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Popular Education for the Environment: Building Interest in the Educational Dimension of Social Action

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Abstract Community-based environmental education is an important part of the sustainability project. Along with regulation and market-based instruments, adult learning and education in non-formal settings consistently features in the sustainability strategies advocated and implemented by government, community and industry entities.

Community-situated environmental education programs often feature didactic "messaging"™, public awareness and community-based social marketing approaches. Clearly, these approaches have limited capacity to stimulate the social learning necessary to reorient toward sustainability. Popular education provides a framework to break from these dominant modes of environmental communication and education and achieve outcomes of a different order. Popular educators build curriculum from the daily lives of community members, address their social, political and structural change priorities, and emphasise collective rather than individual learning. Their work creates opportunities for education as social action, education for social action, and learning through social action.

Case studies from Australia and the United States highlight opportunities for community educators to draw on the traditions and practices of popular education. Residents of contaminated communities organise "toxic tours"™ to bolster their campaigns for remediation. Residents and conservationists concerned about freeway construction incorporate learning strategies in their campaign plan to enhance peer learning, mentoring and prospects of long-term success. Advocacy organisations and research institutions work together to create formal and informal educational programs to strengthen and learn from social action. The principles derived from these case studies offer a starting point for collaboration and action research.

Introduction

Environmental non-government organisations (ENGOs) infrequently pursue environmental education as vigorously or strategically as lobbying, direct action and electoral strategies. My observation as a participant-researcher in the environment movement during the past decade is that education has not fulfilled its potential, that it is often considered by activists to be less effective than measures such as legislation,

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litigation and protest, and that few community-based groups have the resources to conduct effective educational programs. Nonetheless, there are striking examples of environmental education embedded within environmental struggles and opportunities to enhance the learning dimensions of activist campaigns.

The Australian environment movement represents a potentially significant location for environmental education due, in part, to the movement's size, reach and profile. Greenpeace Australia Pacific claims more financial supporters (approximately 100,000) than the combined membership of all the political parties in Australia and is just one of several Australian ENGOs with multi-million dollar budgets. Friends of the Earth has member groups in seventy-one countries and a federation of local grassroots groups around Australia. The environment movement is strongly represented among the 150,000 activists participating each year in the World Social Forum. The movement's significance to the environmental education community is further emphasised by its social and political influence. The history of landmark environmental achievements in Australia including legislation to manage and minimise urban waste, the declaration of national parks including the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and sustained rejection of nuclear power testify to the movement's influence.

The disjuncture between this growing movement and the environmental education community is apparent when one examines the interpretations of "education" and "activism" by the distinct communities of practice. Environmental activists generally consider their media releases, lobbying, rallies and petitions campaign tactics rather than educational work. Although environmental educators promote awareness, commitment and action and are motivated by similar concerns to those of environmental activists, their actions may be perceived by activists to be inadequate or apolitical strategies for change. By bridging this divide, educators and activists may enhance their respective social change efforts and outcomes. The benefits of bridge-building might include more socially engaged curriculum and pedagogy, on the one hand, and forms of campaigning and activism that are more democratic and dialogical on the other.

Popular education offers one resolution to this divide between education and activism. Unlike conventional formal and institutionalised educational approaches, popular education is rooted in the experiences, needs and aspirations of community members. Whereas mainstream educational philosophy and practices tends to promote individual knowledge and growth, popular education enhances collective and emancipatory action. Importantly, popular education also presents strategies to reorient environmental advocacy from adversarial and culturally divisive tactics to a more dialogical approach to social change and to address environmental justice objectives.

Charting The Territory

Education has long been a core element of strategies for sustainability. Environmental education, in particular, was central to *Agenda 21*, the blueprint for environmental governance that gained international consensus support during the first Earth Summit in 1992. Similarly, the latest Australian State of the Environment report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) depicts education as integral to both individual and collective responses to environmental threats, and as a significant contributing factor to community empowerment and participation.

Without seeking to present a history of environmental education or the more recent incarnation of education for sustainable development, it is important to note that some important environmental education theorists have explicitly promoted change-oriented approaches. Fien (2000), Gough (1997) and Clover (1996), for instance, advocate forms

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of environmental education that develop in learners the knowledge, attitudes and skills essential for active and informed citizenship. This values-based and socially engaged orientation is also emphasised in the United Nations-sponsored Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. At the same time, however, the environmental education community has been cautioned by opinion leaders such as Jickling (2002) against approaches that are either ideologically-based or that emphasise the acquisition of skills rather than knowledge.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the ideas and practices of popular educators resonate more strongly with environmental educators working in activist and community settings than state institutions. Popular educators, more than environmental educators, situate their concerns outside schools and other formal and accredited educational settings, express a commitment to transformative learning, and remain firmly rooted to social change movements.

In activist groups including ENGOs, environmental education is favoured to varying degrees as a central element of campaign strategies. In Australia during the 1900s, the Gould League of Bird Lovers adopted the motto, "Education is more potent than legislation in furthering the cause of conservation" (Hutton & Connors, 1999, p. 43) and educated the Australian public about birds to build support for their protection. Contemporary groups that utilise environmental education programs include The Wilderness Society whose volunteers educate school children and community groups about regional wilderness areas and the organisation's efforts to secure their protection (Whelan, 2002). During the last decade, the conservation councils in each Australian state achieved specific and measurable social and behavioural change objectives through the Smogbusters and Cool Communities projects which blended education, community-based social marketing and community development methods. Other ENGOs limit their educational strategies to messaging through websites, leaflets, stickers, t-shirts and fridge magnets and invest considerably more energy in political lobbying or direct action.

Popular Education

Popular education offers a useful conceptual framework to appreciate the potential to *educate for change*. During the last century, popular education has emerged in many countries as an educational philosophy, as a pedagogical orientation and as parallel institutions with strong links to social movements. Popular education encapsulates a broad range of practices including learning circles and folk schools in Scandinavian countries, union and workers' education programs in Australia, community literacy programs in Latin America, anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa and Brazil's landless rural workers movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra).

Another point of reference for contemporary popular educators is the Highlander Research and Education Centre established by Miles Horton in Tennessee in the 1930s which continues to organise training and strategy development programs for activists and community organisers today. Highlander's networking, strategy development and leadership training programs support the efforts of environmentalists, union organisers, civil rights advocates and other social movements. The shared attributes of these and other popular education activities described by authors including Clover (1995), Foley (1998), Crowther, Martin & Shaw (1999) and Rukangira (1999) include:

1. A curriculum or content that is anchored to the daily lives and interests of participants;
2. An overt interest in progressive social, political and structural change and in strengthening resistance; and

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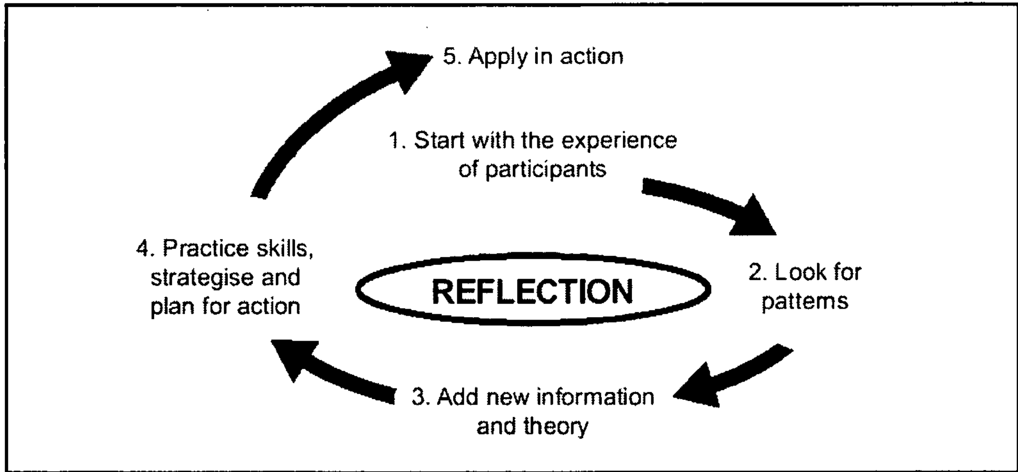

FIGURE 1: "Spiral model" of learning (Arnold et al. 1991, p. 38)

3. A pedagogy or methodology that emphasises collective rather than individual learning and development.

This third feature provides an immediately apparent distinction between popular education and conventional didactic (or transmissive) education. The teaching and learning processes adopted by popular educators emphasise the political utility of knowledge and endeavour to galvanise learners to action. This action orientation is an important feature of the "spiral" model adopted by the North American Doris Marshall Institute, which is depicted below.

The spiral model suggests that learning both precedes and emerges from social action: that social action is inherently a rich opportunity for learning. This assumption differentiates popular education from didactic educational approaches which are described by Freire (1970) as "banking education", that essentially transmit knowledge

TABLE 1: Education, Activism and Popular Education

Didactic education and marketing	Popular education	Activism
Stickers, fridge magnets, posters, water bottles	Toxic tours	Legal action
Community displays	Education *as* social action	Electoral politics
Leaflets	Education *for* social action: workshops and courses	Direct action, non-violent direction action
Lectures and presentations	Learning *through* social action: mentorship, social learning	Lobbying
Classroom education	Action groups with learning emphasis and processes	Media campaigns
Public relations and advertising		Internet activism

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from educators to learners. In a sense, activist tactics that seek to force social change without simultaneously informing, involving and mobilising the community can also be seen to undervalue the learning dimension of social activism. The relationship between didactic and popular education and activism is suggested in Table 1, which portrays didactic education and advocacy at polar opposites and popular education as a "middle ground" that integrates both educational and activist objectives.

In general, the education and marketing strategies in the left column (Table 1) tend to be practiced by industry and government agencies whereas non-government activist groups prefer the strategies in the right hand column. This generalisation is not universally accurate of course. Environment movement groups also generate stickers, badges and other paraphernalia that may contribute modestly to awareness raising, but can not be linked to significant changes in behaviour or tangible conservation outcomes, let alone social change. The popular education strategies listed in the middle column and discussed in this paper appear to be less common in Australia.

Popular Education: Integrating Educational and Advocacy Objectives

The popular education strategies identified in the central column of Table 1 are examined in this paper to highlight their commonalities and underscore their potential. For convenience, this discussion is organised around the constructs of: (1) education *as* social action; (2) learning *through* social action; and (3) education *for* social action.

Education as Social Action

The significance of education as social action is illustrated by the toxic tours led by members of several contaminated communities in the United States. Roxbury, for instance, is a predominantly African American suburb in Boston, Massachusetts. The area's socio-economic indicators include high rates of unemployment, welfare dependency and public housing. The suburb is also highly polluted. Like many communities of colour, Roxbury contains a disproportionately high number of polluting industries and contaminated sites (Bullard, 2000). The suburb is home to the Law and Education for Environmental Justice centre. One of the centre's programs, the Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) program, convincingly illustrates the synergy between educational and activist objectives.

Young people involved in the ACE program lead "toxic tours" of their suburb. These tours expose visitors to Roxbury's underbelly and living activist history. Fifteen to eighteen year old tour guides provide a detailed explanation of air, soil and water pollution. Tour stops include a diesel bus depot, contaminated building sites and waste transfer stations. Cumulatively, these pollution sources generate significant toxic and malodorous emissions and diminish local quality of life. While this might result in a fatalistic worldview, the young ACE activists convey an up-beat sense of optimism and agency. During the last decade, ACE has successfully lobbied for low-emission buses, the relocation of bus depots, additional air quality monitoring infrastructure, toxic site decontamination and improved public transport and housing. To a considerable extent, their political influence has been enhanced by the toxic tour tactic. Government agencies and private sector investors have been publicly named and shamed by these tours, and have responded by implementing many of the remedial actions called for by ACE.

The program facilitates both collective action and learning. The young toxic tour guides speak with obvious political "savvy" which is also reflected in a wall chart in the ACE meeting room that contrasts the values, beliefs and tactics associated with various points on a social change spectrum ranging from radical through neo-liberal to right-wing social change. The wall chart suggests more than the presence of an

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overt social change agenda. It speaks to the presence of a learning culture within this group, where action and learning are inextricably and dialectically linked as praxis or reflective action.

Learning through Social Action

A second aspect of the relationship between education and activism is that citizens participating in environmental action acquire considerable learning. Interviews with conservationists (Whelan, 2002) suggest that their steep learning curve may be traumatic and feel like "being thrown in at the deep end". Learning and movement building are infrequently factored into campaigns to an extent commensurate with their potential. The "siege mentality" arising from rapid environmental degradation and the alienation of community members from decision-making, coupled with acute resource restraints, may lead environmentalists to prioritise immediate campaign outcomes such as blocking development and influencing regulatory decisions over long-term objectives such as activist training and movement building.

Recruits to activist groups, and other citizens who become actively involved in local disputes, acquire a range of skills and abilities as well as extensive knowledge of a technical nature in order to effectively influence environmental decisions. In addition, Chase (2000) argues that activist learning also encompasses political awareness or "big picture thinking", personal growth and life skills, and organisational development skills. These five dimensions of activist learning are illustrated in Foley's (1998) case study of the early 1980s Terania Creek rainforest conservation campaign in northern New South Wales. Foley's interviews with rainforest activists revealed learning of both an instrumental and critical nature: learning to *do* and learning to *comprehend*. During this sustained and ultimately successful campaign, activists gained,

> knowledge and skills in rainforest ecology, lobbying and advocacy. They also developed a more critical view of authority and expertise, and a recognition of their own ability to influence decision making. (Foley, 1998, p. 143)

The attributes of popular education are evident here. Activists involved in this campaign increased their knowledge and understanding of political structures and processes. Their learning was directly related to circumstances and needs, directed toward progressive political and structural change, and involved collective empowerment and action.

Activist learning is often incidental, but it need not be unconscious or neglected. During their three-year campaign, anti-freeway activists in Brisbane incorporated a range of learning strategies into their plans and activities (Whelan, 2005). These strategies included:

- Inclusive campaign planning, analysis and evaluation processes: seasoned activists deliberately included novices in these processes. For recruits, this offered a valuable insight into the political and strategic deliberations of their mentors;
- Informal mentorship relationships: newcomers were encouraged to accompany lobbyists to political negotiations and to share responsibility for the logistics of organising protest actions. Novices took minutes of campaign meetings and helped distribute publications before progressing to more demanding responsibilities and assuming leadership positions; and
- Routine debriefing: after each campaign event, activists met to critically appraise effectiveness and impact. To what extent had the objectives of campaign rallies, media events, public meetings and other tactics been realised? How could these tactics be improved in future? Novices' opinions were welcomed and affirmed.

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These three strategies suit the tempo of environmental campaigns. Rather than representing an unwelcome distraction, they increased the capacity of the campaign coalition in the short term and enhanced the skills of activists who appear likely to take on leadership roles in the future.

Education for Social Action

A third dimension of the relationship between education and activism is the potential for structured and formalised personal and professional development to help achieve social change objectives. This section briefly describes four examples of education for social action: (1) mutually beneficial relationships between activists and academics; (2) an activist workshop program; (3) popular education centres and networks; and (4) tertiary curriculum for environmental activists.

Activist-Academic Collaboration

Universities are under increasing pressure to shed their "ivory tower" status and engage with contemporary society. In general, this redefinition is driven by economic pressures and results in stronger links between universities and industry. The changing identity of tertiary institutions also provides opportunities for universities to become "significant allies" (Stone, 1997) of the community advocacy sector and to engage with regional communities to contribute to problem solving and social justice (Boyer, 1990). Mutually beneficial relationships may be pursued through a range of specific actions.

Firstly, gatherings that attract both academics and activists can create spaces for learning and cooperation. An excellent example is the biennial International "Education and Social Action" conferences hosted by the University of Technology Sydney. Participants in these events bring knowledge and experience derived from political engagement and theoretical immersion and benefit from a genuine "meeting of the tribes". The Australian Ecopolitics conferences are another example.

Secondly, activists and academics may engage in collaborative research projects. Stoecker (1997; 2005) and Cancian (1993) describe participatory action research projects in which control of the research process is shared, all participants' knowledge is valued, and all parties derive the benefits of education and heightened consciousness. Unlike conventional academic research, Stoecker (1997) considers participatory research promotes knowledge and skills relevant to *the task at hand* through relationships of solidarity, resulting in effective action that wins victories and builds self-sufficiency. These methodological criteria bear striking resemblance to the tenets of popular education and have been promoted by popular educators including Paulo Freire and the Highlander Centre team.

Collaboration of this nature requires parties to resolve their sense of alienation from the "other" and to look beyond their apparently divergent interests (Highlander 1990). The Australian environment movement and higher education sector do not enjoy a particularly close relationship. According to Cancian (1993), it may also require academics to sacrifice career advancement and mainstream acceptance.

A third "really useful" (Newman 1994, p. 163) expression of collaboration between activists and academics is the documentation and analysis of environmental campaigns. Activist educator Saul Alinsky (1971, p. 7) considered the paucity of campaign literature symptomatic of hegemonic pressures:

> All societies discourage and penalize ideas and writings that threaten the ruling status quo. It is understandable, therefore, that the literature of a Have society is a veritable desert whenever we look for writings on social change.

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Recent publications that address this gap include Hutton and Connors' (1999) history of the Australian environment movement, Kathleen McPhillips' edited collection (2002) of activists' accounts of toxic campaigns and Green parliamentarian and direct action devotee (and Green MP) Ian Cohen's *Greenfire*. These texts inform and inspire: they allow activists to reflect on movement strategies and to recognise the historical significance of their campaigns. According to Speeter (1978, p. 3), participants' accounts of campaigns create an activist culture:

> The problem with those of us who have been involved in organizing is we ain't got no culture ... we don't talk about our organizing with each other, we just go on to organize around other issues (confrontational junkies, all). The most dramatic example of this is the lack of real written material on the subject of organizing ... it's virtually impossible to walk into your local library and pick up a book which describes the best tactics to use in winning a rent strike, or discusses ways to stop a nuclear plant or force rich people to pay taxes, even though community organizers have been working in these areas for years.

Texts such as McPhillips', Hutton and Connors' and Cohen's contribute in this way to activist culture and are an important element of popular education for environmental advocacy.

Nonformal Activist Education

In addition to academic-activist collaboration, education *for* social action may take the form of semi-formal professional development. The steep learning curve of novice activists described above presents opportunities for purposeful training activities. During the last decade, an increasing number of Australian environment movement groups have committed resources to personal and professional development and training.

Environment movement conferences in 1996, 1998 and 2001 (Whelan, 2002) incorporated a significant professional development element. Given the dominance of campaign-related discussions during these events, the increased emphasis on education and training of a generic nature was significant. During 2002, the Queensland Conservation Council and Friends of the Earth (Brisbane) ran a series of seven one to two-day workshops:

- Developing activist organisations;
- Fundraising skills and strategies;
- Skills for social action;
- Respect, Reflect and React: social solutions for environmental futures;
- Working together: team building and organisational learning;
- Sustainable activism: avoiding burnout; and
- Deep Ecology and environmental philosophy.

These topics correspond to Chase's (2000) five dimensions of activist learning mentioned previously. The workshop series aimed to help participants develop a toolbox of skills and to create opportunities for networking between environmental advocacy and other community sector organisations. The pedagogy adopted by workshop facilitators was intentionally experiential and participatory. Although facilitators and presenters were accomplished activists with a wealth of knowledge to share, participants were also encouraged to reflect on and share their experience as citizens and activists. Since 2002, the coordinators of this workshop series have created an online clearinghouse of activist education resources (http://www.thechangeagency.org) and a program of

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regular workshops with environmental and social justice activist groups throughout the Australia Pacific region.

Programs and Institutions for Activist Education and Training

The utilitarian value of the sporadic workshops described above is somewhat limited by the task-orientation of environment activists (many of whom fit Speeter's "confrontational junkies" stereotype) and by the finite resources available in cash-strapped movement groups. By contrast, in the United States, a comparatively generous tradition of philanthropy has allowed the establishment of permanent popular education centres. These centres, in turn, have contributed to the evolution of activist culture, programs and curricula.

The Highlander Centre in Tennessee exercises movement leadership on a national level through activities including activist retreats for strategic planning and evaluation purposes. In Chicago, the Lindeman Centre provides resources and meeting space for activists to "combine their skills, knowledge and experience in search of solutions (through) problem-posing and strategy building with organisations and groups in Chicago committed to collective and democratically-determined action". A similar role is played by the Kotare Trust Centre for Research and Education for Social Change in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Australia does not currently have an activist education (or popular education) centre, though a group of Australian activist educators recently proposed the establishment of the Terania Centre in northern New South Wales.

Formal Education for Activism

The final advocacy-education opportunity explored here is the development of tertiary courses in environmental advocacy. Since Australia's first schools of environmental studies opened in the 1970s, curriculum development has tended to favour planning, engineering and management. This may reflect the dominant environmental philosophies and political conservatism of contemporary society or, perhaps, the career-orientation of fee-paying students. Courses focusing on advocacy are unlikely to convey the same vocational-orientation of these parallel environmental programs.

Nonetheless, Griffith University's Faculty of Environmental Sciences introduced a one-semester postgraduate elective course in environmental advocacy in 2003. The course was developed in close collaboration with environment movement groups and incorporates a "service learning" element in order to reach beyond the traditional academic classroom. Service learning is a more common feature of academic courses in the United States than in Australia. It provides students with opportunities to apply their learning in real-life activities, fosters civic responsibility and addresses community needs (Peace Corps, 2002). During the semester, students undertake an internship to contribute to and analyse a campaign group's tactics and strategies using frameworks developed in social movement literature. This internship provides first-hand experience and contributes to students' political education. Miles Horton, founder of the Highlander Centre, advocated similar learning strategies:

> We have found that a very effective way to help students to understand the present social order is to throw them into conflict situations where the real nature of our society is projected in all its ugliness. (Newman, 1993, p. 193)

The course's three cohorts to date have undertaken internships with more than twenty activist organisations in four countries, and many students have played instrumental campaign roles. Other graduate and postgraduate activist courses include the University of Adelaide's Environmental Organisation and Activism and the Public Advocacy and Action program offered by Victoria University in collaboration

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with Greenpeace, Oxfam Community Aid Abroad and Amnesty International. The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology offers undergraduate and postgraduate units in advocacy and social action. The University of Technology Sydney offers a program in community leadership. Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, in partnership with Friends of the Earth, has commenced a one-year program in environmental justice, which is attracting activist enrolments. The State University of New York offers a postgraduate course in Social Movements and a Masters program in Environmental Advocacy and Organising has been established by the Department of Environmental Studies, Antioch New England Graduate School.

Conclusion

Popular education presents a framework to build bridges between the environmental education and activist communities and to tap into the significant potential for learning through social action. This is illustrated in the Boston toxic tour vignette where an activity that is primarily educative serves a critical activist purpose. Both the tour guides and their audiences gain an appreciation of the social and environmental pressures experienced by the Roxbury neighbourhood and of the political pressure required to trigger remediation.

This reorientation will require dialogue between the activist and environmental education communities, the development of trusting relationships and heightened recognition of the learning dimension of activist campaigns. The shift will involve redefining "education". The opportunities for environmental education to contribute to positive social change clearly extend beyond awareness raising activities, marketing gimmicks and institutionalised programs. Popular education requires personally and politically relevant content, alignment with the ideals of social movements and an interest in collective action. As these brief case studies demonstrate, these attributes are manifest in campaigns that consciously promote activists' learning, and in purposeful relationships between activists and academics. Education need not be a peripheral component of environmental advocacy campaigns and may be employed in a similarly strategic manner to lobbying, electoral politics and media tactics. This will involve ensuring these strategies have clearly identified audiences and purposes and that they are critically evaluated. Longitudinal studies might assess the long-term outcomes of educational efforts such as those described here and compare their effectiveness in bringing about the changes desired by environmental activists to conventional and adversarial campaign tactics.

Keywords: popular education; community; activism; social action.

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