the celebrity machine to do our thinking for us. But our own attempts at learning, theorising, reflecting, researching are very fragile flowers, often surviving best close to the ground as the transmission of immediate practical skills and struggling to thrive at the heights and complexity needed for us to have any real collective ownership of our shared future.

References

Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor (2010) *Learning from the Ground Up*. London: Palgrave.

Budd Hall, Darlene Clover, Jim Crowther and Eurig Scandrett (2012) *Learning and Education for a Better World*. Rotterdam: Sense.

Laurence Cox (2014) "Movements making knowledge: a new wave of inspiration for sociology?" *Sociology* 48(5): 954 – 971.

Alan Sears (2014) *The Next New Left: a History of the Future*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood.

About the author

Laurence Cox is a founding editor of *Interface* and has been involved in many different social movements and movement education projects. His next book (with Alicia Turner and Brian Bocking) is *The Irish Buddhist: the Forgotten Monk who Faced Down the British Empire* (Oxford, March 2020). Contact: laurence.cox AT mu.ie