**Title:** Radicalising Community Development within Social Work through Popular Education – A Participatory Action Research Project

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**Abstract**

This article reports upon the efforts of three social work/social science academics in partnership with social and community practitioners, at radicalising community development within social work. The project was motivated by painful political events and processes unfolding around the world in 2017 and led to the design of a participatory action research approach with 33 practitioners. Engaging in several cycles of research (pre and post questionnaires, observation, focus groups and interviews) and action learning (a popular education knowledge exchange day, a community of practice day, and proto-tying new projects) several new initiatives were implemented, including the formation of a new Popular Education Network. Reflections and discussion consider the implications of radicalising CD within social worker practice through combining education, organising and linking to progressive social movements. The article overall makes the case that popular education could be a crucial element in enabling the radicalisation of community development within social work.

**Keywords:** Social work, community development, popular education, spiral model, participatory action research

**Introduction**

What would it take to radicalise community development (CD) within social work in Australia? This question, as part of a 2016 conversation between the three authors in Brisbane, was in direct response to the painful political events and processes unfolding before us. These events and processes include the rise of nativist-populism (Finchelstein, 2017; Zizek, 2017), heightened intolerance and xenophobia (Vavrus, 2017), fear-fuelled nationalism, anti-intellectualism (Motta, 2017), misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016), and the ever-increasing gaps between rich and poor (Dabla-Norris et al. 2015). We found the events and processes not merely intellectually confounding – but a source of personal distress as academic-activists committed to the pursuit of social justice and human rights in our research and practice. Recognising that social work has been grappling with these kinds of issues, as per radical social work (Williams and Briskman, 2015), we particularly wanted to engage with how community development within social work could be radicalised.

We continued the conversation about what it would take to empower critical citizens and workers who would be prepared to challenge existing structures, values and power relations (Kenny, 2011, p. 17). Particularly aimed at social workers who use, or would like to use a CD approach, we decided to support a process of reflection on praxis, learning about popular education that would be collectively and politically-oriented. The spiral model (Arnold et al, 1991) was used as a contemporary expression of popular education for CD, and led to the prototyping of several new projects. Our key inquiry was into both how to radicalise CD within social work and also how to revitalise the popular education tradition within CD. We use the concept of ‘radical’ as per the definition of Brookfield and Holst (2011, p.3) whereby radical is ‘getting to the roots of something to discover the essence’. In this sense, CD’s historical roots involve citizens coming together to make sense of their experiences within the world for the purposes of collective action.

Within social work education and practice in Australia there is a strong commitment to critical thinking and practice, yet there is a lack of access to CD education and practice contexts in general, and more particular, radical forms of community development. While working with communities is considered essential core curriculum content for universities who educate Australian social workers (Australian Association of Social Workers 2015), the depth of CD knowledge social workers graduate with is variable. Our project was therefore conceptualised as *continuing education* for social workers using or wanting to use a CD approach with a very specific goal of raising consciousness about the possibility of CD within social work as a more radical practice.

**Locating the project in context**

I came to theory because I was hurting (hooks, 1991)

In coming together to conceptualise the project each of the authors articulated the deep disappointment about the neoliberal policy pathways pursued in Australia, and many parts of the world, in recent decades. Such hurt was the motivation for starting the project. We were not just curious or intrigued - we wanted to be a part of something that could reinvigorate our own praxis alongside others, but also be rigorous in the process. Hence the project, while a continuing education project for participants, was also structured to include a systematic participatory action research (PAR) component. As Glassman and Erdem argue,

PAR [is] an organic framework for adult education (in its broadest possible sense) that serves the needs of all—as it has emerged and continues to emerge across physical, economic, social, and emotional boundaries. We try to capture the unique qualities of PAR…to recognize PAR for what it has always been—a shared process of discovery that continues to grow through new initiatives such as feminist and youth PAR. (Glassman and Erdem, 2014, p. 207).

The three us, as experienced practitioners and academics, were also hurting due to our perceived sense that CD within social work was becoming either marginalised or increasingly conservative (Ledwith, 2005), despite claims that CD could be more progressive (Morley and Ablett, 2016). Within community development, conservative means simply enabling people to survive the ‘system’ being created by hyper-capitalism with its accompanying inequalities and social pain (Brown, 1995). This echoes the social work perspective, where conservative work tends to be individualist and reformist in nature, focusing upon individuals and personal problems and helping people to adjust to the world around them (Gilligan, 2007; Payne, 1996) - what organisational development theorists refer to as single-loop or first order change. Such conservative approaches sit in contrast to double-loop or second order change, which move the focus of change from the individual to the system (Argyris and Schön, 1978).

The intention was for us to join with 33 practitioners, to *co-discover* what popular education could bring to a radicalised community development praxis within social work.

**Broader literature and conceptual framework**

There have been many efforts to radicalise social work in Australia. Jim Ife’s popular *Human Rights and Social Work* (2012)*,* would be an example, along with the more recent collection *Radicals in Australian Social Work: stories of lifelong activism* (Noble, Pearse and Ife, 2017). Recognising that there are many ways to radicalise social work this article asks the question of CD’s contribution to that radicalising.

As mentioned in the Introduction, CD has also been more or less marginalised within social work curriculi within Australia, yet there is a rich trove of literature, from Healy’s *Social Work Method and Skills* (2011) through to more recent work such as Forde and Lynch’s *Social Work and Community Development* (2015). Even if such CD literature is present in the social work literature there has been a lack of edgy (Kenny, 2011) or radical CD (Gilchrist, 2004), hence our focus on how the more radical popular education tradition of CD could be revitalised.

Popular education itself is a form of adult education that encourages learners to examine their lives critically and take action to change social conditions (Kerka 1998). It is ‘popular’ in the sense of being ‘of the people’. The goal of popular education (in contrast to simply adult education) is to develop ‘people’s capacity for social change through a collective problem-solving approach emphasising participation, reflection, and critical analysis of social problems’ (Bates, 1996, p.225–226). Thus, popular education explicitly works for social change and has political action as an integral part of its intention (Arnold, Barndt, and Burke, 1985; Mackenzie, 1993; Wagner, 1998). Paulo Freire, a key influencer of CD, did not develop popular education, but he certainly popularised it such that it percolated into many other disciplines and practices, including community development. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)announces the main themes of Freire’s career: the non-neutrality of education; the power of knowledge; the coercive force behind rote learning and ‘banking’ education; the need for dialogical pedagogies, and the importance of co-constructing knowledge based on the experience of learners. These themes lead to a ‘consciousness- raising’ or ‘conscience awakening’; helping people to see their positionality in the world and to recognising how their knowledge gives them the power to act and to change that world.

Although Freire’s published work did not appear in English until the 1970s, this kind of educational approach has an impressive lineage. For example, Freire profoundly influenced Myles Horton’s work with the Highlander Folk School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center) during the American Civil Rights Movement. Horton’s lifetime of work played key roles in the American Labour Movement of the 1930s, the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the environmental and land rights struggle in the Appalachian region in the 1980s. Freire’s work also shaped the work of African American feminist theorist bell hooks. While embracing Freire’s work, hooks (1994, p.49) also offers a critique of the sexism of Freire’s language and of his patriarchal model of liberation which she read as equating liberation with manhood. hooks adds black feminist perspectives to critiques of education, and also to the way teaching and learning should be re-visioned. hooks, like Paulo Freire, sees education as the practice of freedom and argues that an educator has the ‘right as a subject in resistance to define reality’ (1974, p.53).

As mentioned above, Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* profoundly influenced community development in the 1970s, essentially ‘radicalising’ what had become a reformist project. This radicalising of CD influenced places as far and wide as South Africa – with Steve Biko’s Black Community Programmes, along with re-orienting the UK CD programs towards place-based community capacity building (Craig, 2007). However, in recent decades with the neo-liberal turn and defunding of much CD, there has been a demise of the radical tradition. For example, as a part of this project we conducted a systematic literature review of popular education in contemporary journals over the past ten years, and learned that Australian social work journals do not make any reference to popular education. The Scottish transformative education journal, *Concept,* made only six references to the practice, and the best-known community development journals (CDJ and CD) made less than 10 references. This is not to say that there is no evidence of popular education’s on-going links to CD, as per work such as Ledwith’s *Critical Community Development* (2005). Also, there are some relatively recent attempts to utilise popular education within neighbourhood work (e.g. Bengle and Sorensen, 2016), local food politics (Wight, 2014), to democratise democracy in Latin America (Bronkema and Flora, 2015), and studies of popular education’s usage in radical movements in the global south (e.g. Westoby and Lyons, 2017). Some of the CD literature alludes to overlaps between popular education and community organising (e.g. Tattersall, 2015; Fisher and DeFilippis, 2015) and also considers issues of participation in community-oriented education (e.g. Holman, 2015). There have been some specific attempts to articulate what CD and social change practice can learn from popular education, particularly within Latin America as per Liam Kane’s (2010) and Oscar Jara’s (2010) work. Building on this lineage of scholarship this article adds to the literature, exploring what CD within social work can learn from a popular education learning process.

**Methodology**

The PAR project design utilised an emergent process that enabled data collection, analysis and theory to all stand in reciprocal relationship with one another (Dick, 1994). The design employed multiple phases, multiple data sources, and several different methods, to develop interpretations as part of data collection, and to test assumptions as the project unfolded. In doing so, according to Dick (1990), data and interpretations are better assured and rigour is achieved.

***Project Design and Data Collection***

At the outset a three-stage project design was envisioned, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Project Design**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Project Phase** | **Group Activities** | **Data Collection methods** |
| 1. Preparation |  | 1. Initial questionnaire |
| 1. Intervention | 1. One-day popular education knowledge exchange | 1. Observation 2. Collective responses |
| 1. Community of practice workshop | 1. Observation 2. Collective responses |
| 1. Planning meeting | 1. Observation |
| 1. Reflection |  | 1. Summary questionnaire 2. Focus group 3. Individual interviews |

*Phase 1: Preparation*

The first phase of the project was a preparation phase where the project was advertised, participants were recruited, consent was obtained, an initial questionnaire was sent to each individual participant to gauge participants’ knowledge of popular education theory and its relevance to their practice, as well as their hopes for an ongoing community of practice with other participants during the project.

With two of the authors being academics within schools of social work, there was a keen interest to attract social workers to the project. However, to ensure we could create a critical mass for conversation and group work we did not limit our recruitment to just social workers and the invitation to join the project was opened to a number of networks. A participant information sheet explaining what the project was about and its aims, the date for the first workshop, and an invitation to the join the research process was disseminated through several Queensland community development, social work, and activist-related email lists and Facebook pages. These included network organisations such as Community Development Queensland, Youth Affairs Network and The Change Agency. A website was also developed with popular education resources.

The advertising elicited 48 responses. By way of entry into the project people were asked to respond to three questions: 1. What is your current role in relation to community work? 2. Where are you based (organisation/location)? 3. Why would you like to participate in this project? It was not our intention to turn anyone away based on their responses to these questions, but rather to find out about who was likely to be involved. Our original hope was that 20 people would be recruited into the project, and so it boded well for a rich process that 33 people attended the first workshop. Ethics approval was obtained from both of the partner Universities involved in the project: the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) and The University of Queensland (UQ).

*Phase 2: Intervention*

The second phase of the project involved the collaborative work of the project. We envisaged a six-month community of practice process, where practitioners would have an opportunity to form groups at the first workshop and meet regularly to support each other to apply the theory to their practice, or as our recruitment materials suggested, “to give something a go”.

1. One-day popular education knowledge exchange

An initial workshop was held with 33 participants to act as a popular education ‘knowledge exchange’. The workshop was designed using adapted theory-U (Scharmer, 2007), and moved from ‘observing and sensing’ into the current situation (of the social sphere, social work, community development, popular education), to ‘presencing’ (each person becoming present to what they would like to do; what was motivating them to really be involved), to ‘experimenting and prototyping’ some initiatives. There was a particular focus on learning the *spiral model* (Arnold et al., 1991). The spiral model is built on the thinking of Bell et al. (1990) and involves: i) asking participants to talk about their own knowledge; ii) working with people to make connections among their experiences, and to collectively ‘look for patterns’ from their knowledge; iii) introducing outside information to complement people’s own knowledge; iv) practising the skills and knowledge learned; and v) forming strategies for action, taking action, and returning to the group to reflect upon that action (The Change Agency, 2016). For the third step in the spiral model – introducing outside information, we used Freirean ‘codes’, or what he called ‘codification’ (Freire, 1974) as a way of triggering dialogue that would support emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1971). This use of codes ensures that the learning continues to be dialogical focused on participants ‘discovering’ ways forward for praxis. Overall, the knowledge exchange took the whole day with large group conversations, individual work, and then small groups gathering to consider pathways towards action.

Data collection occurred in two ways:

1. Observation: While two members of the project team facilitated the exchange, the third acted as an observer and note-taker, with the other two members feeding in their reflections at the end of the day.
2. Collective data gathering: A research assistant was hired to write down the collective wisdom of the group, and thus add rigor to data collection.
3. Community of practice workshop

Although not planned for at the outset, the group at the first workshop asked that further workshops be held during the project. A second workshop was therefore held three months after the first, attended by 19 of the participants. In this workshop participants experienced the spiral model and reflected on a reading from *We Make the Road by Walking* (Bell et al., 1990). As per the first workshop, data collection involved:

1. facilitator observation and reflections; as well as
2. data collected from particpants through the workshop processes.

c) Planning meeting

At the end of the second workshop, people indicated the significant value of the face-to-face gatherings. Consequently, a third workshop was held towards the end of 2017. The discussions from the third workshop were not considered formal research data but rather a means for the group to plan their future. The outcomes of any initiatives that participants undertook following the third workshop were included however and are presented in the findings section of this article.

*Phase 3: Reflection*

The third phase of the project occurred after each workshop. The purpose of this phase was to capture participants’ reflections upon their experiences. Three forms of data collection were utilised in this phase:

(i) post-action learning in-depth interviews with ten individual participants, to explore how they had made sense of popular education in their practice contexts and how concepts had been operationalised in community initiatives;

(ii) a post action-learning questionnaire which was very similar to the pre-workshop questionnaire to gauge participants’ knowledge of popular education theory and its application to their practice and to see whether any shifts in perspective had occurred; and

(iii) a focus group interview with a group that had formed a community of practice during the six-months.

***About the Participants***

33 people joined the project from across South-east Queensland. Their backgrounds revealed an extraordinary diversity within the group. 50% were social workers and 50% were from other social science or education backgrounds. A small number saw their practice occurring mainly in their role as an unpaid citizen or as a community activist, while the majority were involved in paid work across various fields and sectors. Table 2 provides details of participants’ fields and sectors.

Table 2: Demographic details of Participants’ Fields and Sectors

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Government Organisation | Non-Government Organisation | Unpaid Citizen | Community Activists |
| 3 | 18 | 9 | 3 |
| Local Government/CD Officers | Sexual Violence; Domestic Violence; Disability; Mental Health; Educational Settings; Family Support; Youth/Sexuality; Indigenous; the Arts; LGBTIQ; Homelessness; Youth Justice;  CD in Neighourhood Centres/Local Community. | Human Rights/Culture/Migrants  Indigenous  Community Organising  Education/Student  Culture/Religion  Intergenerational/ Aging;  Place-based Work | Transport  Environment/Ecology |
| Education/ Primary School teacher |  |  |  |

The project commenced in May 2017 with the first of three main gatherings of practitioners. We gathered in Brisbane on three occasions, and several groups formed meeting elsewhere during the project, and continue now. Most people came from South-East Queensland and one flew up from Melbourne. It was clear that practitioners were very motivated and shared the hurt about the state of world and how CD can play a role in responding, articulated above. People were caught in profoundly restrictive regimes of welfare servicing, and there was very little opportunity for collectively-oriented, politically-focused practice informed by an analysis of structural marginalisation and disadvantage.

Their hurt, their anger, a key element of popular education, was two-fold. On one hand, the sense that the marginalised were living with more and more disadvantage, and that inequalities were growing. On the other hand, the pain of working for managerial bureaucracies where radical discourse and practice was seen to be a distraction at best and aggravating at worst – the practitioner soon labelled as an agitator, troublemaker, or worse, risked losing their job.

The initial questionnaire (during the preparation stage) also revealed that about half of the people came to learn the theory of popular education; the other half came to refresh their pre-existing understanding. It seemed that despite the diminishing of CD within social work to a set of principles, rather than as a potential radical methodology - people were at least aware of the popular education tradition; they knew something, or at least enough, to want to know more.

**‘On the rim’ - reflection on the experience and findings**

A brief synopsis of findings is followed by our reflections on particular experiences and findings. In writing about our reflections and findings it is important to remind the reader that we did not position ourselves as academics ‘outside’ the PAR or continuing education process. We were motivated in the same way that the participants were – as frustrated, disappointed, and wanted to find new ways forward for CD within social work. We were therefore both participants ‘in the process’ (learning, prototyping and so forth) and also were ‘on the rim’ so to speak (Kaplan, 2002), looking in at the process, able to reflect. The bulk of this section is our ‘on the rim’ reflections. However, some basic findings include:

* Even those who knew about popular education enjoyed learning about a particular way of structuring dialogue in the learning process (through the model) and the use of codes to trigger dialogue;
* People wanted to create support groups to continue learning – mainly through sharing stories of experiments in practice of using popular education; and also, co-reading books/articles on the topic; and,
* Participants created a practitioner-managed Popular Education Network, which is continuing post-2017.

***Reflection #1: Reading and intellectual rigour was valued***

Observation, participation and interviews revealed how important the readings were for participants. There was substantial and sustained energy among participants to keep reading. They did want to learn the popular education approach, the spiral model, and discuss arising issues but they also wanted to read. For us, this was surprising. In our experience, within university-oriented social work education people are overwhelmed by reading – and then when they leave formal study, graduate anecdotal evidence is that they cease reading. But what people loved in the context of their practice, was that one book (the Horton-Freire dialogue, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Bell et al.1990), read deeply, carefully and collectively provided opportunity for profound reflections on their work. People said things such as ‘We love the critical reflection and intellectual rigour of reading one key text’. Each of the ten post-project interviews illuminated the significance of the reading*.* This on-going reading, with its emphasis on learning, organising, and social movements, acted as a crucial ‘code’ for our PAR work.

***Reflection #2: Experimenting with popular education and the spiral model***

Stories shared during the workshops, and then the summary questionnaire and interviews, revealed that some participants were feeling confident and capable to experiment with the popular education approach generally, and the spiral model particularly. For example, one participant explained how their confidence and understanding had grown,

I definitely gained a new informed understanding of popular education … The idea of the code was completely new – as a way of helping people move beyond people’s existing understanding. That process of moving through the spiral model, and then introducing the code [used in the workshop] was new and expanded my understanding of pop ed. Being led through the process of being popular educated was great.

This understanding of using Freirean ‘codes’, used during a phase of the spiral model to help people dialogue around new ideas, represented a significant shift for the participant, and many others. Another participant reflected:

A very helpful concept was using a resonating code to help people rethink their underlying assumptions and experiences. Applying that to my work I see that a resonating code for Aboriginal communities is revitalising Aboriginal Language.

The use of a code for dialogue expanded the popular education mantra of ‘start with the people’ to be inclusive of a second meme, ‘but don’t stay with the people’, as popular education has to support people moving beyond a ‘taken-for-granted’ view of the world. In this process there is the explicit reaching for a radical agenda for challenging oppressive structures and processes.

***Reflection #3: People re-imagining and experimenting in their work-contexts***

Some people moved from clearer understanding and re-imagining their praxis to active experimenting. Certainly, not everyone was able to do this. For example, one person shared how their understanding had grown and that they had started to re-imagine their praxis, supporting the Freirean idea that part of the goal of popular education is expanding people’s ‘imaginative literacy’ (see Westoby and Dowling, 2013),

I’ve a couple of workshops coming up soon, on wellbeing benefits of connection with earth (a.k.a. Joanna Macy) and I am thinking about how to incorporate it into that. What could the code be? I’d like to see that happen – one with [a local mental health network] in one of their Sunday workshops; and I am hoping to use that as a trial. I haven’t quite figured out how to incorporate [it] into my council work.

However, others moved from re-imagining to experimenting. One participant, who works in schools in a very disadvantaged neighbourhood, connected with another participant in the project who was very experienced in working with people with disabilities. She brought him in to help her co-facilitate a circle of parents discussing their children’s disability needs, using the spiral model. In this, the second practitioner also connected her and the group to the disability movement.

Shifting practice from deductive to inductive ways of working, as this approach requires, is not easy. Another participant shared her actual experiment in praxis,

When I first had a go at putting the spiral model into practice it felt chunky and hard – like I wasn’t sure what my role was. I’m so used to delivering content. To facilitate a process where participants developed the content was a much harder situation to be in. But it led to the participants developing a project – they developed an action that they think they can do. To get excited about putting something on the ground was just amazing.

***Reflection #4: linking the practice to social movements – possibilities***

Building on the previous point, a significant element of the PAR project was how participants’ discussion started to move to a structural analysis of problems. Added to this, people recognised that their local work needed to connect or link with, or be a part of catalysing nascent social movements. For example, becoming literate and linking to the disability rights movement became an important part of the groups learning. Other connections people made included:

* An assessment of people’s anger at rising electricity bills and the connection of this to recent decades of privatisation. The group started to talk about how to introduce ‘critical energy literacy’ into their practice, which was particularly pertinent for a couple of people working in the energy space;
* The 2017 struggle around Marriage Equality and people’s participation;
* The on-going struggle within Australia around what is understood as the anti-Adani struggle. Adani would be the largest new coal mine in the world if the Indian conglomerate can raise finance capital and overcome what it sees to be resistance indigenous actions in the Galilee Basement of Central Queensland. Participants found the PAR project a space to discuss their anger at this, and discussions provided links and connections into direct actions;
* The rising swell of anger in some lower socio-economic areas about how people experience their engagement with the welfare system, and particularly the recent decision to pilot ‘cashless welfare cards’. The participant who works in this area has significant influence through various civil-society-led organisations and is experimenting with popular education work now.

***Reflection #5: Practitioners reflection on oppression***

The fifth and final reflection focuses more on how participants also used the PAR project to reflect on their own experiences of oppression as professional practitioners. Popular education starts with the ‘experience of the people’ and in the workshops we engaged in numerous dialogues that supported this – for example, exploring questions such as, ‘What is making you angry right now? What are you motivated to do something about in this historical moment?’ Intriguingly, while the practitioners did work with profoundly marginalised people who would be motivated by desire and/or anger to change something (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990), *their own anger, felt around* *their own sense of oppression*, was mainly linked to their experience of bureaucracy and managerialism within their employing agencies.

As facilitators of the workshops we therefore opened up the dialogues on this, also using the spiral model. This created space to: share their own stories within a managerial organisation; understand the patterns; consider new theory that would help people make sense of their experience; and, then strategise for actions. Using popular education and the spiral model to reflect on their own pain grounded the whole learning experience in ‘reality’ – that is, their lived daily reality as workers in bureaucracies – rather than seeing the popular education approach as something applied to the marginalised ‘other’.

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**Discussion**

While many issues could be picked up and further discussed, three main issues have been highlighted, each now considered.

**Critical observations and reflections**

Despite the shifts in understanding and action among participants reported above, in hindsight, as authors-researchers we wonder if we made a mistake. We were working on the premise, one common to community development workers, that if you bring people together around their common concern, they can develop common analyses and actions. However, what brought the 33 practitioners together was their common understanding that their praxis was no-longer radical, that they wanted to revive it, and a combined emergent analysis that their workplaces would not be open to radical praxis – to the point that people would well lose their jobs.

This latter point cannot be underlined enough. It is one of the key barriers to radicalising practice. People’s oppression in workplaces (Beradi, 2009), creates a substantive barrier to radicalising the practice within the workplace. Practitioners needed their jobs even if it meant being an ‘agent of the state’, in the welfare/service-oriented approach. This did not mean people felt powerless to act – and the application of popular education and the spiral model to people’s experiences of bureaucracy certainly enabled people to make sense of their situation collectively. As a result of this there were discussions about what could be called ‘delicate activism’ or ‘acts of resistance’ within workplaces. Yet overall, people were not yet willing to take collective action to challenge their managerial workplaces.

Practitioners, unable to challenge their own oppression in workplaces, did however want to think about how to bring popular education into their service-oriented work. As accounted above, ideas emerged, dialogues were rich, and experiments took place. Yet, these were still located primarily in the silos of particular workplace contexts, or among specific client groups. There were occasional anomalies. For example, in one of the stories recounted above, the practitioner, a very enthusiastic and rigorous participant, had been part of the disability-rights movement for many years, so he was able to transfer what we were learning together into that context. He was also able to introduce several other participants into that context, encouraging them to become ‘literate’ about that movement.

In hindsight, as designers of the project, we wonder if there might have been more impact if there had been more deliberate connections made to progressive social movements. For example, we could have worked with the organically emerging connections such as Marriage Equality movement, or the anti-Adani struggle. But this analysis too has limits, as the number of single-issue social movements do not replicate the array of social justice issues place-based community development practitioners face on a daily basis.

We are still hopeful. Our social learning process has evolved into a community organisation – with the formation of a Popular Education Network. Our hope is that this Network could be *both* a catalyst for a progressive social movement in and of itself within social work, but also link more clearly to existing social movement structures. We see one of the roles of this new Network as helping practitioners ‘read’ the historical moment. Radical praxis entails not only understanding practice, but practice-in-context of the key social, economic, political and environmental issues of the day, hence the need to integrate practice with robust theory that enables practitioners to make sense of phenomenon such as advanced capitalism, patriarchy and intersectionality. Organisations such as the Highlander Institute, now 85 years old, have understood that popular education work is best linked to movements already alive with conflict and creative energy. We are building on that tradition.

***Popular education as social and horizontal learning***

Despite the critique of our own project design, what appears to be crucial for the effectiveness of a learning process that can radicalise community development within social work is a social and horizontal learning approach combined with PAR. Participants in the PAR constantly talked about the value of learning ‘together’. People did not feel so alone in their work. These somewhat understated words ‘together’ and ‘not being alone’ struck us as researchers as crucial enablers within the model of popular learning at work.

The relationships *within* the community of practice forged during the three workshops and associated learning groups, and the *linking between* different practice spaces (as per the story told above linking school-based practitioner and disability advocate) enabled some horizontal learning (Wheatley and Freize, 2011) whereby participants could learn from one another. This in turn created an ecology of relationships that enabled practitioners that were facing significant challenges in their workplaces to gain courage and experiment with support from new colleagues. The new learning and experimentation would not have taken place without this social network of relations.

The learning is predominately social in nature, yet our research also indicates that something else was really needed to move things into a radical tradition that is collective and politically-oriented.

***Extending social and horizontal learning to social movement building***

Our analysis indicates that a popular education and PAR approach which in turn creates a ‘community of practice’ (enabling social learning as per the previous discussion point) is not enough to radicalise CD within social work. Freire and Horton have previously made the point that popular education and PAR processes must be linked to nascent social movements to ensure the work has a structural intention – that is, radical (as opposed to simply becoming reformist) (Bell et al, 1990). Our project confirmed their assertion, requiring the local work to be connected to social movement strategies. For example, local health projects would be linked to broader social movements for health equalities, or local experiences of racism could be connected to the global #BlackLivesMatter movement and campaign. While the likes of key popular educator Myles Horton always valued education more than organising (albeit he argued for both when possible), we argue that radicalising CD within social work requires all three elements of education (i.e. the popular education element), organising (e.g. the formation of the Popular Education Network), and the linking to social movements. It appears that it is *the synergy* of all three elements that would make for radicalising community development within social work.

Our reflections with one another, and with participants, indicates that without the ‘container’ of a social movement, practitioners find it hard to maintain either the safe space for critical thinking nor the momentum or courage of collective social action aimed at tackling the structural causes of poverty or oppression. The key point here is that the literature often lacks analysis of the how PAR and popular education initiatives can be constructed through the linkages between education, organising and movement building, across scale.

**In conclusion**

This project is an intriguing story of attempting to radicalise community development within social work. Our reflections, findings and analysis highlight the complexities of the practice for social workers caught in their own painful workplaces. In this context learning practice requires a sophisticated understanding of how to construct a relational network of relations – *within* organisations, *between* practitioners and *with* social movements and other organisations. It is this social and organisational network that enables people to imagine a different world, engage in courageous critical thinking and collective social action when confronted with state-corporate power. The learning process for the individual cannot be conceptually separated from the social and organisational dimension.

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