

The Labor of Teaching and Learning Policy Advocacy as Media Activism: A Review of Works by Ollis and Choudry

Tracey Ollis, **A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education: Learning to Become an Activist**, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 242 pp., \$143.04 (hardcover).

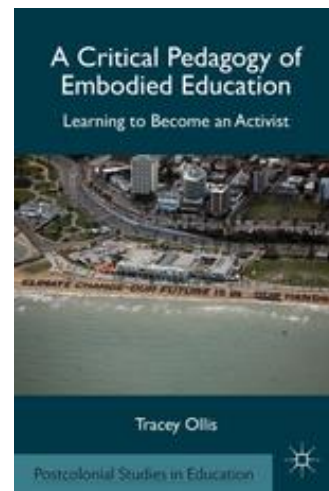
Aziz Choudry, **Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements**, Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2015, 216 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

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How can media activists intervene in regulatory processes to influence the future of policy making about network neutrality and communication policy generally? Teaching and learning policy advocacy skills is central to the work of public interest advocacy organizations that seek to create a deeper and more diverse body of knowledge to inform the communication policy needs of groups underrepresented within policy processes, such as Indigenous and ethnic minority communities as well as media activists. Yet while policy advocacy literacy may not be a central focus of media policy studies (Lentz, 2014) or among media activists, scholarship from the field of adult education that reflects on activist learning can inform this knowledge gap.

Two publications offer innovative approaches for thinking about the labor required to engage in policy advocacy with a social purpose. **A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education** takes a case study approach to investigate learning, including policy advocacy skills, among activists in Australia. Complementing Tracey Ollis's work that aims to theorize a critical pedagogy of activism, Aziz Choudry's contribution in **Learning Activism** reflects on knowledge within social movements to understand how activists produce research to advance their advocacy agendas. Both books help to discern the labor behind teaching and learning policy advocacy skills among activists.

Tracey Ollis's research of how one learns to become an activist distinguishes between individuals who fall *into* activism, or "circumstantial" activists, and those who have been part of social movements since adolescence, or "lifelong" activists (p. 62). This approach reveals differences between how these two groups of activists learn through social action. Her work in **A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education** also illustrates the multiple ways in which



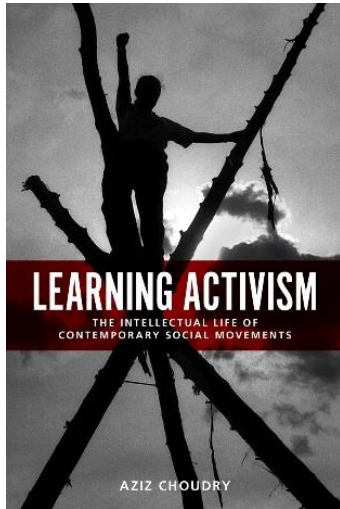
individuals come to activism along with the various teaching and learning experiences that helped them acquired the skills needed to be successful in advocacy work. Documenting circumstantial activists, Ollis's book not only breaks new ground in activist learning literature, but also contributes original thinking on the labor behind policy advocacy education.

In chapter 1, Ollis defines her research questions, which center on the processes of activist learning and identity formation, and places her work within literature related to community development, popular education, and social movements. She demonstrates that the experiences of accidental activists who do not identify with social movements are less studied. This lacuna is the impetus for Ollis's study because, she argues, "If we can understand the motivation and learning practices of circumstantial activists, social movements would be better placed to encourage and nurture participation . . . building movement members and the capacity for greater resistance" (p. 5). The orientation of Ollis's research points to the benefits of strengthening policy advocacy education among circumstantial activists.

In the subsequent chapters, Ollis details her case study research that draws on phenomenology and a qualitative design (chapter 2). To contextualize this framework, she summarizes activist learning literature in chapter 3. Ollis provides her case studies with circumstantial and lifelong activists in chapters 4 and 5, ending these chapters with a brief overview of each activist. This structure allows for the "stories of the activists to be a central part" (p. 16) of Ollis's book. In the final chapters, Ollis relates her findings to the literature on activist learning (chapter 6) and builds on theories of learning to concentrate on the skills acquired and the role of mentors (chapter 7). Her concluding chapter offers a "Critical Pedagogy of Activism" (chapter 8) to summarize her research findings and provide outcomes that can improve activist learning practices. For Ollis, this pedagogy is critical because it challenges relations of power and prioritizes collective learning that benefits social change.

Ollis's case studies help explain the hesitation of media activists to embrace policy advocacy. Her research documents the "huge learning curve" experienced by circumstantial activists, who reported being "suddenly thrown into unknown situations" (p. 119) like policy advocacy. Some activists reported on the role of mentors in soothing anxieties by encouraging the activists' advocacy work. Organizing collective learning opportunities among media activists can create relevant knowledge about policy advocacy and reduce the anxiety caused by the bureaucratic world of communications regulations.

Additionally, during her interviews with lifelong and circumstantial activists, Ollis found both groups identify the social aspects of learning. Ollis concludes that activist education is an embodied form of learning rooted in "being there and present" in social action (p. 163). Ollis documents how most activists cultivate knowledge and expertise through situated learning that is informal, social, at times emotional, and always critically reflexive in pursuit of education with a "social purpose" (p. 173). Ollis recommends creating formal processes that include training in community development skills like policy advocacy and encourage reflexivity, evaluation, and mentoring. These conclusions point to the kind of labor required to shape teaching and learning opportunities that can situate policy advocacy literacy within the tool kit of media activism.



Aziz Choudry's book *Learning Activism* draws on his scholarship and his over three decades of personal involvement in local and transnational movements, including Third World people's struggles, workers and Indigenous movements, and campaigns for environmental and economic justice. His reflection on social movement knowledge locates activist learning and research as produced collectively and in interaction with other activists, confirming the situated learning frame mobilized by Ollis. In contrast to Ollis's conceptualization of informal learning among activists, Choudry suggests learning within social movements is both formal and informal. Approaching "learning as a continuum" (p. 83), he compares social movement learning and research with academic scholarship to illustrate how activists and organizers contribute "sophisticated knowledge" (p. 9). This view highlights the kinds of formal and informal labor behind activist education.

After reflecting on his own informal critical learning that began with his encounters with racism growing up in the UK, Choudry builds on these experiences in chapter 1 by first reviewing existing scholarly approaches to studying activism. He then draws on his experience to think about the relationship between social action and activist knowledge production, including learning, research, and theorizing. In chapter 2, Choudry provides a summary of social movement scholarship, focusing his criticisms on prominent theories and offering newer works that bridge scholarly and activist ideas. He expands this literature in chapter 3 by considering a diversity of activist learning practices. For example, Choudry recalls his experience with state repression and surveillance in New Zealand to show how activists learned during those confrontational moments. In chapter 4, Choudry focuses activist research occurring within social movements, people's organizations, and grassroots NGOs in the Philippines, North America, Britain, South Africa, and transnationally. This chapter reports on the experiences of activists who conduct research outside of academia to benefit popular education. The labor of activist researchers, according to Choudry, produces knowledge that not only targets policy makers, but also serves to build movements. Choudry compiles in chapter 5 lessons and challenges based on the main ideas discussed concerning activist learning, education, and research. Together, Choudry's chapters help identify the significance of activist knowledge and research as well as the multiple forms of labor involved in policy advocacy education.

Through interviews with activist researchers, Choudry documents experiences that can inform the development of policy advocacy practices among media activists. Choudry gathers the diverse ways in which activists collaborate to produce knowledge, such as the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF) based in South Africa that pursues democratic goals during each stage of the research process. One APF activist researcher shared that this "research becomes just like we would talk about what we're going to do on a march of 5,000 people . . . a collective democratic process" (p. 142). These firsthand accounts, for Choudry, indicate "that research and theorizing are a broader part of the life of activism and social movements, whether explicitly recognized or not" (p. 123). Choudry's research of the intellectual life of

social movements enriches Ollis's thorough case study-informed theorization of learning to become an activist.

These volumes by Ollis and Choudry read in combination promote new ways for media activists and scholars to value the labor of teaching and learning policy advocacy as media activism. Scholars of media policy studies will benefit from the activist knowledge compiled by Ollis and Choudry to understand the role of formal and informal labor practices that shape policy advocacy education within social movements. Students will appreciate the accessibility of these works achieved by Ollis through activist storytelling and by Choudry's premise of pushing back against the academic text genre. For media activists, conclusions by Ollis and Choudry concerning activist learning suggest the work ethics guiding the production of knowledge and research for policy advocacy can mirror the same principles that underpin other forms of activist labor. Media activists can engage in policy advocacy with a social purpose through horizontal practices, including during the collective act of preparing policy interventions.

Reference

Lentz, B. (2014, June 3). The media policy tower of babble: A case for policy literacy pedagogy. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 31(2), 134-140.