

# **LEARNING, KNOWLEDGE, AND ACTIVISM: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE**

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All social practices, including activism, involve the production of knowledge (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008). This Special Issue of the *Postcolonial Directions in Education* journal is located in the multidisciplinary body of literature that explores the relationship between knowledge and collective action for social transformation. It emerged out of a panel presentation at the 2013 World Council of Comparative and International Education Societies in Buenos Aires, Argentina. After the panel, entitled “Social mobilisations for education in Brazil, USA and India: A dialogue between activists and academics”, discussions about the papers presented led to this Special Issue, which includes essays about multiple forms of knowledge production within sites of social mobilisation; and strategies for doing activist research and teaching in the corporate academy.

The five contributors explore learning ‘for’ action and learning ‘in’ action in a range of social sites including the university classroom, non-governmental organisations, and social movements. At the same time, they engage with the politics of knowledge production within and across these sites in the context of globalisation and the neoliberal

knowledge economy and society. Here I draw on Nancy Fraser (2001:5)'s description of conditions in the knowledge society:

“In this society...identity is no longer tied so exclusively to labor, and issues of culture are intensely politicized. Yet economic equality remains rampant, as a new global information economy is fueling major processes of class recomposition. Moreover, to-day's diversified population of ...workers...and those suffering from social exclusion is highly conscious of multiple status hierarchies, including those of gender, “race,” ethnicity, sexuality, and religion.”

In this context, progressive social movements must engage with a neoliberal discourse of democratic politics that has “denuded” the public domain of histories of oppression, systematically attacked spaces of collective mobilisation and replaced collective responsibility with individual, privatised philanthropy (Mohanty 2006; Dagnino 2005). As social movement scholars Cox and Fominaya (2009:3) point out, neoliberalism “rewards” fragmentation whether in the form of cooptation by the state, commodification of identities, or the impermeability of academic specialisations.

The authors in this issue share a common interest in activist spaces and structures that offer counter or alternative perspectives to market-driven development. The transformative knowledge produced in these spaces is concerned with basic demands - for life, for dignity - and yet, as adult

education scholar John Holst (2007) writes, “given the nature of globalization today, basic demands by the most marginalized are increasingly striking at the very heart of capitalism”. This body of knowledge bears witness to the fact that neoliberalism is nothing more or less than a ‘policy choice brutally implemented by nation-states and their international institutions’ (Holst 2007).

This Special Issue is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the Landless Workers Movement (MST), Brazil. It begins with an overview or introduction to landless struggles in Brazil and the central role of knowledge production within the mobilisation spaces occupied by the MST. Readers who are not familiar with the MST will find it helpful to read this overview before proceeding to the other articles in this section. In this overview, MST educators and founding members of one of the oldest state education sectors in the MST, Marli Moraes and Elisabete Witcel provide a detailed explanation of the philosophical and pedagogical principles that define MST education, known as the ‘Pedagogy of the Land’. In the subsequent essay, they reflect on their lived experiences within the MST and specifically, the meaning and purpose of the first MST Itinerant schools (established in the state of Rio Grande do Sul). They also provide some insights into the central role of research within the knowledge production work of the movement. The joint reflection is followed by an autobiographical narrative from Witcel on her lived experience as an MST activist. The concluding essay in this section is written by Rebecca Tarlau who critically reflects on doing research with and about the MST as a sympathetic researcher located in the U.S. academy.

The second section consists of articles that explore the relationship between knowledge and activism in diverse contexts ranging from anti-corporate activist NGOs, an emerging social movement for public education in India, and a North American university classroom. The special issue concludes with articles that further explore knowledge for social transformation, with Nina Asher's celebration of the social and educational significance of Nelson Mandela, a tribute from Deborah Hickling on the life and work of two great Caribbean scholars - Professor Stuart Hall and Professor Norman Girvan, and reflections by Anne Hickling-Hudson on the resonance of the theme 'For the Socially Responsible University' at University 2014, the bi-annual conference on higher education in Cuba, held in February of this year.

### **Knowledge, activism and social change**

Critical and feminist social movement scholars have shown that the work of knowledge production and transmission, albeit contested, is intrinsic to the work of organising and mobilising masses of people (most recently see Pinnington and Schugurensky 2010 ; Motta and Nilsen 2011; and the 2009 and 2013 Special Issues of *Interface* and the *Journal of Social Movement Studies*, respectively). Knowledge-making is central to the working of hegemony and counter-hegemony in which every relationship is a pedagogical relationship (Mayo 1999). Social movements engage in collective knowledge work to stimulate oppositional consciousness or build and sustain new and collective political subjectivities and identities; and also to articulate demands and win

positions of power in relation to the institutions and structures they seek to transform (Cox and Fominaya 2009).

The authors approach their analyses with pluralist conceptions of social justice and the role of knowledge production in movements for social justice. They present situated conceptions of oppositional politics or the politics of protest but together underline the intricate link between cognitive justice and social justice (de Sousa Santos et al 2008). The theme of knowledge production cuts across these essays along with shared questions about “presence and play of power” (Ortner 1995:175) in the relationships and activities that constitute activist and academic spaces.

Choudry argues that “everyday struggles are not only the means to build movements, alliances, and counterpower but are generative of, and in turn informed by the learning/knowledge aspects of this activity”. Drawing on the critical adult education and social movement learning literature that emphasises the social character of all knowledge productions, he explores knowledge production by activist researchers located outside the academy. Although diverse in their geographical location and methodological approach to research, their inquiries are located in the socio-economic and environmental struggles of working-class and poor against transnational corporations and other organisations representing international and domestic capital. Choudry highlights activist representations of the different ways in which ordinary people “struggle, learn, educate and theorise where they find themselves” and the tensions they negotiate in the process. He argues explicitly against the dominant

academic inclination to categorise and compartmentalise this knowledge into existing frameworks based on dichotomous and hierarchical thinking.

In Thapliyal's essay, activist narratives about public education in India reveal experiential, situated, concrete forms of knowledge as well as theoretical and theorised knowledge. The multiplicity of meanings and representations of public (and private) education do not diminish the everyday realities of exclusion, discrimination, disparity, and alienation that define the particular ways in which diverse subaltern groups engage with the politics of education. Instead, activists draw on this diverse 'tacit knowledge' (Cox and Fominaya 2009) to challenge the dominant developmentalist approach to education and development that reproduces historical social hierarchies. This essay also provides insights into what constitutes knowledge that is relevant to activists as they reflect and theorise about the challenges confronting their movement.

These conceptions of knowledge which connects, empowers, and transforms is reiterated by MST activists Marli Moraes and Elisabete Witcel in their analysis of the MST Itinerant schools and the underlying philosophical and pedagogical principles that guide education work in the MST. Their discussion of the MST Itinerant Schools expose the inherent contradictions of capitalist education and development. For the MST, constructing knowledge which reflects the lived realities of the landless is central to the efficacy of their struggles. The depth and breadth of the MST knowledge project is shaped by the realisation that countering neoliberal

hegemony requires counter-knowledge that articulates the connections between struggles for identity and redistribution amongst poor and working-class, rural and urban Brazilians. Despite being a movement of poor people with scarce resources and numerically one of the smallest rural movements in Brazil (Carter 2010), the MST has become a global exemplar for anti-capitalist struggles. In large part, this can be attributed to their determination to speak for themselves and on their own terms. And the voice(s) that the MST have inserted into public discourse in Brazil speak out against historical cultural marginalisation and oppression as well as unequal class relations (Fraser 2001; Frampton, Kinsman, Thompson, Tilleczek (2006:256). In dialogue with MST activists I am almost always reminded by somebody that “the struggle of the landless is legitimate but not legal”.

The MST has developed highly organised structures for media and communication as well as research in order to counter hostile media coverage as well as the dominant neoliberal discourse of development. However, knowledge production is not only oriented towards the outside public. The movement has constructed its own primary and secondary schools, literacy programmes, teacher training institution, and university wherein educational processes critically reflect on the ongoing landless struggle. Hence, for both MST activists, the movement was and continues to be ‘their school’. For Witcel in particular, as she tells us in her autobiographical narrative, it is through her participation in the landless struggle that she was eventually able to achieve her dream to continue her formal education. Both women were members of the

first group of MST students to participate in a state-recognised teacher training course based on MST educational principles and pedagogy. Perhaps more importantly, as MST students, educators, and researchers, both women have been part of the ongoing project to construct educational processes that reflect and fortify the struggles of the landless and other groups rendered subordinate by the capitalist order.

### **Resistance in the Corporate Academy**

Sousa Santos et al (2008) remind us, the end of colonialism has not meant the end of the colonality of power and knowledge or “colonialism as a social relationship associated with specific forms of knowledge” which maintain extent multiple forms of domination and discrimination. The dominant approach to knowledge production in the knowledge society is defined by privatisation, fragmentation and commodification/consumption.

Educational institutions, in particular the academy, play a key though contested role in underpinning neoliberal hegemony (Mayo 1999) through the construction and reproduction of learning as self-interested, individualised, and commodified, the ‘flattening’ and erasure of difference, and the domestication of radical knowledge products (Sudbury and Ozakawa-Rey 2009; Quinn and Meiners 2009 ; Mohanty 2013:972). In particular, feminist scholars of colour have and continue to engage difficult questions about power, positionality ,and epistemic privilege(s) as reflected in their theoretical language and frames and possibilities for non-hierarchical, accountable,



and politically committed projects of inquiry.(Mohanty 1984; Naples and Desai 2002; Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 2013; Gutiérrez y Muh, Niemann, González, and Harris 2014). In this context, public intellectual Antonia Darder states that the role of the university-based researcher is, “not only critically comprehending emancipatory theories and revolutionary practices but also contending forthrightly with my [our] own internal contradictions in clear and open ways" (in Borg and Mayo 2007: 197).

In this milieu, Mary Pratt (1998) names some of the dilemmas facing well-intentioned researchers who see themselves as sympathetic to or in solidarity with the movements they study. She writes about the need for ‘outsider-intellectuals’ to “consciously undo” the tendency in academic theorising “to reproduce the structure of power that holds in the situation being theorized, even when the goal is a critique of that structure” (434). In this Issue, all the contributors speak to these questions about relevant and reflexive knowledge production and the limitations of the canon of modern science which dominates the Western academy.

As previously discussed, Choudry and Thapliyal both make situated critiques of the questions and frameworks that characterise conventional social movement research and which constrain our ability to understand the complexity of politics enacted in subaltern mobilisations. Both authors along with Tarlau, also provide instances of movement-relevant research. For instance, Choudry explores a range of rationalities and methodologies of movement-relevant knowledge production by activist researchers located outside the academy, including

conventional research methods. What is underlined here by activists is the seamless interaction or the absence of boundaries between what they think of as research, organising, and mobilising (Quintos in Choudry in this issue). Thapliyal weaves activist narratives together to construct a map of the institutional relations and obstacles facing the movement and weak points that can and have been effectively challenged, as well as possibilities for alliances (Kinsman 2006).

In 'We do not need outsiders to study us', Tarlau reflects critically on the evolution of her approach to doing movement-relevant research with the MST. In this essay, we have the privilege of watching Tarlau negotiate the meaning of what it means to be a self-identified activist-scholar and engage in collaborative knowledge production. She describes the dispositions and processes by which she was able to 'coproduce' knowledge with MST activists in the course of her PhD dissertation research. She also reflects critically on the impact of the multiple identities produced by her gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, family background, and occupation (First World doctoral student) on the data collection process. Her discussion contributes to the explanation provided by Moraes and Witcel about how the MST value praxis and their commitment to critically reflecting on all aspects of their political practice.

In 'A Pedagogy of Resistance', Klees discusses his efforts to counter the hegemony of triumphalist market-oriented discourses in education, economic theories of development, and social science research paradigms. Klees addresses academics when he writes that "we always share our research but we

rarely share our teaching”. Accordingly, he presents a reflexive analysis of his efforts to educate his students about the “cracks, contradictions, resistance, and room for human agency” within the constraints of conservative academy. His primary pedagogical tool is ‘debate’; Klees exposes his students to key debates in each of these fields and supports them in deepening their understanding of how and why people think differently. Thus, each of his courses explore hegemonic as well as marginalised and excluded perspectives in a given academic field e.g. political economy (in economic theory) (see also Rishi 1998), alternative policies and approaches to neoliberal education and development; and critical/transformational modes of inquiry (in the social sciences). Klees provides nuanced observations on the ways in which students respond to his courses and the extent to which this learning experience deepens their capacity to engage with difference.

## **Conclusion**

De Sousa Santos et al (2008:1) deem the “most decisive epistemological question” of the times as that which investigates hierarchies of knowledge constellations, “the reasons for those hierarchies, for their effectiveness, and for their consequences”. All though all the contributors in this issue do not all self-identify as post-colonial theorists, their scholarship is representative of the kind of “countervailing social science” that carries out “power structure” research, particularly the conditions underlying the production of knowledge

which enrich some and impoverish others (Hickling-Hudson 2009:373).

The contributors to this special issue on ‘Knowledge and Activism’ have endeavoured to name “that which is hegemonic” (Steinberg in Borg and Mayo 2007) and counterhegemonic in spaces of resistance and activism. It is our hope that we have made a significant contribution to activist and academic projects that seek to democratise and humanise the neoliberal knowledge society.

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