Ideas

Planning As Learning:
Sustainability and the Education of Citizen Activists

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Introduction

Faced with the challenge posed by interpreting social and environmental is-
sues in a broad sustainability context, many young scholars find that they must
draw from a variety of disciplines in order to create the conceptual frameworks
necessary to advance their research. For example, my doctoral thesis, com-
pleted in 1994, focused on the theoretical and practical significance of learning
by individuals involved in citizens' groups in a land use planning and environ-
mental context (Alexander 1994). Having access to no ready-made theoretical
constructs, it was necessary to create a framework out of elements borrowed
from planning, adult education, political science, and a variety of other disci-
plines.

The research objectives were to put my experiences along with those of
citizen groups in a more theoretical context, and to help fill a gap in the litera-
ture regarding learning processes and outcomes in such groups, particularly in
Canada. In the course of the literature review, only two prior studies were found
that covered some of the same ground (Kieffer 1981; Scott 1991), and none that
looked at the situation in Canada. A longer-term goal, only partially fulfilled,
was to synthesize writing in a number of fields into a new model concerning
'forums of social learning', and to consider what relevance these might hold for
achieving sustainable development. This work has since been augmented by
others, who found aspects of my research to be of use in analyzing learning
processes in other contexts (see, for instance, Diduck and Sinclair 1997).

The findings from the study, expressed in the form of 25 propositions, are
presented below. Following the propositions, a model of social learning in
citizens' groups is presented and the findings are discussed in terms of their
significance for governments seeking to foster the transition to a more sustain-
able society.

The Study Findings Expressed as Twenty-Five Propositions

Preconditions for Learning

1. A fear of irreversible damage to favoured environments, one's community
    or one's own or one's family's health, is usually the 'trigger' that causes
    people to become involved in citizens' groups and to be open to new
    learning.

2.   Involvement in an environmentally-oriented citizens' group will more likely occur if the individual has a value system which is sensitive to issues of health or environmental quality, and if the triggering event offends those values.

What is Learned? Changes in Attitudes, Knowledge and Skills

3.   Regardless of their motives at the outset, the amount of work and self-sacrifice involved in citizen activism in many cases cancels out any personal benefit or avoidance of undesirable consequences that would accrue to individuals.

4.   Once involved, citizen activists often grow from an awareness of their specific concern to an appreciation of a broader set of issues. In a word, they become more 'public-minded'.

5.   Citizen activists are animated by personal or intuitive knowledge which they find difficult to insert into the planning process. This is later supplemented by scientific or technical knowledge. Though not unproblematic, personal or intuitive knowledge may have considerable potential usefulness for planning purposes.

6.   An early perception, and one that often gives more force to citizens' actions, is a discovery that government is not doing its job, is not protecting their interests, or that the opportunities for democratic participation are not as great as they had assumed. Activists tend to learn that the political process is dominated in unhealthy ways by private interests.

7.   Because of the inequities involved in fighting for what they believe to be the "public interest," and the resistance of institutions to change, the risk of long-term demoralization and alienation is considerable.

8.   Activism often reinforces a sense of community and strengthens sense of place. Activists develop a more sophisticated understanding of ecological issues and a deeper appreciation for the environment, and often become important exponents of a 'land ethic', the 'ecosystem approach', or some version of 'sustainable development'.

What is Learned? Citizenship

9.   Members of citizens' groups develop citizenship skills. Democracy ceases to be an abstraction; they discover their own ability to affect change. Having discovered the value of participation, they sometimes become interested in facilitating it in others.

10. Citizen activists often develop an appreciation for the complexities of issues, and the legitimacy of other needs and points of view.

What is Learned? Empowerment

11. Citizen activists often develop a sense of personal, and political, empowerment, which may spill over into other areas of their lives. Developing new life purposes and meaning can lead individuals to shift away from individualistic and materialistic pursuits.

12. Citizen activists learn to question technical and political authority, and develop more confidence in their own analytical abilities. They learn a significant amount about how political and planning systems work, as well as about the basics of political action: research; communications; lobbying; and strategizing.

What is Learned? Teamwork

13. Members of groups learn to subordinate their egos in the pursuit of group goals, but they also have personal needs—for validation and for learning new skills—which organizations should attempt to meet. People seem to learn best when granted some measure of autonomy in a framework of collective responsibility.

14. Many activists find the political and planning systems to be adversarial and desire more co-operative, democratic institutions.

15. Citizen group members enhance their organizational skills in running meetings, devising appropriate organizational forms, effecting a division of labour, and procuring resources.

How Do Members of Citizens' Groups Learn?

16. Most groups operate on a form of consensus and maintain an egalitarian spirit despite differential contributions from their members. People learn how to cooperate and work as a team, which, in turn, requires an enhanced understanding of group process and development of interpersonal and emotional skills.

17. Members learn in a variety of settings: hearings and public meetings; meetings with politicians; meetings of the group and informal discussion; conferences; and, direct action. These situational factors seem to contribute significantly to the learning process.

18. The small group context is significant for validation, emotional support, and willingness of the individual to work for the collective good. As such, it seems to provide the environment needed by individuals to learn new attitudes, knowledge and skills.

19. Other contexts—feedback from the community, institutions, and from media—are important in shaping learning outcomes and affecting actions.

20. Networks are important sources of information and peer support. They function in an egalitarian fashion.

21. Citizen activists learn through a variety of modes. 'Hands-on' or action learning, and dialogue, seem to be particularly important.

Related Issues

22. Citizen group learning is largely crisis-driven and reactive, though some members develop a real thirst for learning independent of the group's agenda.

23. Citizens' organizations have two tiers—the core group and the supporters. What is learned, and how much, is different for each group. Much of the foregoing applies only to the core.

24. There is a reciprocal relationship between the group and the individual. Individuals help give organizations a specific character, and offer specific resources and talents. At the same time, organizations make possible a much more intense learning process, and provide a setting within which individual talents can blossom.

25. Citizens' groups are part of a "learning triangle" involving government, non-governmental groups and organizations—including academics and the media—and themselves. They are a potentially important source of social learning for the wider society.

Developing a Synthetic Model of Social Learning by Individuals in Citizens' Groups

Building on the propositions given above, my PhD dissertation offered a model of social learning in citizens' groups. It starts with the prior learning that individuals bring into a citizens' organization. Their *attitudes*, *knowledge*, and *skills* are augmented—and indeed transformed—in the course of their involvement. These include attitudes towards social and environmental matters, and attitudes towards their own aptitudes and abilities. They also include knowledge of the way ecological and institutional systems work, and specific skills with respect to political action and the organizing of citizens' groups themselves.

In the model, individuals are activated by a specific "trigger event" or "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow 1991: 172, 168) which interacts with their preexisting values and attitudes, thus precipitating their involvement in a citizens' group. This 'trigger event' might be a locally undesirable land use or a threat posed to a particularly treasured environment.

Having been brought together, the first task confronting citizen group members is formulating objectives and determining what it is they want (Crowfoot and Wondolleck 1990). In doing this, and in formulating their strategies, participants draw upon their knowledge, attitudes and skills. What they want and how they propose to get it will reflect normative *attitudes*, their *knowledge* of what

they are up against, and their assessment of their own organizational capabilities and *skills*.

Having formulated objectives and strategies, they engage in action, which in turn engenders certain *experiences*. The activities, experiences engendered, and group processes that prepare actions and allow for reflection after the fact, occur within specific *settings*, *contexts*, *networks*, and employ various *modes* of *learning* (Figure 1). One of the most important settings is the small group, which incubates the social learning process through dialogue, emotional support, involvement in praxis, and individual and group experimentation.

Through the process of taking action, lessons are learned, leading to revised attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Not all that is learned will necessarily be encoded in 'organizational memory', nor will it necessarily be reflected in group practice. For instance, some individuals might be more radicalized by their experiences than others, but would remain bound by the limited objectives and basis of unity of their organizations.

The constant iteration between action and learning produces many learning outcomes that can be broadly categorized under the headings of *empowerment*, *teamwork*, and *citizenship*. These comprise some of the attributes needed to help build a more sustainable society, and are in contrast with the apathy, competitiveness, and self-interest that help maintain the presently unsustainable status quo.

Toward A Broader Theory of Forums of Social Learning

Citizens' groups embody the key attributes of social learning dialogue, praxis, emotional support, and experimentation identified by a variety of authors (Dunn 1971; Michael 1971; Friedmann and Abonyi 1976; Friedmann 1987). Their efficacy in promoting empowerment, team work, and citizenship is directly related to these attributes.

A variety of other organizations have some or all of these same characteristics and achieve some of the same ends. In thinking about this, one can begin to develop a model of forums of *social learning* of which citizens' groups are merely one form (Table 1). Inasmuch as they mediate between the individual and the state or society, forums of social learning have something in common with the "mediating institutions" identified by Langton (1982), Kieffer (1981), and Boyte (1989). Bouchier (1987: 149) addresses the role of social learning forums or what he calls "democratic groups", in the following terms:

> *Whatever in everyday life oppresses, depresses, disgusts, or disappoints individuals is what motivates them to act for change. Typically, in [North] American society, they begin by acting to change their personal lives. To move beyond this, they must decide that their problem is public or social rather than personal, and this is a most difficult step. It entails a revaluation of social values, and examination of taken-for-granted institutions and legitimating ideologies. Here the democratic group or movement serves as the link between everyday experience and political interpretation, providing the support and confidence an individual needs to take the step from personal to public action. Once public action is entered, it gives the experiential basis for a broader, critical view of society as it is and might be.*

LEARNING OUTCOMES
A = Attitudes
K = Knowledge
S = Skills

LEVELS OF SOCIAL LEARNING
1 = Individual
2 = Group
3 = Institutions
4 = Society

trigger
(prior values)
INDIVIDUAL

❶

A

K   S

(reciprocal relationship)

CITIZEN'S GROUP

❷

supporters

dialogue
emotional support
praxis
experiment-ation

core group

LEARNING TRIANGLE
(mutual learning by means of networking)

"significant others"
(academics, media, resource centres, NGOS)

crisis driven

CONTEXTS

GOVERN-MENTS ❸

GROUP
objectives
strategies
action

media

community
institutions
society ❹

MODES OF LEARNING

print

lecture/ presentation

oral-dialogic

sense-observational

"hands-on"

SETTINGS

hearings

meetings with politicians

conferences and networking meetings

group meetings / informal discussion

direct action

OVERALL LEARNING OUTCOMES
• empowerment (individual)
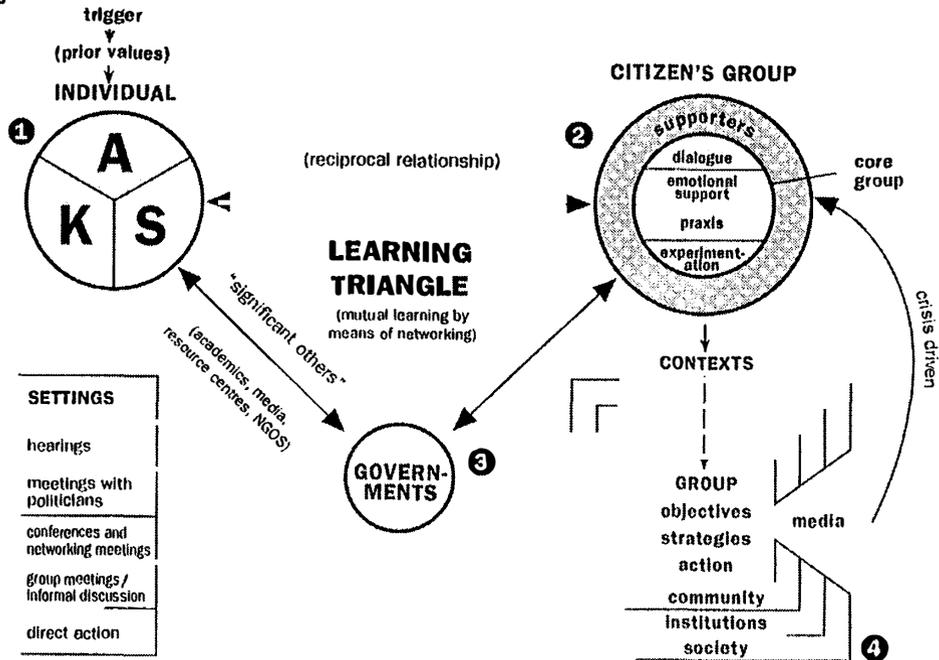• teamwork (group)
• citizenship (community, society)

Figure 1: Model of social learning by individuals in citizens' groups

EDUCATION

study groups and study circles
consciousness-raising and support groups
activist journals and magazines
workshops, retreats and educational centres
folk schools and community schools
partcipatory research
radio forums
networking conferences
search conferences and "community soundings"
technical working committees
round tables
remedial action programs (RAPs)
citizens' groups and coalitions
town meetings and neighbourhood assemblies
community resource boards

PARTICIPATION

Table 1: Forums of Social Learning: From Participatory Education to Educational Participation

The Significance for Governments in a Time of Transition

Citizens' groups, as "mediating institutions," provide a key setting for the social learning needed to facilitate the creation of more sustainable societies, and governments at all levels would do well to pay them more heed. Governments are faced with two challenges: 1) in a time of declining resources, they need to be able to tap into the wider resources of civil society; and, 2) they need citizens to learn for themselves the reasons why a shift to a more sustainable society is both desirable and necessary. In a discussion paper, Romaine and Christiansen (1997: 1-2) address these issues in an illuminating way. They write:

> The magnitude of effort necessary to alter current attitudes to re-
> source consumption and co-management will require the collective
> energy of individuals, communities and enlightened organizations.
> Collaboration is required and essential to overcome institutional, so-
> cial and economic barriers and to test and implement sustainable
> approaches at local, regional, and provincial levels.
>
> Community groups and individuals, familiar with their own sur-
> roundings, often witness more directly than a remote bureaucracy,
> changes that affect their life styles and the future of their children.
> Local groups, therefore, occupy a critical vantage point and position
> for establishing links between healthy ecosystems, healthy communi-
> ties and future sustainability.
>
> Achieving sustainability requires a common understanding by gov-
> ernment, communities and individuals on: the urgency of addressing

in a holistic way, resource and environmental issues; the root causes of the problems and barriers to their resolution; an agreed set of values and strategies for guiding change; and a number of processes for involvement conducive to joint decision making.

Governments that are seriously interested in change need allies. Even the most enlightened environmental legislation and regulations are doomed to fail unless there is significant 'buy-in' by the public. Moreover, governments can no longer 'fix' the problems on their own, if they ever could. Their resources are not sufficient in and of themselves. However, by encouraging citizen action on local environmental problems, they not only enlist additional resources, they also lay the groundwork for the acceptance of more sweeping changes.

A good example of these points is furnished by the phenomenon of stream stewardship. Faced with declining budgets, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans has begun to provide both educational and fiscal resources to assist citizens' groups on the west coast of Canada with monitoring and remediating local streams—particularly those that provide habitat for salmon.

As citizens get involved, they discover, through their own experience, that the health of streams cannot be ensured merely through periodic clean-ups; they must also begin to examine and change the patterns of urban development and of resource extraction. In this way, local watersheds provide a 'point of entry' for citizens to gain a perspective on these broader issues, and to become potential advocates for sustainability and for the various policies that it entails (Smailes 1998).

In the final analysis, the social learning afforded by citizens' groups can enhance the learning and actions of governmental bodies, potentially creating a fruitful synergy between government and civil society. This is essential if we are to meet the challenge of shifting to a more sustainable way of life in the coming decades. My experience has suggested that this learning can best be understood by combining concepts from a variety of disciplines, rather than from within the framework of a single discipline.

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