Agency in the Knowledge Society: Social Movements and Knowledge Creation

James Sharpe
Saint Mary’s University

Abstract: This study documents the experience of popular educators of the Atlantic Popular Educators Network (APEN) who help create knowledge for a variety of social movement and community groups. Through the use of case studies, drama, media confrontation, and collective narratives, these popular educators are helping others through knowledge creation to construct identities, articulate a social vision and confront power. With the transformation from a resource based and industrial society to a knowledge society, this creation of knowledge has become central to power relations in society. By showing the possibilities of using knowledge creation to confront existing power relations, the study contributes to the development of a theory of adult education for social change for popular educators assisting the work of social movements.

Theoretical Framework

Holford (1995) in “Why social movements matter: adult education theory, cognitive praxis and the creation of knowledge,” explains the shift from the adult education movement of the 1930s where "Knowledge, freely available and undistorted by sectional interest, would lead to Truth" (p. 108) to the 1990s where "knowledge and reality are significantly constructed by social movements, and adult education is key in this process" (p. 109). For Holford, when adult educators help create a communicative culture they become central to the emergence of new knowledge in society and to social change itself. This framework builds upon the writings of adult education for social change and social movements of Finger (1989), Hart (1990) and Welton (1993).

Examples of knowledge construction are documented from the author’s participation in the formation and work of the Atlantic Popular Educators Network. This network, which has existed since the early 1990’s, recently conducted a regional meeting in November 2000 at which popular educators from the labour movement, literacy groups, church based social justice groups, community development organizations and popular cultural groups shared experience, techniques and analysis. This study shows how diverse forms of knowledge creation are possible.
Formation of the Atlantic Popular Educators Network

This dynamic of knowledge construction to confront power has taken place in the meetings and workshops of the Atlantic Popular Educators Network (APEN). The network was formed first as a discussion group on popular education in the early 1990s, then revived in the middle 1990s as a local response to the organization of the North American Association for Popular Education. As a discussion group, the popular education group held a series of evening meetings for adult and popular educators to discuss pressing issues and to use innovative group techniques and processes. The group used a number of techniques including small groups, poetry, skits and visioning to articulate a focus and direction. After a large initial meeting of 40 adult educators, the group stabilized with between 10 and 15 for a series of monthly meetings. After a year and a half of meeting, participation fell off so the group did not continue.

By 1994, interest revived. A workshop in the fall of 1994 on popular education techniques attracted a wide variety of adult educators. In the winter of 1995, Michael Welton and Juan Tellez organized a weekend meeting at the Tatamagouche Centre, a church owned residential training centre in northern Nova Scotia, that attracted over 30 popular educators from throughout Atlantic Canada. There was a lot of interest in having a popular education focus to events at the P-7 or People’s Summit, the parallel conference to the G-7 Summit in Halifax in June 1995.

After participation in the workshops, street theatre, and public meetings of the People’s Summit, there was a decision to sponsor another workshop in Halifax in January, 1996. This workshop "We Can't Walk Alone: Sharing our struggle... building a network for the popular movement" was very successful with over 70 participants in attendance. The workshop was based on three key questions:
1. How did we get to the present stage: the predominant economic crisis and its impact in our organizations?
2. What is it that we want to accomplish in the near future and in the long run? Could we put our fears, needs and wants on the table? 
3. How can we begin a process of building a movement for social transformation?

A wide variety of activists attended -- students, labour organizers, environmentalists, teachers, food bank workers, and peace activists. They were interested in a wide variety of educational and political activity, from study groups to lobbying to organizing. From the meeting two interest groups emerged, one to work on the Alternative Budget that was being released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Choices - a coalition for social justice; the second to form a green development group, a group that would develop strategies that support sustainable development.

After the workshop, both groups took a life of their own. The alternative budget working group, already supported by the coalition to oppose the CHST, went on to sponsor another major workshop on the creation and politics of alternative budgets. The environment group had a series of four or five meetings, trying to focus on the barriers and needs for incentives for sustainable businesses in Nova Scotia. The meetings included a presentation of the CalMeadow lending group and an examination of what type of support and direction there is for recycling, organic agriculture and sustainable businesses. However, after several meetings the direction for the group was not clear among the participants. Several wanted to form a non-profit foundation to help
start and fund environmentally sustainable businesses. Others felt that this was too ambitious to begin with but the group should continue as a study and discussion group. By summer the group had stopped meeting.

Although the original plan was to have another conference in Tatamagouche in 1996, the organizing committee for the meeting could not agree on a format and a agenda. APEN was called upon to present a brief to the House of Commons Finance Committee and made three presentations, in the fall of 1997, 1998, and 1999. Many are interested in refocusing on organizing issues throughout the Atlantic region. The current revival of interest in APEN is inspired by the creation of the Canadian Network for Democratic Learning (CANDLE) and the need for popular educators from different constituencies -- labour, universities, community economic development agencies, churches, the black community, popular theatre and First Nations -- to meet and discuss common techniques, strategies and problems.

**Dramatic Tools for Radical Change**

In November 2000, over twenty-five popular educators from the labour, artistic, church and community movements met to share analysis, techniques and strategy at a two day APEN workshop titled “Dramatic Tools for Radical Change.” As the Irondale Theatre Collective was one of the main sponsoring groups and resources, the focus for the workshop was using drama to analyze power, create narratives and express conflict and resolution. Irondale started the workshop with a collective presentation of power, drawn from the “Theatre of the oppressed” of Augusto Boal (1979) by using a table and chairs to envision power relations. Members of the group were invited to show how many forms of power relations they could represent. Participants visualized many relations of power, from equal relations with all the chairs around the table, to relations centered on one leader with one chair at a table with the remaining chairs in an audience, to extreme representations of domination with one chair on top of the table and the other chairs overturned, scattered on the floor.

These physical images of power were a fitting introduction to the next topic, the confrontation over fishing rights at the Burnt Church or the Esgenoopetitj First Nation. Gksidtanamoogk Otjoson, a Mi’kmaq leader and spiritual practitioner, told of the history of the community and the background to the conflict. Since the area was settled by the Mi’kmaq people, they have fished for food and trade. These fishing and trading rights were recognized in the treaties signed by the British occupying force in the eighteen century. In the twentieth century the treaties were ignored and with the expansion of the inshore fishery a quota system excluded First Nations from the commercial fishery. However, a precedent setting supreme court decision of Sept 1999 ordered the Government of Canada to recognize the earlier treaties and negotiate with the First Nations for co-management of the resource. The Government’s response, through the Department of Fisheries (DFO) was to unilaterally assign small quotas to each First Nation. Esgenoopetitj rejected DFO’s quota and through their own management plan, which was reviewed and approved by the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, regulated their own fishery. This lead to confrontations on the water between the Mi’kmaq fishermen and women and DFO officers in the Spring and Fall of 2000. The Aboriginal Rights Coalition (ARC) decided to train witnesses or observers to provide a means for the outside world to observe this confrontation over treaty fishing rights.
Rose Adams, one of the trainers from this witness project, described the five days of intensive training that the potential witnesses received. The witness project was based on ten years of experience with Project Accompaniment in providing witnesses for Guatemalan refugees returning to their land. The trainers worked with representatives of the Esgenoopetitj First Nation to plan the training process. They decided that potential observers should work with role plays that would uncover their assumptions about their relation to the First Nations, their role as an observer and their motivation for taking part in the project. Although the role plays were twenty to thirty minutes long, the debriefing would take from three to six hours, as new emotions, hidden motivations and unforeseen actions were uncovered by the role plays that surprised the participants.

The first day of the APEN workshop ended with remarks by Charlie Kennedy, an observer who went through the training and spent a week at Esgenoopetitj. He described the ambiguous role of the witness, who is there to observe rather than intervene. He also described the result of the work on the witness, with video tape of DFO boats ramming and swamping First Nations fishermen and women, which was broadcast on television news across Canada and around the world. Through the work of the project and training, the story of Mi’kmaq fishing rights and the violence of the DFO was told around the world.

The second day of the workshop included reports by two community activists, the first on community development of African Nova Scotian communities and the second on the use of literacy training by labour activists. Robert Upshaw told about African Nova Scotians celebrating their identity and taking charge of their education through political representation on school boards. Linda Wentzel, a labour leader, reported on how she used principles of plain language to make collective agreements understandable for workers and how this led to literacy training at the work site. The workshop ended with Irondale using the techniques of body sculpture to physically represent the political actors and agents at Burnt Church and how the actors would interact. Through this very participatory and physical form of drama, the group could think through the power dynamics of the situation and what alternative outcomes are possible.

Current Prospects for APEN

There are a number of different directions, institutional interests and tensions influencing the current organizing. The Tatamagouche Centre would like to organize regional training, analysis and reflection meetings at the Centre. They have organized a workshop on spirituality and adult education as vocation for May 2001. As well, they have proposed a popular education study tour to the Martin Luther King Popular Education Centre in Havana, Cuba for the winter of 2002. Local trade unionists and social movement activists have formed a Nova Scotia branch of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Nova Scotia Choices, a coalition for social justice. These coalitions both have active research and educational programs. There is substantial activity in community economic development and interest in a forum for sharing best practices and mobilization techniques. At the present time, most active organizers for APEN are from Halifax and Nova Scotia, but if the organization is to reflect its name, a much larger network of popular educators from throughout the Atlantic Provinces needs to be mobilized. A key issue is to provide a focus which will energize these organizing activities, rather than create another organization that requires funding, time, and energy.
The network is faced with a number of failed attempts to link adult and popular educators. In the early 1990s, the Continuous Learning Association of Nova Scotia (CLANS) disbanded, after thirty years of activity. Adult education associations in New Brunswick and Newfoundland have had similar experiences. The Atlantic Provinces Association for Continuing University Education, which was very active in the 1980s promoting distance education and innovative learning technologies in the region, has not been as active in the 1990s, restricted to a yearly meeting. For these organizations, all the work is carried out by volunteers, and these individuals are under more pressure to produce results for their organization and have less time and resources to devote to associations and networks.

However, there is strength in the structure of a network to respond to these concerns. Hall (2000) in "Global Civil Society: Theorizing a Changing World" states that networks form the means for organizing a global civil society. As he states:

“In his review of international networks, Jan Ruyssemaars refers to an early article by Marc Satin, who challenged ‘the assumption that bureaucracy and hierarchy are the only viable forms of organisation for large numbers of people... [This] points to networks as another, and in many cases a more appropriate form of large-scale organisation... [with] networks growing more vigorously at the extreme ends of power and influence. Networks are emerging both among the global elite and the powerless everywhere.’ (p. 23)"

This vision of a network as organizational form can overcome many of the problems facing APEN. It can allow for multiple nodes of activity, with leadership emerging from different sectors and locations. It can create, through the use of e-mail and list serves, an effective communication mechanism throughout the Atlantic region where adult and popular educators, often geographically or institutionally isolated, can exchange information, share analysis and formulate strategies. And through the use of regional meetings and study tours, personal friendships can be built that will lead to increased collaboration and trust.

If through the network structure, APEN can be focused on activities for mutual benefit, so that both individuals and organizations benefit from the sharing, analysis and strategies, then APEN will receive support from across the region. This structure can provide an important "social imaginary" of how a society can operate without hierarchy, domination and exploitation.

Concerns of APEN

This description of the past and proposed activities of APEN shows the enabling function of a network that allows multiple forms and focuses of activity through different formats, locations and events. Although the future survival of APEN is not assured, the strategy of building communication between adult and popular educators working with labour, churches, schools and universities, literacy, First Nations, community economic development, theatre, visual and performing arts, and African Nova Scotian communities has received much expressed interest and support. Two difficulties have emerged preventing a stronger network, the need for energy and support for specific sector and coalition struggles and the lack of focus for a larger network.

The first concern is with competing priorities and multiple coalitions, organizations and structures to support. There is already a strong overlap in the “activists” involved in forming the CCPA-NS chapter, the Nova Scotia Choices (the provincial alternative budget), the local chapter of the Council of Canadians and APEN. Why does Nova Scotia need a fourth activist network if
each one of these networks or coalitions is interested in supporting the same social movement
issues? Although the same individuals may be involved in many or all of these organizations (as
well as organizations from their own sector) each of the organizations exists for a separate
purpose. The CCPA is a registered charity with a mandate for research and publication of
alternative viewpoints. The Alternative Budget has a specific strategy for education and political
discussion of government priorities and directions. The local chapter of the Council of Canadians
provides an important link to the national group that is one of the most active organizers of the
civil society opposition to the MAI, WTO, NAFTA, IMF, and World Bank. None of these
coalitions focus on the specific educational processes of raising consciousness of issues, creating
identities and forming strategies and analysis. This specific focus makes APEN both more limited
in scope (not to change the world but to provide the techniques to strengthen democracy) and
broader in appeal (these educational and organizing techniques come from different experiences
with different social movement groups). The APEN workshops held from 1994 to 2000 have
shown the energy created when the wide variety of experiences and techniques are shared among
popular educators from different social movement locations. This more limited focus on sharing
popular education methods with popular educators from different social movement groups gives a
unique purpose and focus for APEN.

The vision of the Atlantic Popular Educators Network is that through the sharing of the
experiences of using adult education for social change from diverse sectors and communities of
practice, new forms of analysis, means of mobilizing and social images of the future will emerge.
The hope is that by bringing together labour educators, literacy workers, theatre and artistic
workers, African Canadian and First Nation educators and activists, environmental educators,
feminist activists and community development workers to share the experience of their work and
the methods that they have developed for raising consciousness, creating identities and mobilizing
action, APEN will create new possibilities, new visions of the future. By exploring the new
subjectivities that can be created through new conjunctures of interests, ideas and projects from
active social movements, APEN can help create a more responsive, people centered world.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice:

This analysis of the knowledge creation by popular educators working with social
movement groups will enrich the understanding of the theory and practice of adult education for
social change. In particular it documents the diverse methods that popular educators use to
construct narrative, form identity and develop social visions. By showing how the sharing of
these diverse methods of knowledge creation among popular educators leads to greater insight,
more participatory analysis and more mobilizing actions, this study helps build the theory and
practice of adult education for social change.

References


Adult Education Quarterly, 40, 125-138.