'Laboratories of Learning': Why Social Movement Education and Knowledge Matters

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Summary

Drawing on the findings of a three-year collaborative research project and recently published book (Novelli et al., 2024), this short piece makes the case that learning, education and knowledge-making taking place inside social movements really matters in the struggle for social justice and social change. Our research project sought to answer a simple but profound question: How do movements learn and make knowledge, and what is the effect of that learning and knowledge-making on activists, movements, societies, and social change? The project explored these issues in collaboration with leaders and activists from four social movements in Turkey, Colombia, Nepal, and South Africa. Our findings suggest that social movements in the Global South, struggling in some of the most complex and conflict-affected contexts, can offer us exciting, innovative insights into the myriads of ways that movements learn and produce knowledge as they struggle for a better world. We propose that it is precisely social movements located at the intersection of theory and practice that provide the potential to test out latest ideas, new thinking, and the limits of what is possible. They are 'Laboratories of Learning' from which both social theory and social action can develop and move forwards in new, imaginative, and transformative ways.

Keywords

Social movement learning
Popular education
Radical pedagogies

Introduction

How do movements learn and make knowledge, and what is the effect of that learning and knowledge-making on activists, movements, societies, and social change? This simple but profound question provided the foundation for a three-year collaborative research project (2018–2021) exploring the learning and knowledge-making processes of four vastly different social movement institutions located in four distinct countries and continents, as they advocate for peace with social justice in contexts of violent conflict, authoritarianism, and/or its aftermath.

The institutions, which were core partners in the research, are the following: NOMADESC, a radical human rights NGO based in Colombia that, through popular education programmes and human rights support and accompaniment, has brought together a range of diverse social movements in southwest Colombia, including trade union, Indigenous, Black communities, students, women's groups and peasants; the Housing Assembly, a grassroots organisation from Cape Town that fights for decent housing in post-apartheid South Africa and brings together different homeless and shack-dweller communities across the city; the HDK (Peoples' Democratic Congress), an umbrella organisation that brings together diverse social movements from across Turkey with a vision for a pluriethnic and democratic state, including Kurds, leftists, women's groups, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ and others; and the Madhes Foundation, Nepal, an organisation that works with and for the excluded Madhes community of the Tarai plains of southern Nepal. The Madhesh have suffered widespread discrimination but have begun a process of reclaiming their rights to land, dignity, and peace. In diverse ways, each organisation advocates with and for marginalised communities, seeking to defend and extend their basic rights to education, health, housing, life, dignity, democracy, and

equal treatment before the law. To different degrees, each organisation has also been the victim of state and parastate repression, violence against its members and activists and sustained surveillance and persecution.

Our research was coproduced by investigators working alongside social movement leaders and activists in-country and combined detailed case studies of the learning and knowledge-making processes of each social movement institution, which was developed through participatory workshops involving leaders, activists and supporters of the different movements and was incorporated within that a dynamic process of intermovement learning and knowledge exchange, here facilitated through a series of workshops and field visits to the respective country contexts, with the objective of building collective knowledge and intermovement solidarity. In that sense, this was both a research project and a solidarity process aimed at both producing new research insights and ideas while simultaneously strengthening the learning and knowledge-making processes of the respective movements and building bonds of solidarity and understandings across contexts, movements, and struggles.

In the next two sections, we briefly outline some of the background thinking to the research and then present some of the major findings, which will be useful for readers, activists and movements around the world to engage with and reflect upon and to hopefully encourage them to engage more fully with the freely available open access book (Novelli et al, 2024).

Background to the Research
Back in 1989, Alberto Melucci argued that social movements were cultural '*laboratories of experience'* within which '*new problems and questions are posed. New answers are invented and tested, and reality is perceived and named in different wa*ys' (1989, p. 207). Our research drew inspiration from this insight, extending it to explore the ways that social movements are themselves 'laboratories of learning.' Our central argument is that social movements have the potential, but only if we listen hard enough, to point the way forward to new modes of analysis, new ways of acting and resisting and new strategic directions to aim for and aspire to; that is, social movements are important sites of learning and knowledge-making yet have often been ignored by both mainstream academia and society. We also made the case for the need to fundamentally rethink our understanding of what constitutes education and learning and expand our horizons beyond formal and non-formal education to a more holistic, temporal and relational understanding of the multiple learning spaces that social movements offer to their leaders, activists, and followers. We believe that social movements, operating at the intersection of theory and practice, have

privileged insights into the nature and operation of the system within which we all inhabit. Those insights emerge out of and through struggle processes, and both historically and contemporaneously can provide new ways of knowing, thinking and being. Therefore, researching movements and their knowledge and learning processes can help us to better understand the limits of the possible in the struggles to come.

Key Findings
In engaging with and researching these movements and their learning and knowledge-making processes, we bear witness to rich and exciting processes of struggle, where social movements are engaging with the crucial issues of the day: the revolutionary subject; class versus identity politics; gender and patriarchy; unity and diversity; imperialism; prefigurative politics of living inside and outside of capitalism; state theory and state power; solidarity and its challenges—not in some abstract and distant academic way but through analysis, experimentation, engagement and adaptation. In doing so, they are testing out the limits of the possible in contextually grounded situations and building sophisticated, nuanced analyses of the complexity of social action and social struggle. None of this is easy, nor are they necessarily successful, but these processes are rich with theoretical and practical possibilities—a vibrant learning process that is producing a new vocabulary and grammar of social movement resistance.

Second, emerging from this research is a much stronger recognition of the need to return to definitional struggles over what constitutes education, learning and knowledge in social movements and its challenges (Choudry, 2015; Novelli & Ferus-Comelo, 2010). One insightful challenge, as noted by Tarlau, when reflecting on the weakness of the popular education/critical pedagogy literature, on the one hand, and social movement learning literature, on the other hand, is that '*critical pedagogues need more organisational thinking and social movement scholars need a more pedagogical focus*' (2014, p. 369). At the heart of this challenge, we believe, is that much critical pedagogy literature focuses on the practices of radical learning and, in doing so, prioritises the nonformal learning space rather than fully embracing the broader Freirean idea that the social movement itself—as a totality—is the school and that the '*struggles and actions, their forms of organisation, their "culture", in the broadest sense, constitute the starting point of popular education and its on-going field of enquiry*' (Kane, 2001, p. 13). Our research evidenced this: although we can learn a great deal from exploring the processes of nonformal education—and the NOMADESC/UIP case in Colombia is a rich example of that— we need to link it together with a broader exploration of the way activists and the social movements themselves learn and develop knowledge across the span of their activities, delving deeper into those diverse 'spaces of learning'. These broader

'spaces of learning' should also be part of the pedagogy discussion, but this requires a broadening out of the concept of pedagogy to link these spaces together.

In the present research, we have linked pedagogy to the oppositional social forces that are struggling over the production of new subjectivities. This has led us to the task of inquiring into the different forms of '*socialisation, education and work that promote rebellious or, on the contrary, conformist subjectivities'* (Santos, 1999a, p. 41). What does an alternative pedagogy of producing rebellious subjectivities look like? What is its social base? Within this understanding of pedagogy related to particular social forces with particular goals and objectives, we can begin to explore what a critical pedagogy of our movements might look like, the nature of the social forces that have given it life and what the particular pedagogical modalities are that are being deployed in the construction of counter-hegemony. Whether declared or undeclared, explicit, or implicit, each of the social movements explored has a 'strategic pedagogy' that transcends the movement's activities. It conditions and frames interactions, and it is these diverse social movement pedagogies that represent the sites of learning and contestation.

Third, and in relation to this, our research has evidenced the potential value for social movements of taking a much more conscious strategic pedagogical approach to social movement learning and knowledge-making. A comprehensive approach that transposes the *'different spaces of learning'* (from the classroom to the factory, meeting, and march) and develops a clear strategy to maximise opportunities for learning and knowledge-making, analysis, and reflection. This might begin with a serious nonformal programme of education emerging from a solid diagnosis of movement learning needs that must open up to recognise the vibrant spaces and debates that can be stimulated to take place across the movement's activities. An approach that identifies the different learning needs of leaders, members, activists, interested and general publics, eventually building a coherent strategy.

Fourth, we make the case for the centrality of education in the production of post national subjectivities. Across our case studies, we have evidenced the struggle over the production of new subjectivities, which are revolutionary in aspiration and rooted in the concrete realities and inequalities of the contexts analysed. We believe that these address, in diverse ways, a central contemporary challenge around the world. We live in societies shaped by very particular nation-state relationships, often rooted in colonialism, where dominant ethnic groups shape the nature of entry into citizenship regimes, with many unequally included and others excluded. These exclusions are rooted in various combinations and degrees of racial, religious, gender and class hierarchies,

and the task of many contemporary social movements is to attempt to construct alliances between different resisting subjects to challenge that hegemony. This touches on a central challenge voiced by Mahmoud Mamdani (2020) in his recent book *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, where he calls for a break in the relationship between nation and state.

This is important for us because we believe that this research provides some glimpses into that process, which is both prefigurative in aspiration and intention and extremely challenging in practice. Our research with the HDK in Turkey, for example, evidence what it means to project a postnational vision in an extremely aggressive and nationalistic state. It goes beyond the slogan of unity in diversity to showing what it really means to bring together divergent oppressed groups. In part, it has been about recognition and respect, but it is also about recognising historical injustices, unequal capacities and the need for space for diverse historically marginalised communities to work out their positions and stances. It also means ensuring that different oppressed groups feel included in decision-making, do not get rehierarchised and feel a collective stake in the political project. It is also about the construction of a collective vision that is inclusive of difference but that also projects forward bonds of unity and common purpose. For HDK, the post-national political project also requires the production of a postnational political subject that can hold these divergences together, which is itself a pedagogical process. The centrality of gender in this process is crucial as a unifying revolutionary subject, as is the recognition of the sovereignty of minoritised political subjects, which have been long marginalised through state policy.

In Colombia, we can similarly see in the NOMADESC/UIP project the struggle over the production of new inclusive political subjectivities: one of which is the 'victim.' In that process, 'victims' of state crimes and human rights violations are reconceptualised as actors with agency, historical memory, dignity, and purpose. The concept of 'victim' cuts across gender and ethnic lines and provides a collective and unifying framework for many Colombians that have suffered from state repression. For NEMAF and the Madhesh, a great deal of work has been done in building a unified Madhes political subject out of a history of maltreatment and humiliation. At this stage in their political struggle, rather than reaching out to other oppressed groups, they are working on building the confidence in their own collective political identity. This appears like the South African revolutionary Steve Biko's approach to 'Black consciousness' and the need for self-organisation. Finally, moving to South Africa, we can see in the Housing Assembly intensive work in building unity among Cape Town's precariously housed communities. Central to this has been the construction of the home as a site of organising and

resistance, with strong gender dimensions. All these processes of subject formation are highly educational processes requiring reframing, dialogue, and negotiation, but where successful, they can unleash powerful social forces.

Fifth, while the struggle for diversity, inclusion and representation in social movements is an ethical position aimed at redressing historical processes of marginalisation, it is so much more than that. The process of bringing diverse groups together starts the process of redressing the epistemicide that has dominated social theory and social movements. Working towards an 'ecology of knowledges' is radically transforming some of the movements, changing both the means and the ends of their struggles. The ideas emerging from historically marginalised communities, like the Indigenous, the Black movements, women's movements, the Kurds and the Alevis, are forcing social movements to rethink their relationship to industrialisation, modernity, the environment, the state and patriarchy, producing new 'cosmologies' that have the potential to construct vastly different futures.

Sixth, we argue that there is no magic bullet for radical social change but that we can learn a great deal from the contextually rooted praxis of social movements working things out on the ground in the process of struggle. Central to this argument is that doing research is not about the pursuit of the discovery of perfect formulas for radical struggle. Rather, it is about understanding that opportunities, decisions, and movement processes are taken in particular times and places, have unintended and intended outcomes and that these dynamics change over time.

Seventh, the stories of these social actors, who are working in extremely difficult conditions and often paying a very high price for their activism (emotional, social, political and economic), shine a light on the beauty of the culture, wisdom, knowledge and courage of people who have often been long marginalised, silenced, felt 'unwanted' and seen as 'undesired' simply because of who they are and what they represent. Thus, studies like this are extremely important to make these spaces, these people and their knowledges and histories visible so that we can all be better informed and collectively build a just 'ecology of knowledges.' We have much to learn.

Finally, we make the case for more collaboration between academics and social movements to break the impasse we find ourselves in. Working with and for social movements is first an ethical position. It is centred on the idea of breaking down the distinction between researchers and researched and putting into practice the idea of '*nothing about us without us*,' which is a central pushback to an increasingly commercialised research industry. This is a messy and

challenging process but can bring rich rewards both in terms of strengthening the effects of research for movements and in sharpening and strengthening research insights and findings.

Working through radical theory and ideas with social movements through praxis has the potential to bridge divides, enrich both social movement action and university campuses and support the development of both better theory and better practice. Our work as 'translators' can help bridge not only theory and practice, but also diverse movement spaces, sharing experiences, strategies, and knowledges. Recognising the rich ecologies of knowledge that exist between social movements and universities, building and strengthening links, provides a productive route forwards for both social theory and societal renewal—a form of intellectual commoning that can help build the future in the present, a prefigurative future rooted in dialogue, dignity, joy, reciprocity, equality and solidarity—values that are needed now more than ever.

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