Adult Education Quarterly
63(1) 57–77

DOI: 10.1177/0741713612442803
http://aeq.sagepub.com
SAGE

DIY Activists: Communities of Practice, Cultural Dialogism, and Radical Knowledge Sharing

David Hemphill[1] and Shari Leskowitz[1]

Abstract

This study explored innovative alternative processes of living, learning, and knowledge sharing of a loosely knit community of anarchist, anticapitalist "Do-It-Yourself" (DIY) activists. Generated through participant observation and interviews, findings reinforced adult education theories—that adults can diagnose their own learning needs and carry out appropriate learning activities. Participants also critiqued prevailing educational practices, suggesting alternatives such as autonomy, choice, critical thinking, cooperative learning, and deconstructing hierarchy. In particularly promising findings, the DIY activists described radical alternative channels for knowledge sharing: piracy, skillshares, Internet/open source media, the streets, and zines. Employing older and newer technologies, and legal and illegal methods, these modalities embodied in powerful ways the participants' radical political commitments. The DIY activists also gave cause to reflect on the nature of cultural dialogism, community, and communities of practice as they struggled with the nature of their own identities, ideologies, and desires to broaden outreach beyond their immediate community.

Keywords

informal learning, communities of practice, knowledge sharing

In recent years in urban centers of North America, Europe, and other parts of the world, growing numbers of young anticapitalist activists have begun to create alternative systems of governance, education, and living through a minimalist, anticonsumerist,

[1]San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
David Hemphill, Graduate College of Education, San Francisco State University, Burk Hall 506, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132, USA
Emails: hemphill@sfsu.edu

anarchistic, democratic political ethic. Sometimes identifying themselves as members of "Do-It-Yourself" (DIY) networks, they live "off the grid" by dumpster-diving, freight train-hopping, hitch-hiking, and dwelling in transient housing cooperatives. They live DIY lives, spending much of their time recycling, repairing, gardening, sewing, building, making music, and preserving their own food. Their lives are self-consciously anticapitalist and anarchistic, and they simplify their lifestyles to create alternatives to mainstream consumerism. As a part of their lives, DIY activists have built innovative alternative processes of adult learning, knowledge construction, and knowledge sharing. It is this counterculture that we refer to as the "Do-It-Yourself" or "DIY" movement. Though they do not always use the terminology themselves—sometimes even rejecting it—it is the term that comes from the DIY activists' world, and it best describes their community and their lives.

This study addressed the following research question: "Given the minimalist, anti-consumerist, and alternative democratic political ethic of the "Do-It-Yourself" (DIY) movement, how are issues of knowledge, information, and learning addressed by members of this community?" This research question was further broken down into five specific subquestions: (a) What is DIY: Politics and practice? (b) How do participants discuss the process of learning? (c) How do participants discuss the practice of learning? (d) What models of radical education are emerging from the DIY community? (e) How do participants situate themselves in society?

Many, though not all, of the participants in the study come from comfortable financial backgrounds but have deliberately given up their class privilege for a bohemian, politically driven life. Their critiques of mainstream society indict capitalism and with it, government-supported educational systems. Their anarchistic views of learning are reflected, almost unanimously, in criteria for effective learning that include autonomy, choice, self-direction, cooperation, learning from community, and deconstructing hierarchy in teaching and learning roles. Additionally, participants often create their own DIY alternatives to mainstream models of teaching and disseminating information through innovative alternative modalities.

The current DIY subculture in many ways resembles countercultural movements of the past—the Beats of the 1940s, Hippies of the 1960s, and Punks of the 1980s—all of whom critiqued capitalism and social climates of oppression. These subcultures have all been studied and their philosophies of resistance documented (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). There also has been related work in the field of adult education on issues related to the DIY movement, including radical adult education (Foley, 2001), voluntary simplicity (Sandlin & Walther, 2009), ethical vegans (MacDonald, 1999), sustainable living (Lange, 2004), and environmental activism (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). The DIY scene of the early 2000s, however, is newly emerging, quickly evolving, and marginally located. The DIYers are acting as what Antonio Gramsci (Forgacs, 1988) would call "organic intellectuals" through their everyday practice of crafting radical alternatives to mainstream models of governance, consumption, and learning. DIY activists offer a revealing portrait of an evolving community of practice and radical new forms of knowledge sharing.

Historical Framework

Previous Models of Radical Education With Origins in Political Movements

Historically, members of America's anticapitalist subcultures have implemented their own politically based educational approaches as alternatives to those of mainstream society. Among these were the original anarchist "modern schools" of the early 20th century, the socialist folk and labor schools of the mid-20th century, the free schools of the 1960s, and contemporary democratic schools.

Anarchism's modern schools. Though the term *anarchism* encompasses a variety of traditions, all such traditions reject external authority as enforced by the state, church, or other institutions. Modern anarchism originated in Europe during the Enlightenment, and by the 19th century had accumulated a substantive body of writing. Major theorists included Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1876), Mikhail Bakunin (1990), Emma Goldman (1910), and Alexander Berkman (1929). Miller (2002) refers to the anarchist "modern school" movement of the early 20th century as the "direct philosophical ancestor of free schools" (p. 114). Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer founded the original modern school espousing democratic values in Spain in 1901 (Cohen & Ferm, 1925). Through this legacy a school in New Jersey was established, and between 1911 and the 1950s, about 20 such schools were founded in the United States, many supported by radical, working-class immigrants. Ferrer's perspective of the public schools encapsulated anarchist critiques of society:

> The children must learn to obey, to believe, and to think according to the prevailing social dogmas. . . . There is no question of promoting the spontaneous development of the child's faculties. (Miller, 2002, p. 114)

Socialism's folk and labor schools. Another influence on contemporary DIY philosophy was the U.S. socialist movement of the 1930s. With a severe farm depression that preceded the Great Depression, according to Koch and Koch (1972), "This was a time when farmers became politically active and labor unions were growing strong" (p. 2). As farmers and tradesmen began to organize themselves to survive during the Great Depression, they embraced socialism (Trapese Collective, 1997). One outcome was an educational commune established at Commonwealth College in Arkansas. It was founded to challenge "establishment-funded" worker education programs that came out of the New Deal, which some radical socialists viewed suspiciously.

Another example of activism and education was Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which trained leaders from the poor and dispossessed people of Appalachia. Following in the tradition of the Folk Schools that were pioneered by Danish educational thinker Nikolaj Grundtvig in the 1800s, Highlander was a project of American activist educator Myles Horton and was a lone example of social justice in the deep south of Tennessee. Highlander's accomplishments are well documented in the adult education literature (Horton & Freire, 1990; Jacobs, 2003).

Free schools and democratic schools. With the rise of the Civil Rights movement and the counterculture of the 1960s, a parent–teacher network emerged to combat injustices experienced by African American and minority parents. Aided by teachers such as Jonathan Kozol (1972), a free school movement to create an alternative education system emerged. An apolitical version of the free school approach known as the "democratic school" also emerged, which evolved from A. S. Neill's school experiment in England, Summerhill School. This latter type of school became popular in the United States among a subset of White progressives (Cassebaum, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

Learning as a Situated Activity in a Community of Practice

The DIY movement offers a context for examining learning processes that are situated within specific communities of practice. Lave (1993, 1996) and Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as a situated activity with a central defining characteristic—that learners inevitably participate in communities of practice. In situated learning theory, there is no activity that is not situated, and there is an emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than "receiving" a body of factual knowledge about the world. Lave also argues that learning involves developing and "becoming" an identity in practice in the context of a community of practice. Learners as subjects and the contexts or communities with which they are engaged mutually constitute each other. In the practice of learning, according to Lave (1996),

> Crafting identities in practice becomes the fundamental project subjects engage in; crafting identities is a *social* process, and becoming more knowledgeably skilled is an aspect of participation in social practice. . . . Who you are becoming shapes crucially and fundamentally what you "know." "What you know" may be better thought of as doing rather than having something. . . . "Knowing" is a relation among communities of practice, participation in practice, and the generation of identities as part of becoming part of ongoing practice. (p. 157)

Niewolny and Wilson (2009) argue that Lave and Wenger's work shares its roots with cultural-historical activity theory and that both bodies of work imply that the nature of learning in social contexts is considerably more politicized than is generally reflected in much of the North American adult learning literature (Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006). The DIYers in this study, we argue, are members of a community of practice crafting knowledge, identities, and lives that reflect serious political commitments. They are engaged in informal learning, as distinct from formal learning or nonformal learning as the terms are generally understood in the field of education. As Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2002) note, the European Community describes formal learning as that which is typically provided by an education or training institution,

is structured, and leads to certification. Nonformal learning is typically not provided by an education or training institution and generally does not lead to certification; however, it is structured and is intentional from the learner's perspective. Informal learning, on the other hand, is learning that results from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is not consciously structured and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional, but in most cases it is nonintentional. We thus believe that the DIY community offers a particularly promising context for exploring and articulating dimensions of situated learning theory and informal learning.

Cultural Dialogism: Historical Predecessors to the DIY Movement

Another dimension of the theoretical framework of this study is based on Bakhtin's (1981) theory of cultural dialogism. Specific cultures and cultural products often share, interact with, and appropriate aspects of other cultures. Bakhtin calls this interactive process cultural dialogism, and he notes that cultures, even in different historical times can be in dialogue with one another (Bakhtin, 1981; Lipsitz, 1990). In fact, he expands this sense of indeterminacy to all language. He argues that all utterances are transitional and dialogical in nature:

> The most important feature of the utterance . . . is its *dialogism*, that is, its intertextual dimension. . . . All discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. (Todorov, 1984, p. x)

Although originally basing his work in literary analysis and criticism, Bakhtin and subsequent scholars whom he has influenced believe that language, thought, and culture have important dialogical dimensions that influence and continually shape their meanings—which are never ultimately fixed. The DIY movement, then, appears to offer multiple examples of such cultural dialogism in practice, because in analyzing its antecedents, we can see clear and conscious historical links to prior anarchistic social movements.

The American Hobo. The original hoboes of the 19th century rode the rails out of necessity; they were migrants looking for gainful employment. The U.S. rail system was new and expanding, offering rapid, free travel across vast distances if one knew the ropes. There were new jobs and industries growing in the West, and poor people used this means to reach their destination (Conover, 1984). Later during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the iconic hobo emerged, looking for work, riding the rails through the Dust Bowl, and taking whatever he could to survive. More recent waves of hoboes, the "Beats" of the 1940s and 1950s and the DIYers of the early 2000s, did not choose the hobo lifestyle out of economic imperative. Although they recall the historical tradition of the earlier hoboes, the Beats (made famous by author Jack

Kerouac in *On the Road* [1957]) and today's DIYers have adopted the hobo lifestyle by choice rather than necessity. They have been artists, philosophers, and activists, rejecting their class privilege for a bohemian life.

Food Politics. According to biblical history, waste was sinful. The Book of Leviticus mandated a practice called "gleaning," requiring that landowners allow the poor to look over their fields a second time after harvest (Leviticus 19:9, King James version). Contemporary DIYers may be seen as "urban gleaners," reclaiming more than unharvested stalks of wheat, given the bountiful waste of modern capitalist society. The DIYers also maintain cultural practices that reflect the San Francisco Digger counterculture of the 1960s, which borrowed philosophically from the English "Diggers" of the 1600s. The original Digger philosophy, and what earned them their name, was to provide food to the poor grown on land taken from the rich. They acted collectively during a time of economic collapse and widespread starvation to reclaim patches of "the commons," land that had been designated for public use that was being sold off to private owners. The Diggers planted crops for community survival, protesting the enclosure of public lands by private owners (Trapese Collective, 2007, p. 35). According to the Digger Archives (n.d.), the San Francisco Diggers of the late 1960s took up the English Digger tradition in the Haight Ashbury district of the city, distributing free food to those who needed it and promoting a utopian vision of a "Free City." This movement is still alive in the form of Food Not Bombs, an anarchist group that solicits nearly spoiled food from community grocery stores and then cooks it to serve free meals in public parks.

Punk and DIY. The evolution of the DIY movement is closely related to the development of Punk rock in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and other areas. Punk rock developed initially in the United States in the mid-1970s in response to the excesses of disco music and stadium rock. Punk music was rebellious in its musical cacophony, lyrics of outrage, and extremes of appearance. A DIY punk ethic also evolved, embracing anticapitalism and rejecting mainstream music industry practices. Punk bands performed basement shows in nontraditional venues and recorded and distributed their own music to avoid corporate sponsorship. As the subculture evolved in Britain, a generation of unemployed youths became a punk movement. They ran their own clubs, formed their own record labels, and designed their own clothes, furthering punk's DIY ethic (Appell & Hemphill, 2006; Sinker, 2002). By the 1990s, a punk revival was under way in the United States, with multiple new genres and new, youthful adherents. Green Day, based in Berkeley, California, was one of the most prominent punk acts of the 1990s and grew out of the same cultural milieu as the participants in this study (Appell & Hemphill, 2006; Sinker, 2002).

Beyond its roots in radical politics, however, the DIY movement has also been coopted by corporate interests as a hobby and fashion aesthetic in the 2000s. Craft project and home improvement magazines such as *ReadyMade* and *Craft* and a DIY home improvement cable network have emerged to capture an upscale DIY market. The term *DIY*, then, has become politically contested.

Table 1. Study Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Education	Occupation
Avi	29	Male	Biracial	AA	Green hauler, handyman
Erika	29	Female	Biracial	BA	Chef
Ethan	29	Male	White	BA	Web designer
Gordon	22	Male	White	BA	Bike mechanic, student
Jaime	26	Female	Biracial	MA	Barista, teacher
Joshua	27	Male	White	BA	Environmental nonprofit fundraiser
Katie	27	Female	White	BA	Community center case manager
Michael	28	Male	White	PhD candidate	Student
Ruth	28	Female	White	BA	Americorps volunteer teacher
Sara	28	Female	White	BA	Apprentice in herbal medicine

Methodological Approach

This study employed a case study approach. In this instance, the case to be studied was the San Francisco Bay Area community of DIY activists. Although some methodologists such as Creswell (1994) define the case study as a single instance of a bounded system, such as a child, clique, class, or school, others do not hold to such a tight definition. Yin (2009), for instance, argues that the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is blurred and that it is important to set the case in its context through rich descriptions and details. For this reason, we associate ourselves with Yin's approach to the case study. Furthermore, this study is best described as a descriptive case study, since according to Yin (2009) and Merriam (1998), descriptive case studies employ narrative accounts as primary sources of data; our study is primarily based on interview data. Our key epistemological assumption in conducting this research, as Merriam (1998) puts it, is that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" and that as case study researchers we "are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6).

The 10 study participants were DIY activists in the San Francisco Bay Area, and because of researcher familiarity with this population, there was easy access to them. As Table 1 indicates, the study participants were evenly balanced in terms of gender, all were under the age of 30, and were predominantly White, although two were biracial. All were well educated, and two had postbaccalaureate degrees. Participants have been given pseudonyms.

Participants were selected through an initial purposive sampling process, which was augmented by a snowballing approach. The study began with a small number of identified activist leaders who then suggested others in their community to interview. An email outreach letter was devised, and a recruitment flyer was ready to be posted at co-ops and

community spaces, though maximum participation was achieved before these tools were needed. The primary method of data collection was through a structured interview, with open-ended questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission. Though the interview setting was informal, the interview itself was structured. There were no changes in instrumentation needed during the course of data collection.

Data collection took place in spaces chosen to best accommodate the participants, including homes, a campus academic office, a community space for radical grassroots activists, and computer-mediated exchanges. Interviews took on average between half an hour and an hour and a half to complete, and those who wrote via email reported back roughly the same time commitment.

Once the interviews were completed, written transcriptions were made from the audio-recordings, and participants were given the chance to review their transcripts, with two taking advantage of the opportunity. Data were then coded and analyzed employing an open coding protocol (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Emergent codes were identified and then clustered. The study's initial research categories were analyzed and then merged with the emergent codes to arrive at the final codes that are reported as the following five major themes that emerged as major findings, of which a subset are discussed in this article:

1. What is DIY? Politics and practice?
2. Critical resistance: How do participants talk about democracy, capitalism, and government-provided education?
3. How do participants discuss the process of learning?
4. What are the emerging models of radical education?
5. Participants explore the concept of belonging and movement building.

There are a number of limitations to this methodology and to this study in particular. Although there are many benefits to the case study methodology, including its richness of context and "thick description" as Geertz (1973) puts it, it is sometimes difficult to generalize based on case study data. Case studies are also prone to observer bias and are not always readily open to cross-checking. This study could have been strengthened if there had been more time available to devote to it, if additional participants had been recruited, and if additional instrumentation—quantitative as well as qualitative—had been employed. It would also have been desirable to gather more information on the personal biographies of DIY participants in order to explore race, class, gender, and other motivating factors for choosing this lifestyle, including childhood upbringing and the influence of parental politics.

Study Findings

Participants Discuss the Process of Learning

The participants, while not necessarily careful students of anarchist philosophy, were generally consistent in their accounts of anarchistic ideals of education. All noted the

individuality of the learner and the impossibility of meeting individual needs through standardized structures of public education. They discussed the importance of developing a learner-directed model of education within the public schools and further recommended several alternative methods of learning. Independent from any prompting, most participants mentioned many of the following criteria for effective learning: (a) autonomy and choice, (b) self-direction, (c) cooperative learning, (d) learning from community, and (e) breaking down hierarchy in roles. These criteria reflect the recommendations of many critical scholars of education, including Brookfield (1993), Collins (1996), Freire (1970), Horton and Freire (1990), Taylor (2006), and others.

Lave's (1991, 1996) conception of communities of practice is also relevant to understanding the learning practices of the DIY scene, although the participants, true to their anarchist views, simultaneously rejected the notion of being described as a part of any community or movement:

> I don't think I have ever identified my "lifestyle" as specifically being DIY. (Sara)

> I've never heard the term "do it yourself" applied to an entire lifestyle before. . . . I don't think I'm part of a community. I am a-social. (Avi)

> I've never used the term "DIY" to describe myself nor do I really identify as part of the "DIY" scene. (Ruth)

> I feel like I have low-level participation in the DIY scene. (Erika)

Though participants did not readily agree to the self-identifier "DIY community," there was strong apparent cohesion in their philosophies and collective practices that set them apart from mainstream society as a distinct community or social network.

Autonomy and Choice

The notion of autonomy, frequently used in informal learning discourse, is also a fundamental theme in the philosophy of anarchism and the responses of the DIYers. Participants discussed how they had shaped their entire professional lives to accommodate their drive for autonomy. They noted that in doing so they were willing to forego the time-saving conveniences of contemporary life. The DIYers are committed to producing goods and services themselves. Though this means spending more time on food production, clothes manufacturing, and home maintenance, it also means less time spent at jobs earning money to purchase those very products.

> My penchant for doing-it-myself is paired with a desire to maintain a simple lifestyle with little importance placed on material objects and a strong distaste for consumerism. . . . I live in a manner in which I do not spend the majority of my day working for the pecuniary benefit of someone else. I participate as little

> as possible within the capitalist system and try to maintain the primacy of only the most basic of human needs. For this reason, I have the freedom from wage work that allows me the freedom to choose how I will spend my day working, learning, and living by choice. (Sara)

The freedom to live by choice is integral to the DIY ethic. The anarchistic drive of the DIYers for self-reliance is reflected in their emphasis on local community as a place for learning and governance, where they participate in micro-level democracy.

> [DIY] means living your life as much as possible, free from dependence on government, or on big corporations . . . anything that empowers yourself and your community, rather than the evil powers that be. (Joshua)

Autonomy in their educational lives is also core to the DIYer's philosophy. Seeking autonomy from government, and envisioning a new model of education, they see informal, self-directed learning and autonomy as tools to help their cause. Echoing Brookfield (1993) and Collins's (1996) calls for overt social action. Joshua said,

> The most important thing for creating a participatory system of government in this country is to educate people. There has been a concerted effort by the powers that be to dumb down the American population, and we need to reverse that trend, if you want any sort of revolutionary change.

Informal Learning and Critical Thinking

Although only one or two of the participants had formally studied educational theory, many mentioned something resembling a theory of independent learning.

> The process of learning has to do with the learner being in charge of what they learn, because what is the point of teaching if the learner doesn't want the knowledge you want to give? (Ruth)

> Learning should not be teacher-directed. That's something I really appreciate about the less formal schooling I'm involved in: it's really directed by the people who want to learn something, how they want to learn about it, and expressing what they need in order to learn the topic better. (Kate)

Beyond their consensus on controlling their own learning as a key premise for learning, participants also called for a focus on critical thinking.

> The public school system does a great deal of damage to young people by insisting upon the memorization of certain "facts" instead of fostering critical thinking skills. (Sara)

Cooperative Learning in Community

According to the participants, learning should not be limited to traditional notions of classroom teaching. Learning from peers is a strategy well in alignment with other cooperative aspects in DIY life—working, living, and eating. When asked to describe their ideal educational setting, participants overwhelmingly cited "cooperative effort."

> An ideal educational setting for me would involve many instructors/mentors, co-teaching, mentoring, facilitating . . . and . . . an absolute commitment of engagement by all those involved. (Jaime)

Participants also noted repeatedly that learning should take place in the community, hinting at the obsolescence of state schooling. This sentiment echoes Illich's (1970) anarchist goal of deschooling—moving away from a state-sponsored education system. These views are also consistent with Lave's (1991, 1996) arguments characterizing learning as a situated social phenomenon that occurs in a community of practice. As Lave argues,

> A reconsideration of learning as a social, collective, rather than individual, psychological phenomenon offers the only way beyond the current state of affairs that I can envision at the present time. (1996, p. 149)

Sara and Gordon both emphasize the primacy of the community as their preferred context for learning.

> I believe the world outside of the dominant educational system in the U.S. is . . . my ideal learning environment. By traveling to other towns, other states, other countries or by staying in the same place for a long time, there are always a million opportunities every day to learn a million different things from the people and environment around us. (Sara)

> I think education should take place in the home, and in the community. It should not take place in an exterior institution. . . . Learning should be a constant and dynamic experience. (Gordon)

Kate added that local community should have more power to control and guide schools:

> Communities can provide some direction in education: This is what's important in our community, this is what we value, this is what we want our youth to be learning, these are the people we want running our schools, this is how we want decisions to be made.

There is thus consistency in the participants' ideologies regarding cooperation and community. They also emphasize participatory democracy and local control of education and community services, tailored to meet individual and community needs.

Working to Break Down Hierarchy

Echoing Freire (1970), participants emphasized the need to break down the roles of learner and teacher in order to build an egalitarian model of education. Some argued that roles should be fluid.

> These roles should be shifting constantly, demonstrating a fluidity that would eventually nullify this binary that [is] doing more damage than good in our current system. (Sara)

Others, who were teachers themselves, had conflicting sentiments about designating distinct roles of learner and teacher and had some difficulty acting in the role of teacher-as-authority-figure.

> I've been teaching middle school youth for four years. At the beginning I had a really hard time presenting myself as a "teacher"—with a big T—and I lost a lot of respect from the students because I didn't want to be an authority figure. (Ruth)

Two participants independently described something resembling Freire's (1970) banking concept of education, characterizing it as part of the dominant paradigm of education that goes against their DIY ideology.

> There is a specific term for this that I'm forgetting—filling the glass up mentality within most education . . . institutions, which is that . . . students are a bunch of empty glasses waiting to be filled up by some teacher with all this knowledge and essentially it's this transfer process. . . . That is not a productive way of thinking about education or learning. (Ethan)

> There's a lot of power involved . . . when the teacher has the power and the student doesn't. . . . The teacher is supposed to have all the information and be the expert and . . . filling up the brains of people who are learning. (Kate)

Participants critiqued hierarchies and power structures in learning and all other facets of their lives. Anarchism is based on the notion that each individual has the right to control his or her own life, and the DIYers' ideology of participatory democracy emphasizes putting power back into their own hands.

Emerging Radical Channels of Knowledge Sharing in the DIY Movement

Participants discussed multiple radical channels of knowledge sharing in their community, including piracy, skillshares, Internet/open source media, the streets, and self-published zines. DIY activists are creating alternatives to the status quo, they take pride in their acts of creation, and they see these new channels as explicitly political. As Joshua states,

> These methods . . . are springing up. There are lots of people who are waking up to the fact that if we need a real alternative media, it's something we are going to have to do for ourselves. They do pirate radio shows, they do Internet radio shows, they create zines, they have skillshares, where they have real freedom to share with their community in a way that's not mediated at all by the Establishment.

Piracy. One of the most radical means of sharing knowledge mentioned by participants was piracy of information, which can include copyright infringement. Joshua hosted a radio show on Berkeley Liberation Radio, which broadcast on the pirated frequency 104.1 FM. Using a pirated frequency meant that Joshua was violating state policies, which auction off public airspace to private corporations.

> I basically alternated between playing a lot of conscious hip-hop and . . . having short little news segments where I'd talk about news stories that were getting ignored by the mainstream media.

The rationale for piracy is, like much of what DIYers do, to put power back into the hands of the creators, without having to rely on corporations—in this case the mass media. Another rationale, a key tenet of anarchism, is that the public should not have to pay for information. The DIYers believe that it should be in the public domain, and access to it should be free. The notion of public domain goes back to the medieval notion of the "commons."

Michael echoes the sentiment of keeping information free, and he explicitly rejects copyright laws in order to encourage free dissemination of information. He calls libraries "anarchist institutions" since they allow free access and do little to prevent users from copying books, CDs, or DVDs.

> There's such an easy way to disseminate the information through the libraries. Ripping CDs and DVDs is easy; the technology came really fast. The technology for stealing books is a little bit more challenging. But in our [university] department we've got this fancy photocopy machine—it has a scanner that goes

> at the speed of a photocopier, and then it makes PDFs and emails them to you. So I've been scanning books.

The outcome of such illegal dissemination is that the knowledge has reached a broader audience, and in a way emulates the Robin Hood strategy of the Diggers, putting knowledge back in the hands of the public. Michael goes on to say,

> It is worth my time to sit there at the photocopy machine . . . then I can give [the photocopies] to other people. And then [the photocopied books] end up being this whole curriculum. . . . I'm going to put them on the server at my house. We've got all this piracy at my house! No one's got the books, but they have printouts.

Skillshares. Skillshares have been widely recognized as a DIY hallmark. Skillshares are free cooperative events where volunteers lead workshops on a skill in which they have expertise, ranging from crafts to civil disobedience, street medical knowledge, or legal aid. Ethan uses the skillshare model in his cooperative company:

> We don't codify these practices necessarily, but what we essentially do is a lot of skillshare type activities. There's a lot of one-on-one time where we've got questions that other people in our company or peers we know can answer, and so we'll just ask and can teach each other those things.

Similar to skillshares are radical study groups. Using self-directed learning processes that participants designate as crucial, study groups are autonomous learning zones. Kate, who participates in an herbal medicine study group, discusses the trend:

> A lot of people [in my group] have had varying amounts of more formal herbal studies training, but with different teachers and in different parts of the country. All of that knowledge can come together and be shared.

True to their anarchist ideology, Kate and group members also subvert other formal training workshops that charge for knowledge:

> It's a pretty common model in my community that anyone who goes to a more formal training on a topic goes with the attitude of "I'm not just going because I want this information, but I'm going because I can bring this back to my friends, my family, my community, people I know. Really share that information so that people who didn't have access to that information can have that access through me."

Some skillshares and study groups take place at "The Long Haul," a local anarchist meeting. The space was also the location for several participant interviews for this

study. Though hesitant to identify themselves as a community or movement, the DIYers through their collective, cooperative actions appear to form a community of practice.

Internet and open source media. Participants who work with technology mentioned the Internet as a democratizing tool for knowledge-sharing:

> There's nothing I could think of that somebody somewhere hasn't done—and put online. [They] take the time to chronicle [their] adventures in taking apart this very specific model of computer [for] anyone else who does—it's crazy. It's unbelievable. And it's all free, you just have to look for it. (Avi)

Burbules (2006) calls such activities self-educating communities:

> One of their most striking features . . . is an overt commitment to sharing information, initiating newcomers, and extending their collective knowledge through such processes as shared problem-solving, experimentation, and independent inquiry—new knowledge that typically gets fed back into the network. (p. 273)

Moreover, the newer developments of wikis and open source software and other media further democratize the Internet. Erika discusses Drupal, the open source operating system used by Erik in his cooperative business:

> Anyone can use it; everything is transparent. You can read about it online, you can get all the tools to do it online. And it's meant to be accessible. . . . It kind of reminds me of Wikipedia in a certain way.

However, lack of free and fair access technology was also frequently mentioned by participants. Three participants noted that the Internet, while able to open up vast amounts of information, is not universally available.

> The Internet was supposed to be this big gateway of information, and you can learn anything on the Internet, but it's inaccessible to a lot of people. (Gordon)

The participants, then, display a blend of enthusiasm and skepticism about the Internet. On the one hand, they view it as a powerful tool of constructing and sharing knowledge in ways that are relatively unconstrained by corporate or governmental power structures. On the other, they recognize the problems of politics of access and the digital divide.

The Streets: Zines and word-of-mouth. Before the Internet, there was word-of-mouth. The San Francisco Diggers of the 1960s distributed the Digger Papers free on the streets. These street manifestoes fused several contemporary anarchist traditions together and can be seen as the forerunner to the modern "zine" phenomenon. Distributed free of charge on the streets of Haight-Ashbury to the hippie counterculture

community of San Francisco, the Diggers' leaflets and street sheets spread breaking news, political tirades, and word of event happenings.

Like the Diggers, Joshua prints and distributes his own activist materials:

> That is the main activist front I've been working on: Getting out on the street, passing out flyers, talking to people, handing out DVDs, documentaries.

Ruth mentions the various word-of-mouth methods of passing along information in her community.

> I would say that information is mostly disseminated by word of mouth/talking . . . also through email . . . flyers . . . power point presentations, maps/posters in public spaces and zines.

Ruth cites further examples of self-publishing in her community beyond zines. She documents local dumpsters that may have salvageable food available on a map posted in her house, with ideal hours to go, along with information on obstacles to easy dumpster-diving, including locks and security guards.

In the tradition of the 1950s Beats with their independent presses, and the 1960s Hippies with their mimeographs and street sheets, zines have emerged more recently as a product of the punk culture of the 1970s and 1980s (Spencer, 2008). Always created independently, either hastily or laboriously, and usually artistically and politically, zines cover topical issues in the community and usually use a cut-and-paste method that portrays an iconic punk aesthetic. Several participants mentioned this method of sharing information:

> There is a large zine trade in town, as well as many underground event spaces and workshops. (Jaime)

> I made a zine about community bike shops in the bay area. . . . I've handed them out to co-workers, friends and people on the street riding bikes. (Ruth)

> I have several zines about fermenting different foods, or basic herbal medicine, or reproductive issues with specific medicines or home remedies. And having that is a really accessible form of information. It's not a big technical textbook. You don't have to have a computer or internet literacy. (Kate)

Though Kate is a consumer and advocate of zines, she also offers a critique about the medium's limits:

> I think zines are providing an alternative access to information, but it's in a very small, specific community. . . . Within the radical DIY scene it's a known

alternative to share and learn information. But I don't think it increases access to information typically outside that community.

The insular nature of zine culture raises a broader question about the DIY activists and the extent to which they wish to reach out beyond the confines of their immediate community to share learning, knowledge, and political action.

Conclusion

This study has explored the radical living, learning, and knowledge sharing alternatives to dominant, corporate-driven, consumer society practiced by DIY activists in one location. They espouse and live by their own DIY version of anarchism, unique to a particular historical and cultural moment. Yet there also appears to be a process of cultural dialogism at work, as the DIY activists are in dialogue with the past historical phenomena of the American Hobo, food politics activists, and punk music innovators.

The knowledge that study participants shared with us reinforces long-held notions in the field of adult education regarding informal education—that adults are well capable of diagnosing their own learning needs and carrying out appropriate and innovative learning activities. They also articulated a radical critique of prevailing educational practices, suggesting alternatives that include autonomy, choice, critical thinking, cooperative learning in the community, and breaking down hierarchy.

In a promising set of new findings, the DIY activists described radical channels for knowledge sharing: piracy, skillshares, Internet/open source media, the streets, and zines. Employing technologies both old and new, and methods both within and outside the law, these knowledge-sharing modalities embody in powerful ways the participants' substantive, radical political commitments. Some of these modalities are dialogical in the Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin, 1981). Zines are essentially pamphlets that are self-printed and passed out on the streets or to acquaintances—a technology and modality that hearkens back to the 19th century. Skillshares hearken back to the work of the Diggers of San Francisco or to the earlier English Diggers of the 1600s. Other technologies such as Internet/open source media are state-of-the-art without specific historical antecedents. Nonetheless, all these tools democratize the ways in which the DIY activists construct and share knowledge, moving away from the entities that currently control their sources of knowledge—government schools and corporate mass media.

At the same time, the participants have given us cause to reflect on the nature of a community and a community of practice. Most were uncomfortable with being formally associated with the DIY "scene" or "movement," and as a result we were hesitant to designate the DIY activists as a community of practice. Nonetheless, following the work of Lave (1996) and Lave and Wenger (1991), we felt justified in doing so, if we are to believe that learning is the ongoing transformation an individual's role in a

community of practice. Lave argues that learning involves developing and "becoming" an identity within the context of a community of practice, so that knowledge acquisition and identity development are inherently linked. Therefore, following this logic, "knowing" is a relation among communities of practice, participation in practice, and the generation of identities—in this case the identity of "DIY activist." Crowther et al. (2008) point out that the process of learning in social movements—to the extent that the DIY activists we profile can be characterized as a movement—"is not linear and probably has to be understood in terms of "leaps and bounds' accompanied by setbacks and relapses" (p. 1). Nonetheless, social movements and the work and lives of alternative, anticapitalist communities of practice such as the DIY activists are very distinctive contexts for learning.

Some participants also expressed the desire to reach out and educate other communities. But as Jaime noted, "The [DIY] 'scene' can be a cliquey one." Sara, although appreciative that her co-op is supportive of her DIY pursuits, wants to be part of a community outside of her immediate co-op:

> Because I wish to participate as minimally as possible in a capitalist economic system does not mean that I wish to interact as minimally as possible with my neighbors, co-workers . . . fellow bus riders, etc. This is where I depart from . . . the DIY scene. Achieving DIY sufficiency is undoubtedly aided by being part of a community of like-minded folks . . . but I have found that plenty of people who do not subscribe to a DIY lifestyle . . . [still] engage in DIY activities and projects.

Yet if the DIY activists do want to reach out and educate their surrounding communities, they are currently not particularly well suited for this outreach. Their activities are often insular, self-referential, and off-the-grid. Since they live in poor urban neighborhoods with predominantly Black, Latino, and Asian neighbors, practices like dumpster-diving, handing out zines, or conducting pirate radio broadcasts in English will have a limited appeal to their multicultural neighbors without a more focused outreach effort. The DIY activists' anarchist ideology, which rejects formal organizational structures—and which even hampers their self-definition as a community—may also limit their potential for broader outreach and community education.

DIY is to a certain extent about creation. If the intention is to reach out and broaden the base of DIY consciousness, then there will probably have to be movement away from the current condition of insularity. Several participants cited educating the community—both mainstream and radical—as key elements of their political work. Yet at the same time, the more formalized such an organization becomes, the more it may stray from its anarchist ideological roots.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Appell, G., & Hemphill, D. (2006). *American popular music: A multicultural history*. New York, NY: Thomson Schirmer.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakunin, M. (1990). *Statism and anarchy*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Berkman, A. (1929). *Now and after: The ABC of communist anarchism.* New York, NY: Vanguard Press.

Brookfield, S. (1993). Self-directed learning, political clarity, and the critical practice of adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 43*, 227-242.

Burbules, N. (2006). Self-educating communities: Collaboration and learning through the internet. In Z. Bekerman, N. Burbules, & D. Silberman-Keller (Eds.), *Learning in places: The informal education reader* (pp. 203-227). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Cassebaum, A. (2003). Revisiting Summerhill. *Phi Delta Kappan, 84*, 575-578.

Cohen, J., & Ferm, A. (1925). *The modern school of Stelton: A sketch.* Stelton, NJ: Modern School Association of North America.

Colley, H., Hodkinson, P., & Malcolm, J. (2002). *Non-formal learning: Mapping the conceptual terrain.* Leeds, England: University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Institute.

Collins, M. (1996). On contemporary practice and research: Self-directed learning to critical theory. In R. Edwards, A. Hanson, & P. Raggatt (Eds.), *Boundaries of adult learning: Adult learners, education and training* (pp. 109-127). New York, NY: Routledge.

Conover, T. (1984). *Rolling nowhere: Riding the rails with America's hoboes*. New York, NY: Viking Press.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crowther, J., Hemmi, A., Martin, I., & Scandrett, E. (2008, July). *Learning through ICTS in the environmental justice movement: Case studies from Scotland*. Paper presented at SCUTREA 2008, 38th Annual Conference on Whither Adult Education in the Learning Paradigm, Edinburgh, England.

The Digger Archives. (n.d.). *History section: Communication company*. Retrieved from www.diggers.org

Foley, G. (2001). Radical adult education and learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 20*, 71-88.

Forgacs, D. (Ed.). (1988). *An Antonio Gramsci reader: Selected writings, 1916-1935*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Goldman, E. (1910). *Anarchism and other essays.* New York, NY: Mother Earth.

Hall, S., & Jefferson, T. (1976). *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in postwar Britain*. London, England: Hutchinson.

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Illich, I. (1970). *Deschooling society*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Jacobs, D. (Ed.). (2003). *The Myles Horton reader: Education for social change.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Kerouac, J. (1957). *On the road.* New York, NY: Viking Press.

Koch, R., & Koch, C. (1972). *Educational commune: The story of Commonwealth College*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.

Kovan, J. T., & Dirkx, J. M. (2003). "Being called awake": The role of transformative learning in the lives of environmental activists. *Adult Education Quarterly, 53*, 99-118.

Kozol, J. (1972). *Free schools*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Lange, E. A. (2004). Transformative and restorative learning: A vital dialectic for sustainable societies. *Adult Education Quarterly, 54*, 121-139.

Lave, J. (1993). The practice of learning. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Lave, J. (1996). Teaching, as learning, in practice. *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 3*, 149-164.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Lipsitz, G. (1990). *Time passages: Collective memory and American popular culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Macdonald, B. (1999). An ecological perspective of power in transformational learning: A case study of ethical vegans. *Adult Education Quarterly, 50*, 5-23.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miller, R. (2002). *Free schools, free people: Education and democracy after the 1960s*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Niewolny, K. L., & Wilson, A. L. (2009). What happened to the promise? A critical (re)orientation of two sociocultural learning traditions. *Adult Education Quarterly, 60*, 26-45.

Proudhon, P. (1876). *What is property?* Princeton, MA: Benjamin R. Tucker.

Sandlin, J. A., & Walther, C. S. (2009). Complicated simplicity: Moral identity formation and social movement learning in the voluntary simplicity movement. *Adult Education Quarterly, 59*, 298-317.

Sawchuk, P., Duarte, N., & Elhammoumi, M. (Eds.). (2006). *Critical perspectives on activity: Explorations across education, work, and everyday life.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Sinker, D. (Ed.). (2002). *We owe you nothing: Punk Planet, the collected interview*s. New York, NY: Akashic Books.

Spencer, A. (2008). *DIY: The rise of lo-fi culture*. London, England: Marion Boyars.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Taylor, E. (2006). Making meaning of local nonformal education: Practitioner's perspective. *Adult Education Quarterly, 56*, 291-307.

Todorov, T. (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin: The dialogical principle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Trapese Collective. (2007). *Do it yourself: A handbook for changing our world*. London, England: Pluto Press.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bios

David Hemphill is Professor and Associate Dean and Acting Chair of the Department of Administration and Interdisciplinary Studies in the Graduate College of Education at San Francisco State University. He is the author of books and articles on popular culture, postmodernity, literacy, cross-cultural communication, and second language acquisition. He teaches courses on critical and cultural theories of education, international education, and interactions of culture, transnationality, hybridity, and learning, and is working on a book on these and related issues.

Shari Leskowitz completed the Equity and Social Justice graduate program of the Department of Administration and Interdisciplinary Studies in the Graduate College of Education at San Francisco State University. She works in Oakland, California in the field of early literacy intervention, with an interest in youth empowerment. Her current project is Green Branch (greenbranchlibrary.org), a library and resource center for young change-makers.