

Politicization as Learning: Centring Racialization, Colonialism, and Gender in Learning Sciences Analysis

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Current research

I am a scholar of learning, identity development, and student-led social change. In order to theorize politicization within sociocultural learning frameworks, I focus on how student activists learn new practices and develop new worldviews in movement contexts. My research shows that learning is fundamental to social change, so I trace how student leaders in movements learn systemic critiques and prefigurative practices, and I show how people learn to become justice-oriented leaders. Within the Learning Sciences, my work has been part of a significant recent shift to address politics and power within studies of learning. My work is important for shaping what we know about learning and equity in social movements. Theorizing how student activists learn to understand, critique, and re-make social relations in their movements is fundamental to building a more equitable society and a generation of justice-oriented leaders.

My current research project examines the development of political consciousness within the climate change movement. A new generation of young people have seized on longstanding critiques of mainstream environmentalism as a white, colonial, and masculine movement, and they are working to shift its politics. My project explores how student fossil fuel divestment activists develop political critiques, alternative practices, non-dominant ways of knowing, and radicalized identities through their activism. Through a multi-year, participatory action research project that collected video of meetings, rallies, direct actions, caucus spaces, reflections, interviews, and stimulated recalls, this study examines the struggles over the legitimacy of different ways of knowing and being within multi-racial, multi-gendered, and settler colonial movements. We collected over 10,000 minutes of multi-camera video data, which we content-logged and coded collaboratively. Several different analyses have emerged, which draw on sociocultural views of learning, as well as different constellations of feminist, anti-racist, and Indigenous thought.

Several articles have emerged from this project. The first, accepted at the *American Educational Research Journal*, traces the politicization of students in the group. This paper uses the case of radicalized student activists within the fossil fuel divestment campaign to theorize politicization as a process of conceptual development, shifting practices and modes of participation, becoming cognizant of and challenging dominant epistemologies, and developing a shared identity as radical activists (Curnow, Davis & Asher, forthcoming). This work extends traditional work on learning in social movements, centring sociohistoric critiques and bringing robust theories of learning as a central analytic for theorizing changes in movement frames. Another article, building from the 2016 paper presented at ICLS (Curnow & Chan, 2016), analyzes gendered and racialized participation dynamics within the fossil fuel divestment campaign. It argues that expertise and leadership were conflated with white, masculine modes of practice, undermining women and people of colour's participation and leadership. This paper contributes to theorizations of "doing gender" by analyzing performances of racialized masculinity, arguing that disproportionate recognition of white men as leaders and experts was an ongoing interactional accomplishment by people of all genders. I also have an article building from ICLS 2016 (Curnow, 2016), which argues that situated learning theory must account for power dynamics and social relations in communities of practice. This contributes to the Learning Sciences by bringing an equity critique to situated learning and communities of practice theories, arguing that racialization, gender, and colonialism must be included in analyses of learning, identity development, and participation.

The publications from my dissertation build on my earlier articles on learning and leadership in the fair trade movement. In *Gender & Education*, I traced women's conscientization processes, demonstrating how consciousness-raising among a sub-community of practice forced shifts within the broader community. This challenged situated learning theory to account for power relations and theorize resistance to masculine leadership within a community of practice framework (Curnow, 2013). Another article argues that consensus-based decision-making and equity-oriented facilitation enabled participants to transform their self-identification to become activists through legitimate peripheral participation (Curnow, 2014b). In *Interface*, I used legitimate peripheral participation to theorize leadership development across the student fair trade network (Curnow, 2014a). I argue that leaders should construct opportunities for joint work with and between grassroots groups to develop shared political vision and build the ladder of engagement for rising leaders.

Contributions to the field

Often, scholars in the Learning Sciences conduct research, design interventions, and present findings without addressing the power dimensions of their work. My research begins from a different set of assumptions, acknowledging the positional ways we produce knowledge and organize systems of learning. The decolonizing, participatory, feminist, and sociocultural learning theories that my work brings to bear are central to my analysis of learning in social movements. A growing number of Learning Scientists are calling for exactly the kind of analysis that my work provides—deep analysis of the interrelations between power, politics, and learning.

Theorizing racialization, gender, and colonialism and learning

Last year, *Cognition & Instruction* published a call for a greater focus on power and equity in our discipline, arguing that learning is shaped by racialized, colonial, and gendered dynamics (The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). My work addressing these issues has been at the forefront of anticipating and responding to this call. My research turns the field away from the ubiquity of Eurowestern ways of knowing, bringing attention to the racialized, gendered, and colonial aspects of learning theory.

Analyzing and making space for reconciliation and anti-colonial pedagogies

I have invited papers in two forthcoming special issues, one on racialization and settler colonialism in the environmental movement for *Environment & Society* (Curnow & Helferty, forthcoming), and another on the pedagogical significance of territorial acknowledgments for *Curriculum Inquiry* (Asher, Curnow & Davis, forthcoming). These papers contribute to emergent discussions around Indigenous-settler reconciliation and decolonization by examining how settlers learn about settler colonialism and racism, and how that learning informs their participation in multiracial environmental campaigns. This research centres Indigenous methodologies in fields where these are not widely acknowledged, and plays an important role in making space for other ways of knowing and being that emphasize decolonial practice as a step toward reconciliation. In response to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action, my research provides data on how social movements and educational institutions can create opportunities to learn that serve anticolonial and antiracist goals, enabling settlers to meet our obligations and better educate students around settler colonialism.

Social action as a learning process

My academic publications have been part of the shift in the Learning Sciences toward theorizing learning in the context of social movements. My publications in *Gender & Education* and *Interface* both brought sociocultural theories of learning into the analysis of student activism and gendered leadership development (Curnow, 2013; 2014a). Additionally, I have published papers theorizing learning in the context of social movements (Curnow & Gross, 2016; Curnow & Wilson, 2013), offering the strength of Learning Sciences tools to social movement scholars and activists in order to shift how scholars conceptualize learning and participation. These publications also add to the growing understanding of the nature of learning in social movements for scholars of learning, who tend to work within school settings rather than in social action contexts.

For the Learning Sciences, my work offers groundwork to theorize learning and citizenship practices and to integrate learning about racialization and settler colonialism as central learning accomplishments which can be measured, evaluated, and theorized.

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