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Thinking social movement learning, again: Choudry, Freire and the conversation between popular education and social movements

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ABSTRACT

Disciplinary pressures within academia often produce specialised and one-sided accounts of complex social processes. Convincing accounts of popular education regularly acknowledge the importance of social movements but without theorising them adequately – and vice versa. This one-sidedness is compounded by a widespread tendency to generalise from often highly specific institutional and political contexts, as though all movements learned in the same way across space and time and popular education's role in fostering this learning is simple. Unchecked, this leads to the reification of 'critical' theory and the reduction and flattening of emancipatory practices to methods or even predefined goals. This paper constructs a dialogue between the work of Choudry, Freire and other authors in both fields, aimed at both celebrating and problematising their contribution to learning from our struggles. By developing a conversation between them, we want to explore how their insights might be usefully integrated for contemporary social movements.

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Introduction

This paper comes out of our joint work in the Movement Learning Catalyst project, bringing together three pan-European activist training networks (the Ulex Project, European Alternatives and European Community Organizing Network) with ourselves and Alberto Arribas Lozano as activist educators in the university, connected through past activist networks: in particular, we were all involved in the anti-capitalist 'movement of movements' that followed the 1994 Zapatista uprising, in different ways and in multiple countries. That movement was also an extraordinary educational moment; Fergal and Laurence collaborated over a period of 14 years (2001–2015) on movement-building gatherings in Ireland, practice-oriented spaces of mutual learning across movements which we also theorised as popular education (Finnegan and Cox 2007).

These networks themselves represent rather different training and education experiences: schematically, Ulex uses critical and participatory pedagogies to work with radical activists across Europe; European Alternatives engages in artistic, intellectual and movement-based activities and in policy advocacy; and ECON draws on US community organising methods, and works primarily in East and Central Europe.

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The goal of the project is to take the partners' experience of strategic movement education (Ulex' 'Ecology of Social Movements' training, European Alternatives' 'School of Transnational Activism', the 'Citizen Participation University' which ECON co-organise and the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism that we worked on together in Maynooth) and develop a deeper and larger-scale education programme for movement activists and popular educators.

A first strand of participatory and iterative research feeds into articulating a 'learning competence framework' – what activists and adult educators need to know, know how to do and know how to be for systemic transformation. These knowledge needs will be formalised as a curriculum and supported with materials for blended learning (brief residential elements and longer online ones). This process also involves a year-long pilot training, offered to experienced activists and popular educators across Europe on a solidarity basis.

The vision for the course goes beyond basic technical training and skill share (e.g. in organising, direct action, security culture, fund-raising, media work etc) to support movement strategising and constructing alliances across movements, social groups and places. A major focus is on building relationships between participants, enabling them to 'learn from each other's struggles' and in this way not only articulate what they 'know but do not know' from their own context and experience but also achieve peer learning with activists and popular educators from very different contexts.

This paper is part of our research for the project, reflecting specifically on Aziz Choudry's contributions to thinking about social movement learning and knowledge production (LKP) and putting it in dialogue with Paulo Freire's work on adult learning and education (ALE) in order to help us think about the challenges we are facing. In this paper we first discuss Choudry's work and then attempt the dialogue with Freire, contextualising their work historically and asking about their implications for the kind of activist learning we are engaged with. We finish with some unresolved questions.

Adult education and social movement studies

The coexistence – sometimes in sublime ignorance of one another, sometimes in uneasy dialogue – of ALE and LKP research is indicative of a set of problems rooted in academia but with implications for movement organising.¹ Here we want to build on the small body of work which explicitly thinks across these fields in a generative way. Reading across this work we see questions that deserve further consideration: does education for social transformation 'just happen' in movement spaces as a matter of course amongst those who do not expect much of a society's official processes, but as activists recognise the need for movements to become learning spaces? This assumption leads to descriptions of movement learning, some of which are very rich, but gives us little purchase on what is effective or how movement learning can be enhanced or scaled up.

Or is transformative learning something that mainly happens in spaces of adult education using the appropriate forms of pedagogy for fostering critical reflection and social analysis? This can easily lead to seeing transformative education as separate or even a stand in for organised collective action.

Radical adult educators and movement activists alike might agree that we can expect the institutionalisation of fields that sustain and reproduce themselves within capitalist society (and therefore also develop bodies of specialists). The carving up of the dialectically linked processes of learning and action into the thematic research 'areas' of specific disciplines reflects the dominant scholastic culture of the university and the dynamics of disciplinary competition and personal advancement within the academy (Bourdieu 2000). However, acknowledging these issues is not the same as overcoming them, and our experience as activist scholars interested in movement learning suggests this fragmented and reified approach needs to be actively struggled against. The article seeks to do this by creating a dialogue between a key LKP researcher (Choudry) and the best-known proponent of critical ALE (Freire).

Before moving to this specific engagement, we should state another and wider problem which the dialogue also bears on. In both adult education and movement activism we can observe many different processes of personal transformation and examples of relatively immediate movement success. Those working in both spaces need have little doubt *that* we do something distinctive and valuable – there are concrete practices with real results – even if we disagree about what is most effective and how to theorise it. The same, however, is rarely true for larger-scale systemic transformations or revolutions.

If we are lucky enough to be part of these latter processes, the role of education within them is not easily distinguished from everything else that might play a part. Conversely, when such transformations do not happen, we are much less able to assess what education *might* contribute to bringing about a hypothetical better future.

Tententially we are likely to assume that more of the same – more of what brings personal transformation and small-scale movement wins – will also bring large-scale changes in the social world; but just as not all personal transformation in adult education leads to movement wins, and not all movement wins lead to personal change, we cannot assume that large-scale social change is related to either in a straightforward or linear way. This problem of course goes beyond the scope of this paper but needs to be stated nonetheless.

Positively, one of the shaping features of both fields is that most significant authors on ALE and on LKP in movements are themselves practitioners – they are adult and popular educators, social movement activists, and frequently both. This might seem obvious, but a glance at the social sciences more generally, or at writing on social change, makes it clear that a connection to practice is far from being a prerequisite and often appears not even to be an advantage. There is something valuable to be noted here about what gives an author credibility in these practice-oriented fields.

Choudry on social movements

Aziz Choudry exemplifies this position: his work as an academic started after, and constantly referred back to, his activist practice. His academic work is a major contribution to the literature on learning and knowledge production in social movements. Much of it bears the shape of activist contributions to collective knowledge: specific pieces written for particular contexts, often collaboratively, predominate over headline pieces intended to make a ‘name’. This is consistent with one of his great strengths, which is emphasising the extent to which *movements* produce knowledge: he explores how they learn, how they engage in research, how they think and so on – often very informally, in struggle and in very particular situations (e.g. Baltodano et al. 2007; Choudry 2019; 2014b; 2014a; 2013; Choudry and Kapoor 2019). His work appropriately celebrates this, not just vis-à-vis the academy in general (see also Choudry and Vally 2020) but also vis-à-vis mainstream social movement theory, both of which often downplay this.

Alongside this, another and less ‘propositional’ contribution is Choudry’s sheer enthusiasm for the practical work of what he calls long-haul organising and the underworld of flyers, meetings, demos, newsletters, repression etc. that people learn in and through. He constantly refers back to this practical context: while formal training activities and so on are not ignored, he is interested in how *all* activists learn, and not simply those who go (or are sent) on a course (e.g. Choudry 2009; Choudry and Vally 2018; 2020; Salamanca Cardona and Choudry 2019).

Another point to note is Choudry’s big picture of the world – as with his pushing the boundaries both of the academy and of the neatly bounded training course, he also pushes the boundaries of polite social movement studies and education as neatly bounded subfields to include movements around race and majority world struggles, class-based activism and global labour chains or resistance to state power and repression (e.g. Austin et al. 2013; Choudry 2018; 2012; 2007; Choudry and Bleakney 2013a; 2013b; Choudry, Majavu, and Wood 2013). His descriptions of activism, and of activist learning, tend to be situated in relation to such movements rather than those which take the world for granted and only start from discontent in one area.

He takes a genuinely interdisciplinary approach that spans social movement research, labour history, adult education, political philosophy and sociology. Choudry's work is marked by a capacity for connection, a synthetic intellectual imagination, which is used to assert the importance of learning in radical movements as an area of scholarship.

Perhaps most importantly (but hardest to theorise within an academic paper!), his praxis-oriented perspective combines organising, learning and research as interconnected rather than institutionally and socially separated: a 'pedagogy of mobilization' (Choudry citing Holst, repeatedly).

Writing for academics

A weakness in his writing – from the point of view of a practical activist project like ours – is that by needing to lift up all this and emphasise the situated nature of movement knowledge as against birds-eye theorising, he loses the ability to give a more practical indication or set of principles of what it is that *good* activist/movement knowledge construction involves. Activists also learn how to learn, how to research, how to create knowledge etc. and presumably they get better at it – but he doesn't leave himself much space to write in a way that contributes directly to movements (other than by making them more visible in the academy). Clearly from e.g. *Learning Activism* Choudry doesn't actually think that all activist learning is equally good – but he doesn't leave himself much of a space to say something that would help activist learning processes, a point we will return to. Or, more positively, he feels that while wearing his (critical) academic hat it is not up to him to write for activists who are trying to think what to do, but rather to challenge other academics.

Learning Activism: The intellectual life of contemporary social movements, his single most sustained contribution in the area (Choudry 2015), is strongly marked by the familiar tension in committed research between 'testifying' and critically reflecting on social movement practice and how it relates to transformative learning. Choudry often approaches writing as a type of witnessing and act of persuasion, which hopefully creates the conditions for mobilising other scholar activists. This orientation also means that he gives less time to theoretical development. These choices were conscious ones, but came at a cost.

Celebrating movement practice fits well with Choudry's grounded and sceptical mode of thought, where he continually emphasises movements' situatedness and the value of the LKP that arises out of movements (informally, incidentally and so on): good pedagogy, implicitly, may arise over time.

In a sense, he offers activists more adjectives than nouns to work with: not so much 'do this' as 'whatever happens, do it this way'. This is of course closely linked to the contingencies of mobilising, his attentiveness to power relations and to the race / class / gender dynamics *within* movements.

Choudry's engagement with ALE

One of Choudry's great intellectual strengths was his capacity to make connections across disciplines and diverse areas of research and to trace a 'red thread' of common concern between them, resisting specialisation and disciplinary fragmentation. Specifically, one of his major scholarly contributions was to systematically link research on ALE with engaged scholarship on social movement learning, a rarer focus than it should be.

In this section we focus on how he makes use of ALE research in his work. For this we conducted a systematic review of the content and citation patterns related to ALE literature in nineteen of Choudry's pieces (Austin et al. 2013; Baltodano et al. 2007; Choudry 2007; 2009; 2012; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2015; 2018; 2019; Choudry and Bleakney 2013a; 2013b; Choudry and Kapoor 2019; Choudry, Majavu, and Wood 2013; Choudry and Vally 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Salamanca

Cardona and Choudry 2019),² paying particular attention to *Learning Activism* as his most substantive piece of work dealing with ALE.

The first, unsurprising but still noteworthy, point is that Choudry's engagement with ALE research is highly selective and partial. He draws on the radical tradition of adult education, leaning heavily on four specific lines of inquiry and scholarship within this broad and diverse tradition. In marking out the contours of his approach to social movement learning he frequently turns to synoptic, broadly framed Marxist analyses of education offered by writers such as Antonio Gramsci, Paula Allman, Bob Boughton, Sara Carpenter and Shahrzad Mojab. Historical materialism is foundational to how he understands learning processes, but he brackets out any detailed discussion of issues in Marxist educational studies about the relationship between the economy and education and how exactly this is tied to the logic of capital accumulation and social reproduction.

Alongside this Marxist writing he also draws on some of the relatively small body of work exploring social movement learning in ALE, most notably John Holst but also key figures in the field such as Budd Hall and to a lesser extent John Holford. Connected but distinct from this strand, it is clear that Choudry is also well aware of material from Popular Education Network and other similar networks as he makes use of Astrid von Kotze and Eurig Scandrett's research.³

Marxist theory and accounts of popular education are further supplemented by work on participatory research, much of which has its roots in radical adult education and community development. Choudry uses these authors and traditions in a very consistent way across diverse contexts to highlight the enormous, but often unacknowledged, value of the learning that takes place in emancipatory movements. To return to an earlier point, he testifies and celebrates this learning in order to make these processes visible, in full awareness of the academy's condescension towards knowledge production that breaks with the dominant principles of scholastic reason.

Choudry repeatedly describes learning as a layered and varied set of processes and he is especially attentive to the importance of the *incidental* and *informal* dimensions of learning within movements. This brings us to the fifth main feature of Choudry's use of ALE research – the work of Griff Foley, the Australian radical adult educator, author of *Learning in Social Action* (1999), the piece of ALE research that had the deepest and most enduring influence on Choudry.

The affinities between Choudry and Foley are stylistic as well as thematic. Both frequently illustrate learning through case studies (see especially Choudry 2015; 2018). This presentation is closely linked to the claims noted above about the significance of informal and incidental learning and ensures that the discussion is grounded in activists' lived experience:

Relatively little attention has been paid [in academic literature] to how members of activist organisations connect their individual and collective reflective processes in spaces like meetings, assemblies, and workshops to action. (Salamanca Cardona and Choudry 2019, 38)

Case studies also attest to the richness and complexity of movement learning. One other commonality is worth noting: Foley frequently highlights the need to be alert to the limits, contradictions, and tensions within movements. This is also the case in Choudry's work and there is a deeply rooted, perhaps even characteristic, refusal to romanticise things in his writing. As we shall discuss later, these emphases are useful as they counterbalance tendencies in critical pedagogy to overlook the role of incidental learning in movements and to frame education in dramatic terms.

While Choudry argues that learning shapes activists' lives and sustains the work of movements, it is striking from an ALE research perspective just how little attention is given, empirically or theoretically, to exploring the specific dimensions of learning processes. There is also not a great deal of discussion of pedagogy. This lack of granularity means the relationship between formal and informal learning in popular education and the role of pedagogy in generatively combining various forms of learning together remain undertheorised. Learning is treated as a set of interrelated, contiguous processes, the patterning of which often seems to be treated as largely contingent and contextual. How *specific* dimensions of learning processes, and forms and types of education, might be differentiated in terms of their range, intensity, or impact is hardly explored and not conceptualised

at all. There are typologies of how people learn in movements (for example), but no typologies of different types of movements from the point of view of education, in his work. From our own experience, this can reinforce movement educators' challenges in trying to identify what sorts of learning possibilities they can most effectively support, amplify or create in a specific context: or, put another way, Choudry typically writes as a critical academic for whom what movements do (including in LKP / ALE) is largely given, rather than with his movement educator hat on, considering what they *could* or *should* do in a particular situation (Barker and Cox 2002).

Developing a conversation between Choudry and Freire

The strengths and weaknesses of Choudry's approach to ALE are thrown into sharp relief when we read him alongside the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. This may initially seem redundant, as Freire is regularly mentioned by Choudry and one might well assume Freirean ideas are already an integral part of his work. However, when you look at his writing carefully you discover that only one of Freire's books is frequently cited (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) and in the publications we reviewed there is sustained attention to his ideas within one chapter (Cardona & Choudry 2019). Typically Freire's ideas about popular education and activist research are discussed via collaborators or adaptors of Freire's work rather than through direct engagement with Freire.

Here we arrive at an interesting paradox, perhaps even a knot, in Choudry's work. While he describes himself as aligned to a version of popular education which in most important respects Freirean, he stands at a sceptical distance from Freire as a figure and a theorist. This is evident in the content and citation and also the way he deploys critiques of Freire.⁴ This is articulated most explicitly in a section of *Learning Activism* (2015, 93–97) where Choudry argues strenuously against 'radical heroes' and mythmaking. In a key passage he tells of a North American academic conference where Freire was treated as some type of latter-day saint. According to Choudry, the discussion of ideas at this conference was completely uncritical and the academics gathered there were completely disconnected from, even uninterested in, movement struggles. This sort of academic game playing was anathema for Choudry and it appears to have shaped his relationship to Freire and Freireans significantly.

Reading Choudry through Freire, Reading Freire through Choudry

There are certainly many academics who invoke Freire without any radical intent and there are undoubtedly researchers and practitioners who treat critical pedagogy uncritically. However, in Freire's defence Choudry offers a very truncated and lopsided perspective on Freire, who continued to develop his ideas long after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Nor does Choudry make full use of the accumulated knowledge and practical achievement of researchers and practitioners who have elaborated and amended Freire's core propositions.

Our purpose here is to rescue Freire from the sainthood that Choudry quite rightly resisted, and to re-situate his theorisations of popular education as ideas developed over time in concrete contexts of collective action, through cycles of defeat and victory. Our hope is to move away from reifying Saints and Books to see the developing body of practice of collective endeavour expressed in various ways.

We think there is a value in advancing a 'missed' dialogue between these two thinkers, not as theorists in a textbook sense but rather situating them in their own contexts – their different trajectories, their biographical, disciplinary and historical experiences, and the kinds of movement situation and adult learners they worked with. If we consider their different trajectories and main ideas in relation to each other, this may help us to reframe and rethink how we view movement learning and popular education for our own activist education project.

Specifically we believe Freire's work can speak in a direct way to Choudry's main intellectual and political concerns and be used to further develop his insights, in particular in deepening his analysis of meaningful popular education and what this requires pedagogically.

On the other hand, there are tendencies and currents – theoretical, practical and moral – in Freire, and in the wider Freirean tradition, that require sustained scrutiny and scepticism which Choudry encourages. As we have already noted, this includes a tendency to overlook the incidental aspects of movement learning and to focus on the more dramatic and transformative dimensions of movement learning. There are also conceptual weaknesses in Freire's body of writing. In the material published in English Freire always situates his work in a movement horizon, but he rarely analyses emancipatory movements systematically.⁵ Choudry offers resources for thinking beyond these limits and perhaps even reinvigorating aspects of Freirean thinking.

While Freire was active in movements for most of his life and was always movement-oriented, he assumes rather than explores the nature of movement processes. This partly comes from a sense that the interconnections between communities, formal education, social movements and society are self-evident: he describes emancipatory learning processes working alternately inside and outside institutions depending on the play of forces. Choudry offers us a more deliberately disruptive view of movement activity and education vis-à-vis established institutions.

We might also ask, however, if Freire could have been more explicit in theorising the specific demands and needs of radical popular education for activists who have *already* done the work of articulating their own tacit knowledge / hidden transcripts / 'good sense' etc., and constructed movements around this. It is clear that he sees 'basic' community education and the education of militants as underpinned by the same learning process (Freire 1978; 1994). The implied subject of Choudry's movement LKP, activists who are already radicalised and organised in demanding ways, have perhaps already engaged in significant movement learning.

Radical lives, movement waves and the academy

It is important in such a critical dialogue to remember how much shared ground there is between them. Freire and Choudry's lives and careers were defined by their lifelong commitment to equality. Both worked with a wide range of movements guided by the ideals of socialist humanism and heterodox, non-dogmatic version of Marxism. In different ways they were shaped by anti-colonial thought, especially Fanon, and were internationalists who advocated the necessity of listening carefully to voices from the south. As a matter of both contingency and choice, they lived peripatetic lives.

Choudry's life and movement engagement is discussed in detail elsewhere in this special issue; perhaps the most important point is that he was a movement organiser in New Zealand for fourteen years *before* moving to Canada for graduate studies and then an academic career – while remaining strongly engaged in movements (see also Interface 2021). This shows strongly in his writing, as scepticism about views of academic theories and practice as sources of social transformation: he could always refer them back to the wider world of struggle which was his primary point of reference. As noted, this shows up in his writing as a tendency to defend movement thought *against* academic condescension rather than to write directly for activists about how best to do things.

Between 2011 and 2016 Aziz was also an editor of the activist-academic social movements journal *Interface* along with Laurence (unfortunately we never met in person); he edited a special issue on anticolonial and postcolonial social movements among other contributions.

Freire's formative experiences were as an adult educator with the Brazilian employers' organisation SESI (Serviço Social da Indústria) (Gadotti 1994) and in left-wing popular cultural initiatives. His doctoral thesis synthesised what he had learnt in SESI and from the popular culture circles with educational and social theory, most notably John Dewey (Brandão 2019). Liberation theology and the sociological research on models of social and economic development were important in Freire's political and intellectual milieu during this period.

Freire became famous in Brazil in the early 60s through his planning, management and theorisation of good practice in adult literacy which led to his appointment as the director of the national literacy programme (Torres 2019). As we know these efforts were cut short by a military coup and his subsequent imprisonment. Exiled, Freire settled in Chile where he held a position in education in support of agrarian reform as well as collaborating with UNESCO (Gadotti 1994; Schugurensky 2011; Torres 2019). These experiences further radicalised Freire and intensified his interest in Marxism and anti-colonial writing of Fanon and others which fed into *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and later work.

Despite growing fame in academic circles Freire opted to work with the World Council of Churches (WCC) based in Geneva⁶ for most of the 70s. He explained his choice to work with the WCC (Freire and Faundez 1989, 12) thus:

I was by then already absolutely convinced how useful and fundamental it would be for me to travel the world, be exposed to various environments, learn of other people's experiences and to take a fresh look at myself through the cultural differences. And, indisputably, the Council was offering me that more than any university.

The role put him in contact with radical educators, activists and scholars across five continents and allowed him to participate in popular educational initiatives in many places including at a national level in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, Nicaragua and Grenada (Freire 1978; 1981; 1994; Freire and Macedo 1987; Torres 2019). The experience of trying to scale up emancipatory learning made Freire much more attuned to the possibilities and limits of educational efforts within specific socio-historical circumstances.

After Freire returned to Brazil in 1980, he combined work in the university⁷ with research and engagement with various radical educational collectives (Gadotti 1994) and activity in the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). He served as the Municipal Educational Secretary of Sao Paulo and was a key figure in inspiring radical educational and municipal reform in Sao Paulo and in other Brazilian states (Apple 2013; O'Cadiz, Torres, and Lindquist Wong 1998). His final years were spent reflecting on these experiments and the challenges of neoliberal capitalism (Freire 1994; 1998 inter alia).

Here we want to highlight some facets of Choudry and Freire's formation and how this informed their view of the academy. Choudry was a radical activist who then through his activism became interested in education and later became an academic. His formative period of activism was with comparatively small-scale movements. As part of the burgeoning alter-globalisation movement that was making gains he encountered state interference and spying. The preface to *Learning Activism* begins with a vignette of how Choudry brought a suitcase packed with the 'outputs' of an activist life to his first academic job interview. The enormous condescension of the traditional academy towards movements as spaces of learning, research and theory building is a key theme and animating force in his writing.

Freire was an educator who became an increasingly radical activist between the late 50s and late 60s when national and global movements were in the ascendant. In the following decade he witnessed very serious repression and major historical defeats in South America but also participated in campaigns, networks and reforms that affected millions of people (Archer and Costelloe 1990). His early academic experience in university extension, literacy and popular education was on the edges of the university, more 'permeable' and responsive to currents in wider society. His research field was interdisciplinary and did not sit *within* the university in any strongly institutionally or intellectually bounded way. Both practice and theory were product of political ferment and collective dialogue.

Higher education was something Freire discussed in asides and rarely the focus of extended analysis. His most substantive statement of his position is contained in *Paulo Freire on Higher education* (Escobar et al. 1994) based on a two-day discussion at the national university of Mexico (UNAM). Even here Freire does not dwell on higher education alone, preferring to focus on society wide learning processes and competing political forces. He is very explicit about the

structural limits of higher education as a space for transformative education asking (Escobar et al. 1994, 58):

Is it possible that university education could propose a new education? I think not, because this would be the equivalent to asking the dominating class if it is planning a type of education that would rebel against its domination. Naturally it would have to say no, because up to now there has never been a dominating class that committed suicide.

Freire says it is up to university educators who have been ‘reeducated’ (xx) by political experiences outside of the university to ‘swim against the tide’ (52).

There is another telling remark made by Freire at UNAM which makes an important conceptual distinction: ‘the chastity of university, but not academic [per se], knowledge probably hinders us greatly in understanding reality’ (Freire and Faundez 1989, 79). This reasserts a dialogical theory of knowledge but is also careful to note the value of conceptually elaborated, propositional knowledge and of the need for various forms of expertise. From his earliest work with SESI, Freire put great store by such knowledge and repeatedly linked transformative education to the ability of popular educators to bring such knowledge to bear on situated and contextual processes of conscientisation.⁸ His position within the World Council of Churches and IDAC and his educational reform initiatives mean that while he is savagely critical of traditional forms of education – what he calls ‘banking education’ – at all levels he is far less concerned than Choudry about the power of the academy to block or recuperate and domesticate radical researchers.

From a wider perspective, Freire and Choudry speak from different moments in the historical process of struggle. In very broad strokes, Freire’s work is shaped by the mid-twentieth century struggles of the post-colonial majority world, at a point when the state (if ruled from the left or with the participation of popular movements) seemed like a credible bearer of emancipation, so that good forms of popular education – if always needing to be fought for in bitterly conflictual situations – were nonetheless possible in collaboration with state and other more or less ‘general’ (e.g. church, university) institutions.

This sense of speaking from and for a (contested) general ‘we’, of a period in which processes of popular emancipation could be seen as winning in some parts of the world – but also of a period in which (for example) the expansion of simple literacy programmes could be understood as a radical act rather than a form of labour market activation – mark his work.

By contrast, Choudry’s work is very consistently shaped by the rise and embedding of neoliberalism across the world, and a situation where radical learning is much less likely to be able to appeal (with whatever opposition) to a generalised ‘we’ or a shared vision of national development, and is more likely to exist within defiantly oppositional social movements. It is tellingly also written much less with the implicit ‘we’ of the *national* community sharing a common goal of development, and more either on the level of globally interconnected struggles or locally entrenched ones. His engagements were also mostly with smaller organisations, part of the explanation for his focus on the particularities of specific struggles. Choudry’s was a far less easy experience to build generalisations about ALE or movement LKP from. He also speaks from a moment when the emancipatory value of the university – while rhetorically celebrated in much writing from the 1990s and 2000s – in practice was located within an increasingly self-referential institution, rather than one oriented towards contributing to popular development. This is of course also closely tied to his location within minority world universities, where such orientations are far less common. As noted above, much of his writing is devoted to justifying movements’ relevance within the academy, rather than being able to directly use the resources of educational systems for transformative social projects.

These historically related but clearly distinct speaking positions mean that the conversation between Freire and Choudry has to be read above all in terms of the implied subjects of their work – who the practitioners they were writing for and about were (professionally and politically), where they were located (geographically and institutionally), but also the way in which they could

relate to a general social-developmental national 'we' or a local or global moment of resistance in a period of historical crisis.

Learning, education and pedagogy

Both Choudry and Freire see education as a set of institutions which mediate a range of complex and conflictual socio-historical learning processes. Both also see radical movements as driving emancipatory learning processes.

As we have seen, Choudry is especially concerned to highlight the importance of incidental and informal learning within what are often small or under-resourced radical movements, often exposed to state repression and where the simple existence of formal educational or research organs is itself an achievement. Freire approaches this differently: he repeatedly discussed *everyday* (not movement) activity and experience as culturally rich and educationally significant and as an essential resource for critical education. But it is the basis of critical education rather than its purpose.

Freire is also much more explicit than Choudry in describing learning as purposeful and socially transformative. These bold hopes are integral to Choudry's worldview but he is far less expansive than Freire. Indebted to radical forms of existentialism, psychosocial theory and left Hegelian thought, Freire adhered to conceptions of human freedom which foreground choice and action. The unfolding of events in the global south in the 1950s and 1960s and flowering of anti-systemic movements globally between the 1960s and mid-1970s fed not only his sense of urgency (shared with Choudry's movements) but also of enormous possibility. Conversely, of course, the educational work he did and wrote about regularly had some degree of institutional resources and official standing available that were simply absent from Choudry's points of reference.

This along with Freire's interest in philosophy and a willingness to make large ontological and epistemological claims and his deep immersion in the principles and rhetoric of liberation theology means that freedom and revolution are discussed in eschatological terms in his work – while for Choudry, who obviously sees both as important, what matters is rather the actual struggles that are waged against oppression and capitalism.

Two of Freire's most influential ideas – dialogue in education and conscientisation, the development of reflexive, emancipatory agency (1972) – were communicated to readers as elements within a larger redemptive imaginary, shaped by liberation theology. A good case can be made that this unusual set of sources and their dramatic rendering explains how an adult educator from Brazil, who wrote highly wrought books of philosophical reflection, became so influential globally.

Choudry's imagination was nourished by very different sources. His work insists in various ways that small, seemingly humdrum, decidedly non-heroic interactions and practices of social movement is often what matters most. Educators are often not central in movements, and activists by definition need to master a range of skills and practices. Popular education needs minute takers and video editing, as well as participatory decision-making, deep shifts in consciousness and small and large acts of liberation. Revolution may be possible, but not as a likely outcome either of personal transformation in a quasi-religious sense or of a given historical process – rather it is the result of concrete acts of organising.

Choudry's work is therefore a useful and realistic corrective to overly grand rendering of movement learning. However, as noted earlier his treatment of learning fails to articulate a theory of general or popular education that can be used by movements and radical adult education beyond individual contexts. It is not clear from his work what prevents, distorts or eviscerates significant learning or what motivates, sustains and deepens transformative learning.

Freire situates human beings through ontological claims; that we are 'unfinished', incomplete and in a foundational way curious beings. His theory of dialogue is premised on knowledge as created and recreated in a dynamic way through time and in context. Emancipatory knowledge, he argues, emerges through critical reflection which can dialectically link situated experience and

knowledge to general social needs through an accurate ‘reading of the world’. This process may involve incidental learning it certainly requires informal learning but critical education demands an explicit theory of knowledge and consciousness which movements and popular educator can use to inform and structure their interventions. This, in situating education and elaborating on effective pedagogy, is where Freire is invaluable.

We can also note that historical optimism on a smaller scale – the likelihood of social movements from below to readily adopt large-scale emancipatory visions such as development or Marxism – had far greater plausibility in Freire’s time overall than in Choudry’s. In 2022, it is simply not possible to imagine that social movements will automatically orient themselves towards Marxism or feminism (for example); if they do so, it seems more likely to be a result of conscious activist effort within movement spaces than a general trend. This of course is where we would like to see Choudry offer more in terms of what activists should *do* to nourish this kind of learning and research; the implicit recommendation of ‘just do the work’ does not really answer the problem.

Conclusion: some questions from Sardinia

This article is not a disinterested comparison of two literatures but driven by the practice-oriented needs of the Movement Learning Catalyst project, with the overriding question ‘How can we best do this?’ Here we summarise some key points from the discussion above and try to take them further with some unresolved questions, drawing on Gramsci.

Firstly and most importantly, ALE and LKP are important correctives to naïve liberal views of the tendentially emancipatory nature of education as such. A broader picture of the world that includes both exploitative and oppressive structures and a wide variety of struggles to overcome these implies the need for a dialogue between practitioner and academic knowledge (exemplified by both authors).

Education is a kind of intervention in social learning processes, and popular education is a type of intervention which seeks to enhance emancipatory movements’ capacity for reflexive agency. This necessarily has to move in several directions to be effective: within movements and non-institutionalised popular education processes, into formal institutions where possible and with wider publics.

To our mind Choudry complements Freire by highlighting the ‘pedagogy of mobilization’, a practically-minded clarity about the many different ways in which learning sits within movements and attention to the internal dynamics of power, race, class and gender. Freire complements Choudry by constantly pushing us not only to notice and celebrate what popular educators do, but to continually reflect as practitioners on what we are trying to achieve and the wider picture, not only of social transformation but also of human emancipation within the learning process. However, in the bottom-up and situated view of knowledge which we share with both authors, how can movement education get further than the effective articulation of an organisation’s own situation, or that of an organised social group, what Gramsci calls a ‘corporatist’ reformist populism? Can we find theoretical resources that reach beyond the Brazilian PT (Freire) or small transnational advocacy networks (Choudry)?

The notion of ‘learning from each other’s struggles’, derived from our own Masters in activism, seeks to respond to fragmentation and construct a wider ‘we’ across difference of various kinds (geographical, movement issue, social basis, organising traditions etc.)

And yet this too does not necessarily tell us what kinds of educational process and practice can help movements arrive at a *practice-oriented* understanding at the level of society as a whole (as opposed to Gramsci’s ‘contemplative’ knowledge) – in its multiple, contradictory, global, crisis-ridden aspects, but as a space for strategic collective action.

Is there a point of balance that might enable a process that is both organic to movements and the social groups they grow from – and genuinely educational, reaching beyond what a movement (and its constituent organisations and networks) currently consists of, to what it is capable of becoming?

Finally, Choudry and Freire both do necessary work in highlighting the importance of movements in constructing emancipatory knowledge. But this tends towards the celebratory (Choudry) and teleological (Freire) and is less helpful in acknowledging the many ways in which movements *unlearn*, *mislearn* etc. and fall back into particularism or into destructive patterns (racism, Covid denialism and so on). How can we account for ‘bad’ pedagogical trajectories in an organic way, as something which does after all regularly result from movement learning processes? To our mind both Choudry and Freire help us to think through the challenges identified here, and the fictive conversation we have constructed between the two has helped us to tease out the challenges we face in the process of working with activists and adult educators to design a movement learning space that can help movements and their participants to go beyond their existing understanding.

Notes

1. For example in ALE, see e.g. Kuk and Tarlau (2020); Finnegan (2019); Crowther (2013); Foley (1999); O’Cádiz, Torres, and Lindquist Wong (1998); Horton et al. (1990); Holst (2002); hooks (1994); Kane (2001); Shor (1992) and the various works by and on Freire cited elsewhere in this article. See also sociological orientated research on LKP, e.g. Apple (2013); Langdon (2020); de Smet (2015); Barker (2014); Cox (2014); Hall et al. (2012); Barker and Cox (2002), and the various works by Choudry cited elsewhere in this article.
2. This is of course only part of his wider body of writing.
3. This is largely an Anglophone network and Choudry’s citation of ALE tends to be from Anglophone research.
4. Choudry quite rightly points to the limitations of Freire’s ideas, drawing for instance on the socialist pedagogue Michael Youngman (1986), but it seems telling that he also gives space to thinkers who are, poorly aligned with his wider intellectual and political commitments, e.g. Choudry’s approving use of the thin, but much cited, postmodern critique of Freire by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) in the same section of *Learning Activism* discussed above.
5. This is not always the case; see for instance chapter four of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which, inspired by Fanon and events in South America, where Freire reflects explicitly on movements
6. He combined this with the work of the Instituto de Ação Cultural (IDAC) which he established with others to support the educational work of groups in the global South struggling for independence.
7. When he first returned, he had to refuse to return to his previously held academic post because the state required that he attest to his ‘lack of dangerousness’ before he could do so, a measure dreamed up as part of the transition from the military dictatorship (Schugurensky 2011).
8. One of his last books, *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994) is especially revealing in this regard as it discusses in detail the way he managed his teaching and research commitment, how he developed and applied his ideas and the priorities he held throughout his career.

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