

Adult education and radical habitus in an environmental campaign: Learning in the coal seam gas protests in Australia.

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This paper examines the adult learning dimensions of protestors as they participate in a campaign to stop coal seam gas exploration in Gippsland in Central Victoria, Australia. On a global level, the imposition of coal seam gas exploration by governments and mining companies has been the trigger for movements of resistance from environmental groups. They are concerned about the impact of mining on their land, food and water supplies. In central Gippsland a group of 'circumstantial activists' comprised of farmers, tree changers and other local residents are campaigning against coal seam gas exploration. This unlikely coalition of environmental action groups has made effective use of a variety of community education strategies. This paper commences by outlining some of the key literature on learning and activism drawing on the education tradition of adult learning. We then draw on key concepts from Bourdieu's writing on 'habitus' and 'field' to analyse the data from this research. We outline some of the learning

practices of activists; through their involvement in this campaign, and the knowledge and skills they gain as they develop a feel for the game of protest. We argue circumstantial activists learn both formally and informally in the social environment of campaigning. Of particular interest is the role of more experienced activists from Friends of the Earth (FOE), a non-government organisation (NGO), as they pass on knowledge, experience, tactics and strategies to the novice and less experienced activists in this community campaign. We explore some of the contradictions of the protestors' identification as activists using Bourdieu's concepts of 'doxa' and 'Ilusio'. The paper concludes by arguing learning in activism is a rich tradition of adult education and practice. However, Bourdieu's writing on field and habitus makes an added contribution to interpreting the learning that occurs in the social space of a campaign or social movement.

Keywords: Adult learning, informal learning, activism, environmental movement, coal seam gas, Bourdieu, habitus.

Context and methodology

Research into adult learning in the coal seam gas protests is limited, although an important site of research that needs further exploration. In previous research about learning and activism it has been argued social movements and campaigns are rich sites of adult learning (Ollis 2008, 2011, 2012). Whilst activists learning can cross a broad range of issues of concern and activism can span both progressive and non-progressive values and ideologies. Our interest in this space of research is concerned with progressive social change and the contribution that activism and movements for social change can make to furthering the project of social justice and to educating communities about social change. Tracey's previous research into the learning dimensions of lifelong activists and circumstantial activists examined the differences and similarities between 'lifelong' and 'circumstantial' activists. Circumstantial activists generally participate in activism due to a disruption, a life event or a series of circumstances that collide to motivate them to act on an issue of concern. One of the important outcomes of Tracey's previous research is the need for more attention to be given to the learning processes of 'circumstantial activists'. For example, if we can understand

their motivations for participating in activism, there is a possibility of building larger and more cohesive movements for social change (Ollis 2012).

Twenty-three in-depth interviews were held with protestors involved in the coal seam gas protests in central Gippsland and its surrounding areas. The data collection phase of the research commenced in September 2013 and was completed in March 2014. This research for this project is qualitative using case study methodology and method (Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Stake 2003, 2006). An application to the Deakin University's Faculty Ethics' committee was made and approval was given. Most of the interviews were held in the Gippsland, areas of Seaspray, Poo Wong and Koo-Wee-Rup. Access to the research site was facilitated by FOE an organisation involved in environmental activism in Victoria, Australia and internationally. A call for research participants was promoted through the networks of FOE and participation was entirely voluntary. The research team promoted the research at several coal seam gas events. Interviews were initially recorded and then transcribed. Research participants were given a copy of their transcript to review and noted any changes that needed to be made regarding factual inaccuracies or misconceptions about the data. This allowed the research participants to have some control of the data and the stories about their activism and adult learning (Stage & Manning 2003). All of the participants have been given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

As researchers we have both been involved in a broad range of campaigns and social movements. Michael was a draft resister for the Vietnam War, and has been involved in a myriad of community development based initiatives. Tracey is an activist educator and has held multiple roles as an organiser who has campaigned on issues such as youth housing, affordable housing, women's issues, the union movement and the rights of refugees. Whilst it can be argued we both have a position of insider/outsider status to the research, we had limited direct connection to the coal seam gas campaign. We knew none of the participants that were interviewed, apart from one interview that was conducted with the campaign co-ordinator of FOE.

Reviewing the literature, adult learning and activism.

Adult education has long represented a tradition of learning outside the confines of formal education and schooling. Places and spaces of learning such as neighborhood houses, museums, community gardens, adult and community education centers, libraries, art galleries, community campaigns, public protests and social movements are all sites of education, although not widely recognised as such. Progressive activism and the work of social movements generally reflects a collective commitment to social change education as Sandlin, Chulz and Burdick claim:

.....they deal with bigger more pressing issues of cultivating a pedagogy of humanity, which ultimately has implications for schooling and non-schools settings. These are public pedagogies – spaces sites and languages of education and learning that sit outside the walls of the institutions of schools (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick 2010:1).

The literature on learning in activism is eclectic and draws on several education traditions such as public pedagogy, critical pedagogy and adult learning. However, this paper focuses primarily on the education tradition of adult learning.

In recent years, It has been recognised that learning in community campaigns, activist groups and social movements are significant sites of adult learning (Branagan & Boughton 2003; Brookfield 2005; Crossley 2008; Foley 2001; Jasper & Goodwin 2004). In Australia, the work was led by Griff Foley in his important book *Learning in Social Action* (Foley 1999). This research explored the incidental, everyday learning that occurs informally in sites or spaces of rich activity such as neighborhood houses, environmental campaign groups, or a womens organization in Brazil. Learning in these sites is recognised as incidental, informal, tacit and implied and not always recognised as real adult learning (Foley 2001). Moreover adults learn both individually and collectively through their engagement in community development activities and by their participation in social movements (Jesson & Newman 2004). Walter (2012) has claimed, central to these concerns have been the role of social movements in facilitating collective and individual adult learning; and the significant role of activist educators in advancing the important work

of social movements.

Much of the research on learning in social action has focused on cognitivism and the critical intelligence of activists as they work towards issues of social change (Foley 1999, 2001; Newman 1994, 2006). Or social learning in the situated site of popular education or social movements (Ollis 2012). Research on environmental activists' training has found learning is based on adult learning principles and is largely informal as formal education amongst environmental activists is uncommon (Whelan 2002:33). Learning in the social environment of protest is an emotionally charged practice, where emotions are often the drivers for taking action in the first place (Drew 2015; Flam & King 2005; Gould 2004). They are sites of education where adults engage in holistic, purposeful and embodied learning (Drew 2015; Ollis 2011, 2012). As Maddison and Scalmer (2006) argue progressive activists have a great deal to teach the world and refer to this knowledge as 'practical wisdom'. A powerful outcome of adult learning in social action is recognised in the conscientisation that occurs in individuals' lives as they grow and develop an awareness about both themselves and the world around them (Freire 1972). Others argue learning in the environmental movement is a calling and transformative, learning in this sense is deeply rooted in both the conscious and unconscious self. These activists generally have a deep spiritual commitment and connection to land, conservation, land care and the environment (Kovan & Dirkx 2003). This is apparent in the coal seam gas protests where a deep connection to the land by activists, is an important motivation for participating in the campaign. These farmers, tree changers and environmental activists are highly protective of preserving their land and water supplies for future generations.

Pierre Bourdieu, activism and habitus

As stated the literature on activism and learning is eclectic and draws on several broad traditions of education and social theory. We argue an analysis of the practices that happen in the field of protest using Pierre Bourdieu's writing on habitus can contribute a new dimension to how we view activists' learning. Bourdieu wrote a series of books on practice, which focused on using his theory of habitus. (Bourdieu 1977, 1998, 2000). The work initially came from reflecting on his early days

as an anthropologist, observing and interacting with peasant groups in Algeria. Bourdieu believed that the theory of structuralism could never explain the complex ways of organizing in this community. It could not account for certain work practices, their communal way of living, gender roles, marriage ceremonies and other community practices (Bourdieu 1999). He believed the key to analysing any practice within a field was to look at the ways in which people organized and interacted with one another, often unconsciously. Bourdieu believed that in any social field, certain habits, practices and dispositions are developed and reproduced; he described this process as habitus. Habitus and field work with one another. A field is a social space that generates activity. Habitus are the practices that are generated in the field (Bourdieu 1977, 2000). In this case the coal seam gas activists ways of practicing with one another - their dispositions, their ways of behaving, speaking, dressing, running a picket line, managing a campaign or interacting with others in the field, all form part of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977). Tracey's previous research on activists' learning practices identified that newcomer activists learn from one another in the social field of protest (Ollis 2012). It is here that novice campaigners learn the skills, knowledge and practices required to be effective in a protest, often from the more experienced members in the group.

Doxa & Illusio

Bourdieu's concepts of 'doxa' and 'illusio' also have relevance to understanding the coal seam gas protesters. Doxa is the concept that long held beliefs, thoughts, ideas and practices that seem to be orthodoxy, correct and natural, have more often than not been imposed by a struggle of competing visions. Doxa is a point of view of the dominant, which generally presents itself as a universal view (Bourdieu 1998). The doxa in this case is that green activists, farmers, and tree changers have competing interests or non-aligned views. This discourse will be explored further in this paper when we outline some of the narratives of the protesters. Pierre Bourdieu claims doxa is orthodoxy, a primordial political belief.

... It should not be forgotten that such a primordial political belief, this doxa, is orthodoxy, a right, correct, dominant vision which has more often than not been imposed through struggles against

competing visions. This means that the ‘natural attitude’ ... that is, the primary experience of the world of common sense, is a politically produced relation, as are the categories of perception that sustain it (Bourdieu 1998:56-57).

Illusio is from the Latin word ‘ludas’, meaning game, for example being in the game, or being caught up in the game, believing the game is worth playing or having a feel for the game (Bourdieu 1998). Developing a mastery of the practice of the game is relevant to the experiences of the coal seam gas protestors and why they are interested in the campaign. As Bourdieu claims,

In fact the word interest initially mean precisely what I include under the notion of illusio, that is, the fact of attributing importance to the social game, the fact that what happens matters to those who are engaged in it, who are in the game. Interest is to ‘be there’ to participate, to admit the game is worth playing, and the stakes created in and through the fact of playing are worth pursuing; it is to recognise the game and recognise its stakes (Bourdieu 1998:76-77).

In this campaign the protesters see the importance of the campaign and they want it to be successful. Success means suspending the long held doxa of perceived negative discourses about radical environmental activists or greenies. These activists are learning how to play the game of protest.

Coal Seam Gas campaigning

Public interest in environmental issues has significantly increased in Australia in the past two decades (Flowers & Chodkiewicz 2009). Issues such as climate change and land conservation have long been concerns for environmental activists. One of the important roles of environmental movements and NGO’s is to ‘bring about behavioral and social change for sustainability’ (Flowers & Chodkiewicz 2009:298). In recent years the mining of large multi nation companies by horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing (fracking) for gas, has emerged as a major environmental concern in Australia (Lloyd, Luke & Boyd 2013). As Willow claims:

In recent years, the merger of horizontal drilling and hydraulic

fracturing (often shorthanded as fracking) techniques has made the extraction of fossil fuels from deep shale rock layers feasible and lucrative (Willow 2014).

In the food belt of Victoria an unlikely coalition of people have joined together to prevent multinational mining companies from 'fracking' for coal seam gas. Here seasoned environmental activists involved with FOE, farmers, tree changers and concerned community members, have formed an improbable alliance to educate the community about the dangers of fracking for coal seam gas. In Australia and elsewhere internationally, as large multinational resource companies search for gas in a market with increasingly depleted gas resources, fracking for coal seam gas has become an attractive proposition. (Lloyd, Luke & Boyd 2013). In Australia, fracking for coal seam gas has become a prominent issue of concern for farming communities, where the imposition of hydraulic fracking has the potential to contaminate important water and land resources. Moreover, a coalition of rural community groups has formed across Australia under the broad banner of 'Lock the Gate Alliance' (Lloyd, Luke & Boyd 2013). There are three central concerns of the community organizers involved in the campaign. Firstly, the risk to the Australia's best food producing land and natural environment is important. Secondly, Australia is one of the driest continents on the planet with water resources becoming increasingly scarce; protesters believe the current mining boom will inevitably impact on water purity. A third and final concern is the impact of pollution through mining on the air as well as water quality. The Lock the Gate Coalition argues the impact on community life in rural communities is dramatic, drawing on international research about the impact of fracking for coal seam gas resources and armed with several case studies of farmers' experiences of mining companies using their land to mine (<http://www.lockthegate.org.au/impacts>). This coalition of activist groups and their successful campaign have managed to stop the production of coal seam gas in Victoria. Significantly, the coalition of Lock the Gate and FOE have been able to secure an indefinite broad based moratorium on mining.

The narratives in the dialogue listed below reveal the agency of these coal seam gas campaigners. Amy has had a long-term involvement in the environment movement, Gail is a local resident of Poowong and John is a retired small business owner who now owns a farm in Poowong in

Gippsland. Both John and Gail are newcomers to protest and have never been involved in a major campaign before participating in the Lock the Gate Alliance. As several activists have argued, the impact of coal seam gas on their land and community was the driver for their participation in the protest.

Amy says:

Well initially it disturbed me greatly to think that our food bowl in Gippsland would be destroyed and the water would be contaminated. It's a great risk I feel, [in] Gippsland, and because I'm retired, and because I've always been I suppose caring of the environment or always like to think I've lived as sustainably as possible I thought 'yes this is something that needs help and I'm prepared, [to do something] I'm quite passionate about it'.... .

Gail says:

... this is an issue that touches all parts of our lives. So I mentioned social and I mentioned environmental as well. So there's the education on 'what is the environmental impact' which is something you have to research and you make a conclusion. You draw your conclusions and say 'is this acceptable', 'is this the only alternative we have', 'are there better alternatives'

John says:

Yeah my word, once you contaminate the ground that's it - finished. They've proven that, in America they've proven it and Queensland and New South Wales are now learning the problem, we can't afford to have it.

What do the CSG protesters learn?

Most of the participants in the research are circumstantial activists; as previously stated circumstantial activists are those activists who come to protest due to a life issue, a crisis, an event an issue that effects them politically or personally. The event is often disruptive in some way, for many of these activists they must protest in response to this disruption or conflict. The disruption gives them important agency and drive,

which builds a desire for knowledge so that they can resolve the conflict or disruption. Most of the CSG protesters, unlike lifelong activists, have not participated in protest and campaigns in their youth. They have not been involved in student politics or socialist, labor or political movements normally associated with 'left' politics. Moreover, the geographical location in central Gippsland is traditionally a conservative electorate. Most of the protesters have not been involved in broad based political social movements. Furthermore, some of the coal seam gas protesters are quite antithetical to radical environmentalists or greenies. It should be noted however, that in many rural farming communities people are often involved in local community issues. Furthermore, there is a long history of farmers pushing back against bank foreclosures, due to drought and loss of income. It has been argued the 'rural' community is a complex social space of education where important community practice within that social space is often misunderstood (Reid et al. 2010).

Furthermore some of the protestors are still establishing their identity about whether they are an activist, or whether they belong to a social movement (Jasper & Goodwin 2004). When the protesters were asked if they identified as an activist they responded with the following. Gail says her participation in the campaign is because she has a duty of care to the environment:

'No I don't really see myself as an activist. I was in New Zealand and they had a placard and it read 'I am not protesting against, It is my duty to care for', it was something in that wording and I thought 'yeah it's not actually about anything but it is a duty of care'.

John says he doesn't identify as an activist at all, but just another person who's concerned about coal seam gas. When he was asked if he identified as an activist he stated, 'no, I don't - I'm just another anti-coal seam gas bloke'. Tim a retired engineer and tree changer is adamant that he is not an activist and claims, 'I'm not an activist - I'm a concerned resident!' On the other hand Tina's involvement in the campaign has changed her identity and perception of herself, she states she now views herself as an activist when she never did before:

Yes I do now I never did before, definitely so then you define

activist, I'm not a direct action one, no that does not interest me at all, I will go to protests, but mind you when we did the Gippsland one (rally) I was certainly in your face down there and got on to a you-tube video. - Tina

Most of the protesters in the campaign learn a great deal through self-directed learning. They learn about global systems of inequality such as neo-liberalism and the imperatives of growth, profits and business interests. The majority of this education occurs through searching the Internet about the impact of fracking on the environment, and through socialising with other members of the campaign group. As Gail claims:

I've spent literally hundreds and hundreds of hours trying to educate myself, you can feel strongly about something, but unless you know what you're talking about, you would be very unwise to go and speak to other people.

Bourdieu (1984) argues the knowledge of the autodidact is not given prominence in the hierarchy of knowledge because it is not legitimized and sanctioned by an educational institution through set curriculum and assessment and recognised or credentialed through formal qualifications or by what he refers to as the scholastic mode of production. Adult education literature and research has shown that most adults learn for most of their lives, in formal and non-formal settings (Beckett & Hager 2002; Billet 2004). However, we now know that a majority of this learning also takes place informally through socialisation. Education is an all encompassing process which often preserves dominant cultures and practices, but also provides an opportunity for reflection as well critique (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick 2010). Activists' practice is learned through socialization and communication with other activists. In regards to the CSG protesters they develop incremental knowledge from more experienced activists and by observing both the effective and poor practice of other campaigners, they learn more experiential and communicative practices, conducted through embodied protest actions. Education is located not in the activities of the teacher, nor in the activities of the learner, learning occurs in the social interaction that occurs between both teacher and learner. Learning is embedded through social interaction in the everyday activities of being engaged with a group of campaigners. An important theme arising from the research is

the protesters frequently referred to learning from the more experienced campaigners from FOE.

Tina says:

At that stage FOE was coming to every community meeting by industry and Quit Coal, so it was a huge effort on their behalf and very well appreciated because they had the experience, although there was so much they didn't know about the local community.

Gail says:

FOE is quite extraordinary, I'll be quite honest and everybody is willing to give you help, you're never given the brush off no matter how ignorant you are. I think definitely the training, you do the training, but you also get a lot of literature as well that you can read at your own leisure.

FOE has also been instrumental in providing some formal training on using the media and direct action practice. Through socialization in the field of the campaign with other activists, the data has shown the protesters learn community development skills such as, letter writing, how to lobby a politician, an understanding of policy, group work skills such as communication, facilitation skills and the everyday functions of running a meeting. Moreover, they learn event management skills such as how to run a rally, with large amounts of people, how to negotiate safety of people in a large event, how to liaise with police and use the media. They learn to think strategically about systems and structures that advance or impede the progress of their campaign. Tim's comment below shows his critically cognitive practice:

... You can see companies wrecking the place, destroying the habitat I suppose, peoples livelihoods with no consideration at all for the future and our politicians are letting that happen and I can see the criminal aspect of that, it mightn't be law type criminal but it is criminal to society and human behaviour, if you like and respect for everybody rather than just the hip pocket!

John says he has learned about the social, economic and political realities of coal seam gas mining and the potential impact on the land

by reading, thinking and listening to other people in the alliance and through observing the practice of others. As he claims 'I just read and look and listen and observe'. A common theme of those interviewed for the research is the role that most have played in educating the community about the risks of coal seam gas. This has included holding public forums and meetings, speaking at community forums and holding a stall at local events. In addition community education has taken place by selling hundreds of lock the gate protest signs, which are now fixed to the gates of farms all over central Gippsland. Education is always an important part of any campaign as Jose Dineras- Peiras writes:

Activist educators are educators, whether school teachers or not, who are engaged in the collective social struggles for the liberatory transformation of the status quo. Their main purpose is to help to construct a more just and humane society in which everybody's rights are respected and in which one cultivates the principle that nothing is impossible to change. In this sense activist educators are 'dreamers' because they really believe that it is possible to construct a different society, they actively participate in trying to realize this dream by laying the foundations of deep structural changes in their current societies (2013:p1).

The activist dreamers in the coal seam gas protests are educating the public about the risks associated with fracking and the subsequent costs to the environment now and for generations to come.

Developing a 'feel' for the game of activism

A significant early theme arising from the research has been the role that FOE has played in resourcing the group of protesters. FOE is a radical global environmental NGO, recognised for its green politics. Indeed, in Victoria the organization still operates as a collective amidst an environment of NGO's that have become corporatised. Here FOE organizers have played a role as conduit between the NGO and Lock the Gate campaigners within the field of the campaign and broader social movement. Bourdieu (1977) has argued that in every social space (field) certain practices and dispositions are played out to create a habitus, it is here the CSG protesters learn the dispositions to practice effectively. In the case of the Lock the Gate campaign, here several fields join together. The fields consist of, the non government organization FOE,

the national Lock the Gate Alliance and the field of the central Gippsland campaigners to form what Crossley argues is a ‘radical habitus’(Crossley 2002). As Crossley has written Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is able to provide an epistemology that allows us to understand how societies and certain social practices are played out and or are reproduced:

His notion of the habitus as both structured and structuring, a product and producer of social worlds, for example, captures both the embodied-performative aspect of social structures, and the mechanism whereby they are transmitted across generations and through historic time (Crossley 2003:43).

The partnership is important. FOE has resourced the group with information, provided spaces for informal learning to occur, but have also provided formal media training and information about direct action practices. As Bourdieu claims:

Because the habitus is an infinite capacity for generating products - thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions - whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production ... (Bourdieu 1977:79)

One of the consistent themes from the data has revealed the enormous admiration the protesters have for the skills, practices and abilities of FOE organisers; this was observed over and over again. The ‘symbolic capital’ that is brought to the field by the FOE organizers has been necessary and attractive. It is interesting to note Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘doxa’ and ‘illusio’ are relevant to this field. As previously stated, doxa denotes ideas and discourses that are taken for granted in any social world. Bourdieu’s concept of illusio outlines a belief in the game of protest that the campaigners have collectively agreed to play (Bourdieu 1977, 1998). The newcomer coal seam gas protesters entrenched ‘doxa’ is the taken for granted view that the interest of environmental activists could not ever possibly be aligned with the interests of farmers. Here Bourdieu’s concept of ‘illusio’ for the game is being played out in relation to the identificatory dispositions of the protestors outlined above, and the rejection of the dispositions of being a greenie. Moreover, the illusio of the protesters towards the FOE organizers has allowed them to suspend their understanding of what they perceive to be the realities of the ‘game’ of protest. That is, that the very FOE organizers

the campaigners admire so much have the dispositions and practices they would associate with being a ‘greenie’. We argue the community development processes and practices undertaken by FOE of resourcing the alliance, building community, providing an informal space for knowledge development, informal learning and formal training, has undermined the doxa of antipathy towards the ‘green movement’. Illusio has allowed the protesters to buy in to the game of protest because they have made an investment in the game and a successful one at that. These protesters believe they can undermine, delay or even win the campaign against coal seam gas exploration in Victoria.

An emerging conclusion

In this paper we have outlined some of the early findings from our research project into adult learning in the coal seam gas protests, in central Gippsland. Here a disparate group of campaigners have been effective in establishing a broad based moratorium on coal seam gas exploration in Victoria. The educational dimensions of these campaigners have shown they develop a broad range of community development skills by participating in informal and formal learning in the situated site of protest. They learn from observing the practices of the more experienced activists from the NGO FOE. We have argued there are several overlapping ‘fields’ in this campaign that allow a radical habitus of activism to form. Using Bourdieu’s concepts of doxa and illusio we uncover the contradictions and long held beliefs about green activists and how these beliefs are suspended in order for the campaign to be successful. Finally, we argue the situated site of protest is a rich space for adult learning to occur. These activist educators are teaching the world about the impact of coal seam gas fracking on the environment.

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