**Occupy Wall Street: Learning through symbiotic vines**

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**Part 1: Introduction**

Throughout the US, Canada and the world, the phase Occupy Wall Street (OWS) now has meaning and emotion. To some, OWS brings about powerful emotions and denotes an important movement involving standing up for the rights of the 99% (the common people) and saying no to corporate greed and the 1% (the very rich). For others, it may only surface visions and non-emotional thoughts of hippies in drum circles and for others it may bring negative emotions of people wasting tax payers’ money staging protests requiring police control and delaying their daily commute.

Where do you stand and what did you learn as part of OWS? At first, it may be difficult to surface learning from this social movement, but an investigation of the happenings and social media sites attached to the movement expose learning. Learning through the movement is contextualized by the symbiotic vines of the economic environment, politics and the individual contributions to learning such as speeches, art, videos, signage and web based forums.

In this essay, I will explore the context in which OWS became a social movement and then will investigate the learning practices within the movement. I will ground the essay with a discussion of three points on the intertwining of the economy, politics and the people which influenced the learning infused in OWS.

**Part 2: The spark that lit the movement**

One could go back as early as the Great Depression, to investigate the inspiration of OWS but most analysts will agree that recent movements such as the Arab Spring and uprisings in Europe in late 2010 and the early months of 2011, provided fuel for what became one of the iconic social movements of North America – the “Occupy” movement, which was led by Occupy Wall Street (Sarah van Gelder and the staff of YES! Magazine (eds), 2011).

Since the start of global financial crisis in 2007, impacts were felt heavily by the people of North America. Senator Bernie Sanders expressed the view felt by many Americans when he addressed the senate and stated:

*“The American people are angry. They are angry that the middle class is collapsing because of the Wall Street-caused recession, they are angry that unemployment is sky high, that 50 million people lack health insurance, and that working families can’t afford college for their kids. Meanwhile, the wealthy and the largest corporations are doing phenomenally well and now billionaires and their congressional friends want to balance the budget on the backs of the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor.”* (Easley, 2012)

This imbalance of power between mega-corporations and individuals and the influence in the government was becoming dangerous and both activists and non activists were taking note (Stucke, 2012). A challenge from *Adbusters* magazine to show up on Wall Street on September 17th 2011, resulted in a few thousand people gathering in the financial district of New York City with some of them setting up camp in Zuccotti Park (Gitlin, 2012). It was there in Zuccotti Park where the Occupy movement began. It commenced with the inspiration of a transformation of vision and imagination, a transformation also known as learning (Hall & Clover, 2005). One hand written sign that was prominently featured in many media pieces on OWS is one stating: “This is the 1st time I’ve felt hopeful in a very long time.” This sign signified how people involved in the movement were taking it to heart and considering it a moral challenge and a personal problem to dissect and expose to the rest of the world (Gitlin, 2012). It was not merely a social drama, but as suggested in Hall and Clover (2005) in their definition of a social movement, it was social action from where new knowledge including worldviews, ideologies, religions, and scientific theories could originate. It is within this realm of new knowledge and transformation of vision and imagination that I will discuss some of the prominent learning practices of the OWS movement.

**Part 3: Learning within the movement**

I will begin with the learning practices that occurred within the core of the movement, on the streets of New York City and the main “occupation” which helped change the collective conversation about how many people understand capitalism to work (Cobbett & Germain, 2012). The prominent practices were the general assemblies, walks, informal discussions and living as part of a community within the OWS encampment.

General assemblies occurred on a daily basis during the encampment. Here, decisions were made by consensus. Everyone involved had a chance to express approval, disapproval or to block consensus by means of hand signals (Sarah van Gelder and the staff of YES! Magazine (eds), 2011). The assemblies provided an avenue for many to explore what is was like to be part of a system that didn’t function on hierarchical power but through horizontal power. Anyone could speak and would do so using the people’s microphone whereby they would shout “Mic check” and then would begin to say a few words at a time and then the others would shout the words on to others behind them. The people’s microphone became a mechanism that encouraged deeper listening as the audience actively repeated the words of the speaker and became more conscious of the words spoken (Sarah van Gelder and the staff of YES! Magazine (eds), 2011).

The walks were an important part of the movement that helped create solidarity amongst the activists. The walks created a presence that said: “We are here”; “Recognize us!” (Tarrow, 2011). The walks hosted numerous signs such as “the youth are no longer apathetic or powerless”; “all of our grievances are connected”; “another world is possible”; “invest in me”; and “When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.” The walks created excitement and for many a feeling of empowerment and that they could make a difference, which are important aspects for self-transformation.

The experience living within the OWS community, opened up the possibility of living in a world that is inclusive, respectful, supportive and horizontal (Sarah van Gelder and the staff of YES! Magazine (eds), 2011). Members joined work groups and worked collectively to ensure everyone was feed and cared for. This meeting and living with people with different backgrounds and values is theorized to result in new habits based on mutual adaptation (Larsson, 2001). As new ways and habits are learned, unlearning of old ways of doing things can also occur.

As part of the community, there were many informal discussions about the issues of economics, politics and society. These discussions were often had by groups of diverse individuals whom wouldn’t normally have come together to speak and perhaps for some wouldn’t normally have felt comfortable speaking but the movement created an atmosphere of safety and equality which allowed people to overcome their fears and reservations and speak openly with each other. One example of this (posted on YouTube by infomuncher, 2011) was part of a discussion had by New Yorkers on the public education system. The open dialogue created new learning and provided those involved (as well as outside viewers) different perspectives on the system. The creation of this type of dialogue can result in an investigation and an illumination of a question that should make one better equipped to take a position on a warranted basis (Anlberg, 1935 in Larsson, 2005). As people become more informed, they are also able to spread their learning to their community.

**Part 4: Learning through media**

Outside of those actively participating (or visiting the main site) of the movement, people across the United States, Canada and throughout the globe were bombarded with media reports of OWS and similar Occupy movements. The movement became global on October 15th, 2011 when people in 951 cities in 82 countries marched in protest of income inequality, corrupt politicians and economics designed to benefit the wealthy (Sarah van Gelder and the staff of YES! Magazine (eds), 2011). This made the Occupy movement somewhat of a sensation. The learning practices of those not directly a part of the movement are wide spread but some of the key practices are identifiable through analysis of literature and social media sites.

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube became the primary forums of online communication and interaction with the OWS movement (Juris, 2012). There were a total of roughly three million Americans who self-identified with the movement by “liking” one of the 680 Occupy-related Facebook groups and pages (Gitlin, 2012). The groups that can be followed on Twitter are extensive, numerous listservs and websites were created and over 57,200 videos are available on YouTube about the OWS movement. The videos range from songs of what should be done, unedited footage from the movement, humour used both in support and against the movement and even threatening videos by the group Anonymous directed towards the President of the United States about his lack of recognition of the movement and imminent failure of the country. The videos provide a tremendous library of different perspectives on the movement and long lists of comments from viewers accompany the videos.

Numerous articles have been written about OWS and a search on Amazon.ca uncovered over 40 book titles on the Occupy movement. A movie entitled Occupy Love is soon to be released in October 2012. The extensive repository of information and opinions on the movement along with the plenitude of opportunities for commenting and discussing the information and opinions on social media sites and through listservs has enabled interested parties across the globe to learn from the movement.

**Part 5: Symbiotic vines and their relationship to learning in the movement**

***1. The government created the economic environment that sparked the movement and must now create solidarity with the oppressed in order for the people’s and economic transformation to occur.***

In the late 1970’s, the neoliberal project was launched in the US to restrict government’s control over economic life (Roberts, 2012). By the height of the economic boom, income disparity reached levels not seen since the Great Depression and the influence of corporate and financial interests seemingly overpowered the institutions put in place to protect and provide a voice for the general population (Nugent, 2012). At the same time, due to the neoliberal project, unions had dissolved from making up 25% of the workforce in the 1970s down to only 12% in 2007, meaning that there was no united front for the frustrations felt by many in the face of the economic downfall of 2008 (Roberts, 2012). The isolated frustrations by everyday citizens were channelled together when the assembly emerged on September 17th 2011.

One could speculate, as Cobbett and Germain did (2012), that the American people had been oppressed by their own government and that their human rights had been superseded by capitalism. As the people realized that they were not alone in their oppression, they spoke out by being part of the Occupation; bodies being and staying and claiming space and change (Cobbett & Germain, 2012). Although the primary movement seemed to attack the 1% (very wealthy), it was the government that enabled the 1% to exist, and it is therefore the government that must stop regarding the “oppressed as an abstract category and see them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor – when he (the government) stops making pious, sentimental, and individual gestures and risks an act of love” he (the government) may then be in solidarity with the oppressed” (Freire, 2011). Together, the government and the people could redefine and transform capitalism to one imbued with a moral purpose, whereby talents are used for the betterment of others (Stucke, 2012).

The business community has already taken note of this need as was stated in Stucke (2012): business scholars are reconsidering capitalism, “one imbued with a social purpose. In the past, the concepts of sustainability, fairness, and profitability generally were seen as conflicting. But these concepts are seen as reinforcing under the principle of shared value, which involves creating economic value for society by addressing its needs and challenges and enhances the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates.”

***2. Capitalism created ironic twists within the OWS movement***

The support for capitalism and globalization brought forth incredible growth in computing and communication capabilities within the United States and throughout the world. Although OWS activists are predominantly against globalization and capitalism, the use of social networking tools were considered by many as the main life lines of the movement and have allowed the movement to continue outside of assemblies and walks (Juris, 2012). In addition to the twist of how tools created through the rise of capitalism helped create momentum and discussion for the movement, these tools, envisioned by the 1% and supporting the wealth of the 1%, (for example, one of Facebook’s founders, Mark Zuckerberg is currently worth $9.4 billion (Bates, 2012)), helped create a type of culture that is anti-capitalism. These communication tools allow for many different voices to be heard equally regardless of race, class or gender, supporting the essence of the horizontal, participatory practices of the movement.

YouTube, which hosts over 57,200 videos on OWS alone, is worth billions and it a prime example of the growth and demand of commuting technologies. As Google’s shareholders benefit from the flood of uploads and associated advertising profits, OWS activists and interesting parties benefit from the wide variety of videos uploaded portraying different aspects and views on the movement. A video, *Occupy Wall Street Vs. The iPhone Line,* which could be considered humorous to some and sadistic to others, brought forth the irony of protesting against capitalism while enjoying the benefits of an iPhone. A more brutal attack towards activists by Bill Whittle declared that if every year, everyone had to spend three and a half days in the woods they would appreciate what corporations do for people and wouldn’t be protesting. At the other end of the spectrum, the importance of diversity, equality, community and freedom of speech were the prominent view in some videos which highlighted that the fight shouldn’t be about us (99%) versus them (1%) but should be about creating love and contributing to the future.

***3. The sense of community and enactment of new horizontal, direct democratic practices created an environment that instilled learning in the movement***

In today’s world, community-based learning is challenged to be sustainable as resources are diverted towards employment-related learning in the pursuit of global competitiveness in the “knowledge economy” (Mayo, 2011). This has left many with a sense of being disconnected with their community. When people came together to Occupy Wall Street, they acquired a sense of community and felt empowered. With the understanding that the current representative democracy, using hierarchical power, was not working for the benefit of the people (as their voice was left unheard), a new horizontal type of direct democratic practice was initiated within the movement. The main hub of this practice was within the general assemblies of the movement as well as the 97 working groups where decisions were made through consensus.

Other trends were seen throughout the movement which embodied enabling elements of self and community transformation. For example: the use of the people’s microphone instilled deeper listening and greater reflections on the spoken word; expression through art, dance and music created a safe and accessible learning environment; open dialogue amongst diverse groups, speeches by influential activists, chants and signage providing people with an opportunity to imagine a new type of world. The movement exemplified Oscar Olsson’s vision of self-education as “education for and through the people” (Larsson, 2001). This type of forum for learning is in stark contrast to the learning environments existing in most formal education and employer based learning programs, supported by the knowledge economy. The forum, which aligns with many of the principle of popular education today, created an opportunity for new knowledge to be realized and transformation of vision and imagination to occur.

**Part 6: Final thoughts**

As OWS has celebrated its one year anniversary, the movement hasn’t propelled but has dwindled. Still, the movement shed light on the failures of the current economic system. “Our system needs fundamental change...If it’s not working for everyone, it’s not working” stated a self proclaimed 1% (Sarah van Gelder and the staff of YES! Magazine (eds), 2011). Although benefits from capitalism were intertwined within the movement that was standing up against it, the movement shed light on the true source of the problem and the avenue for the full transformation of capitalism, relating current capitalism back to government policies that are no longer representing the voice of the people and that it is time for people to stand up and have a voice. Although each person’s opinion and learning form the movement is unique a message that rings clear is that people must listen and learn from each other and utilize horizontal participatory avenues (like social networking sites) to help create love within the community to transform themselves and the world they live in.

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