

Learning from, in, and with Independent Community and Activist Archives: The Past in Our Present and Future

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Introduction

There is growing interest in the informal and non-formal learning and knowledge practices of community organising, popular struggles and social movements. Although often neglected by dominant strands of adult education scholarship, some scholars suggest that many of the most critical ideas about, and for social change are produced as people struggle collectively for a better world (Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Kelley 2002). Organisers, educators and activists in a variety of contexts are digging into history in order to unearth and utilise ideas left behind and critical insights drawn from engaging with history in ways that are useful to think through present and future problems and possibilities for change. This special issue of *Education as Change* includes articles which explore the diverse ways that communities, activists and social movements not only strive to document their struggles and experiences, but also how they critically engage with histories, educate from them, and how such practices inform today's struggles for change. The educative aspects of social movements are often overlooked by education scholarship. But this issue foregrounds rich histories of praxis, popular education and workers' education as well as lessons gleaned from critical engagement with earlier periods of activism in South Africa and beyond.

UNISA 
university
of south africa
PRESS

Education as Change
www.educationaschange.co.za
Volume 22 | Number 2 | 2018 | #4513 | 9 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/4513>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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Around the world, community and social movement activists have often employed creative and innovative tools and approaches, which include experimentation with pedagogical strategies and practices, as they construct and co-construct, document, recover and preserve histories and ideas. On the other hand, where they exist, such histories and alternative archives are in danger of being lost, for example, as organisations dissolve at times of political, social and economic transition, or as people try to uncover social movement/organising history and ephemera during periods of repression, and among marginalised communities and groups when the maintenance and preservation of documents has sometimes carried great risk. Furthermore, these processes and practices of producing historical resources that are relevant for contemporary struggles can be sites of experimentation, intergenerational learning and exchange, debate, tension, and contestation of ideas and memories.

The articles in this special issue consider:

- processes of creating independent community/activist archives;
- popular/community education approaches to working and engaging with historical material;
- arts/cultural practices related to engaging/preserving/educating from activist and community histories;
- challenges of work on activist/struggle archives in contexts of “transition,” repression, criminalisation and conflict;
- alternative activist and community archive practices;
- how activists actively participate in constructing critical histories;
- struggles over history within communities and social movements;
- impacts of community/activist histories on contemporary organising;
- democratising community/social movement histories; and
- strategies to educate about excluded/marginalised histories.

Elsewhere (Choudry 2015; Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Choudry and Vally 2018; Vally, Wa Bofelo, and Treat 2013), we have argued that activist intellectual work requires practices and strategies grounded in critical (including self-critical) historical perspectives as well as emerging ideas which arise from engagement in current struggles. Thus, our focus on activist knowledge,

learning and history explored in this special issue foregrounds the ideas, insights and visions produced by people collectively working for social, economic and political change and who reflect on their experiences based on historical precedents. This is knowledge about systems of power and exploitation developed as people find themselves in confrontation with states and capital. The contributions also illustrate the existence of rich, often underexplored, archives and publications of earlier generations of movements (Flinn 2007; 2010; Ramamurthy 2013; Sears 2014; Vally, Wa Bofelo, and Treat 2013), as well as the conscious production of understandings that challenge dominant or hegemonic “common sense” within, and about, various struggles.

In our recent edited collection (Choudry and Vally 2018, 4), we write:

A significant current that runs through the intellectual work within many movements and which takes multiple forms is comprised of efforts to recover useful histories, oral history, forgotten archives and history from below. Popular education resources also make accessible hidden histories of struggle, and tools for understanding the contingent—what might have led up to particular conditions at particular moments. This collection explores and critically engages with the democratic significance of activist knowledge through developing popular education tools, documenting histories of struggles and informal ways in which political education is passed across generations of activists. Some authors reflect on pedagogical issues and approaches which seek to draw upon important ideas and debates found within activist archives (organised or informal), from oral histories and from other critical/dialectical engagements with history. In doing so, we engage with ways in which organisers and activists try to develop context-specific, locally relevant ways to connect historical movement knowledge with contemporary organising ... [We ask] echoing Andrew Flinn [2018], have people attempted to make history of their struggle part of the struggle itself? And, if not, how could they do so?

While organisers and scholars of social movements and social change frequently invoke new forms of politics and activism, in many places there is also renewed interest in critically engaging with earlier struggles—digging into the ideas, strategies, visions, dilemmas and challenges of earlier struggles. These contributions include critically interrogating earlier activist histories, addressing silences and absences, and debates within movements, as well as analysing “official archives.” A critical perspective can yield fresh insights to help think through praxis that is connected with today’s challenges and dilemmas.

This Issue

Canadian feminist scholar Benita Bunjun discusses The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (RCSW), which, she argues, is embedded in liberal hegemonic feminist

ideology, and is largely the landscape that has influenced the (de)politicising of the mainstream women's movement in Canada since the 1970s. The testimonies and recommendations of the RCSW predominately represented the needs and voices of white heterosexual Anglophone and Francophone able-bodied middle-class women. Using an intersectional critical race feminist framework, this article critically analyses the “making” of RCSW “against the grain” in relation to discourses of nation-building and racialisation in Canada. Drawing on extensive historical archival data and relevant in-depth expert interviews, Bunjun argues that the RCSW as a colonial archive furthered nation-building projects while crystallising indigenous women and women of colour as the Other. The article illustrates how the feminist organisation, Vancouver Status of Women, is embedded in the colonial archive of the RCSW, one that reproduced nation-building discourses of essentialism, racialisation, and exclusion.

History lecturer at the University of the Western Cape, Koni Benson, portrays the history and pedagogy as well as the groundbreaking work of the Gender Education Training Network (GETNET), the first gender training organisation in South Africa. Between 1992 and 2014, this feminist political organisation attempted to make real the gains made on paper for challenging gender dynamics and institutionalised sexism in post-apartheid South Africa. This article engages the dilemmas and challenges of writing histories of the recent past, and political agendas of intervening in those histories in the present. It draws on the literature on activist archiving and feminist methodologies of intergenerational dialogue, aiming to (a) share some of the most radical and relevant work done in the decade after 1994 by anti-apartheid feminist activists developing what they called indigenous and regional perspectives, materials, and methodologies to expose and shift gender dynamics, and (b) to spark ideas and conversations about ways of producing activist archives that are accountable to movements and to the future—that can create space for difficult intergenerational conversation about ongoing attempts to mobilise to challenge sexism and patriarchy at personal, organisational, and structural levels.

South African researcher and educator, Mudney Halim, contributes an article that looks at the process and value of compiling a community archive in Westbury, Johannesburg, a township that morphed through phases from the historic Sophiatown. The motivation for this archive comes from the personal collection of Florrie Daniels, a community activist by choice and an archivist by

default. The collection includes meticulous records of community organisations she helped to establish related to early childhood development, preventative healthcare, poverty alleviation, housing, sport, youth and women's organisations, as well as political and civic movements from the 1960s onwards. It is further inspired by Flinn (2007, 153) who writes that "community archives are the grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership of the project is essential." Much of what is contained in the Florrie Daniels Collection is associated with cooperative grassroots activity. Daniels had the wisdom to document, collect and preserve experiences in a way that makes it relevant for activists and organisations to draw lessons for contemporary struggles in Westbury and elsewhere. It forms a basis for further gathering of grassroots narratives and records in a community archive to contest the dominant chronicles and jaundiced, often bigoted, perceptions of the area and its people, towards contributing to the discourse for long-term solutions for challenges facing working-class communities.

University of Johannesburg scholar, Mondli Hlatshwayo, focuses on labour education in South Africa. With few exceptions, scholarship on the modern labour movement which emerged after the Durban strikes of 1973 tends to focus on trade unions that constituted the labour movement, strikes, collective bargaining, and workplace changes. While all these topics covered by labour scholars are of great importance, there is less emphasis on the role played by labour support organisations (LSOs), which, in some cases, predate the formation of the major trade unions that were component parts of the labour movement. Based on an analysis of historical writings, some archival and internet sources, the article critically discusses the contribution of LSOs and their use of workers' education to build and strengthen trade unions, which became one of the critical forces in the struggles against racial capitalism in the 1980s. The article critically examines the work of the Urban Training Project (UTP) and the workers' education programmes of the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) as a contribution to building the labour movement. The relationship between trade unions which had elaborated structures of accountability and LSOs which were staffed by a relatively small layer of activists also led to debates about accountability and mandates.

Australian scholar Susan Kennedy Nour al Deen discusses the sociopolitical background to, and creation of the Bedoun Archive at the Australian Data Archive, managed by the Australian National University, Canberra. The Bedoun are a Bedouin minority comprising stateless members of the main tribes of Kuwait. The article notes that they have been subjected to “Othering” in scholarly literature, reflecting methods of Orientalist analysis, an approach which has contributed to their oppression by the state, and omission from the official histories of Kuwait and the academic literature. The archive functions as a counter-narrative to the marginalisation of the group in the production of authoritative forms of knowledge, and to provide safe storage for data for future use. The theory and methodology behind the creation of the Bedoun Archive is discussed, influenced by the principles of humanistic sociology and collaborative research with Indigenous Peoples. The role of Bedoun intellectuals in the development of the Bedoun Archive is also discussed. The article contributes to improving understanding about the influence of Orientalist theory and methodological approaches on perceptions of Middle East histories in general, and the Arabian Gulf and Kuwait in particular. It explores the complex situation currently faced by the Bedoun, and the future role of the community in developing formal systems of knowledge about themselves.

University of Newcastle (Australia) education scholar, Nisha Thapliyal, analyses the ways in which education activists in India deploy critical histories in their struggles for a public and common school system. Social movements for public education challenge neoliberal claims that there is no alternative to the market—to the inevitability of the privatisation of education. The article is empirically grounded in a critical analysis of a 2016 activist documentary film called *We Shall Fight, We Shall Win*. The film was produced by a grassroots activist coalition called the All India Forum for the Right to Education (AIFRTE) as part of their ongoing struggles against the commercialisation and communalisation of education. The film provides a rare opportunity to explore different kinds of historical knowledge produced in collective struggles for equity and social justice in India. In particular, this analysis examines the ways in which activists link the past and the present to challenge and decentre privatised narratives of education and development. In doing so, this research offers situated insights into the critical histories that inspire, sustain and co-construct one site of ongoing collective struggle for public education in India.

South African scholar and educator, Daryl Braam, discusses how the discourse of the New Unity Movement (NUM) can potentially contribute to educational development in the context of South Africa's social inequality. It describes the NUM's political lens and how its discourse countered the oppressive forces of a capitalist-apartheid system, in a struggle for an alternative world order. NUM's discourse is posited as a progressive voice whose educational analysis and sound pedagogic principles could be recalled towards transforming education in South Africa today. Critical discourse analysis is applied to recontextualise the role of teachers and their societal role in what Fairclough (1995, 19) describes as "discursive practices as part of wider processes of social and cultural change." Braam's analysis of NUM's writing also draws on Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony that enables further insight into cultivating an educational philosophy that is emancipatory.

In their contribution to this special issue, Tui Nicola Clery and Robin Metcalfe remind readers that the voices of Pacific women and girls have too often been excluded from Fiji's archival history. However, they contend, alternative understandings of history, stories that defy and blur accepted polarities and reflect the knowledge and experiences of women and girls, have always co-existed. Their article attempts to address the lacuna of Pacific women in the archive by claiming space for women's voices, and contributing herstories which record and are inspired by Fiji women's feminist activism. They offer three stories from women whose activism seeks to reveal and challenge dominant historical narratives in Fiji. Their stories celebrate Fiji's communities as historically and inextricably interwoven, and encourage a renewed sense of belonging to one another. These examples of feminist storytelling as activism emerge from women's complex and intersecting identities, and from an understanding that oppressions also overlap and interconnect. Activist work therefore needs to occur in a variety of spaces and forms, working relationally across marginalised communities and stories, in order to challenge exclusionary understandings, and to build peace. The contribution of alternative stories of practice is a call for the inclusion of diverse voices: Clery and Metcalfe seek to offer feminist, community-centred, and practice-based knowledge from Fiji to the archives.

In her article, South African scholar Heidi Grunebaum contends that memory politics are often regarded as the "soft" issues contested in the aftermath of political and social upheaval. Yet, she

suggests, critical public debates on memory, justice, impunity and reconciliation in South Africa prompted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process suggest otherwise. The article offers a partial review of some of the key themes and critical debates on justice, reconciliation and memory in the 1990s, followed by a discussion of the spatial practices of the Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory (DACPM), whose multilayered social pedagogy and activist repertoire of the transitional period challenged the terms of the political transition and the TRC's scope. The debates on the TRC and the practices of the DACPM constitute but a glimpse into the significance of memory-work for now forgotten terrains of activist intervention, contestation and practice.

Our sincere thanks go to all the contributors to this special issue. These rich and varied articles make useful contributions to the literature, and are hopefully of interest to scholars and practitioners alike. We express our deep gratitude to the reviewers of the submissions for this special issue as well as the enthusiastic support of EAC managing editor Dirk Postma and editorial assistant Bianca Nienaber throughout.

Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge support from Aziz Choudry's Canada Research Chair in Social Movement Learning and Knowledge Production.

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