A Hard Road to Learn

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Abstract

On 9 June 1999, Brisbane City Council voted to approve construction of a six-lane inner city freeway through an inner city park. Community groups in suburbs effected by this new road had campaigned vigorously against the decision for several years, developing networks and acquiring political acumen and advocacy skills. While their immediate campaign objective, stopping the road, was not achieved, important long-term objectives were realised and valued. These long-term objectives included the acquisition of advocacy skills and attributes by anti-freeway activists through both incidental and intentional learning. Campaigners demonstrated a strong commitment to training as they evolved to become a learning community. This case study by an activist-researcher explores the potential for and limitations to learning through social action.

Environmental activists: a neglected species

Non-government organisations (NGOs) oriented toward advocacy play an important role in contemporary politics. Despite activists' remarkable contributions to social and environmental health, there is minimal Australian research exploring how these individuals learn to effect change. Environmental literature tends to describe and decry contemporary environmental problems (see for instance Porritt 1990, 1991; Brown 1998) rather than offer a critical analysis of the role played by activists in achieving environmental objectives such as the declaration of national parks or increased funding for public transport. In fact, Foley (1999: 134) laments there has been "almost no extended analysis of social movements or examples of social action." In particular, he observes the lack of analysis from participants' perspectives. Activists' disinclination to theorise on their strategies for change is attributed by Heaney (2000) to their preoccupation with organising and sense of alienation from the 'ivory tower' of academia. This case study is a response to these observations as it explores an innovative community campaign from the perspective of an activist-researcher to identify the means and ends of learning for advocacy.

The romantic popular image of environmental crusaders effectively conceals the learning associated with effective advocacy and mitigates against deliberate educational efforts that might enhance environmentalists' efforts. During my own development as an activist, I have learnt to work with volunteers and the media, raise and manage campaign funds, communicate and educate, research, develop policy and utilise democratic processes to bring about positive social and environmental change. Activists' learning is often unplanned, incidental and incremental and generally acquired through struggle. Interviews with participants in the 1974-1979 Terania Creek rainforest conservation campaign, for instance, enabled Foley (1999: 29) to identify a range of new skills and understandings acquired by rainforest activists. Campaigners "learned a lot about the dynamics of campaigning, about the need for accurate knowledge and persistence, about the importance of identifying the real decision-makers (and became) clearer about their own and their opponents' values and strategies." These dimensions of activist learning resonate with those identified through more recent interviews with environmental advocates (Whelan 2000).

Campaigns also present opportunities for intentional learning. For example, the Highlander Center in Tennessee provides retreats and other educational activities for activists while the Mid West Academy and the Doris Marshall Institute have trained North American community and campus organisers for decades.

Intentional activist training was a significant element of the Franklin River campaign during the late 1970s and early 1980s, arguably Australia's best known environmental dispute. Environmentalists participated in nonviolence training before travelling up-river to participate in direct action intended to obstruct the damming of the wild river. This training was influenced by Gandhian and Quaker nonviolence philosophy and Cover et al's (1978) *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution*. More recently, activists preparing to participate in direct action against the proposed uranium mine and processing plant at Jabiluka in northern Australia were trained in nonviolence and environmental campaign strategy.

However encouraging, these examples are the exception rather than the rule in environmental campaigning. The author's experience as an environmental advocate and researcher suggests activists are likely to speak of being "thrown in the deep end" when they joined activist organisations and campaigns and to have received minimal training or support. Engaging in political campaigns provides excellent opportunities to learn social change skills and knowledge. By recognising and harnessing these learning opportunities, activist organisations can enhance this learning. This case study aims to illustrate both the potent learning opportunities presented in a community campaign and strategies through which these opportunities might be harnessed.

A city in decline: a community ready for change

Brisbane, the state capital of Queensland, is a city of approximately one million people. Like many Australian cities, Brisbane is increasingly car-dependent. In recent years, the city has experienced sharply increasing population, car ownership levels and per capita vehicle use. Since the 1960s, public transport has declined from 40% to less than 10% of all trips (Queensland Government 1995). This trend has been compounded by factors such as the closure of the city tram service in 1969, poorly integrated bus, train and ferry services, fare hikes and state subsidies that deliver the nation's cheapest petrol. As city engineers have gradually implemented their 1960s transport plan, new and widened freeways have increasingly dominated the city landscape.

Brisbane City Council (BCC) is Australia's largest municipal government. All twenty-six BCC councillors are aligned with either the (Left-wing) Australian Labor Party or the (Right-wing) Liberal Party. The city's preferential electoral system effectively mitigates against the election of independents or minor parties that may be more responsive to community concerns. At the time of this campaign, the Labor council was in its third term and had a strong environmental policy, especially in the area of nature conservation and waste management. Despite the Council having a pro-public transport policy, road building programs still enjoyed unprecedented funding.

LULUs mobilise NIMBYs

Local community activists in Brisbane have mobilised around sustainable transport issues on a number of occasions. The Route 20 proposal in the 1980s that entailed widening and connecting several arterial roads to create concentric ring roads, for instance, triggered widespread community opposition and prompted major concessions. The influence of community activists was also evident when three members of State Parliament were voted from office in 1995 following their support for a proposed second motorway from Brisbane to the Gold Coast. The motorway would have transected significant koala habitat and was effectively opposed.

In the early 1990s community campaigners targeted another unpopular transport infrastructure project. This project involved widening a major arterial and the consequent removal of several stately trees. Residents groups diplomatically expressed their concerns to Council BCC but made little progress. By the time bulldozers arrived, activists had resorted to more confrontational tactics such as occupying a giant fig tree destined for removal and driving spikes into tree trunks so that chainsaws could not be safely deployed. Despite these actions,

Council's plans were implemented with little apparent regard for residential or environmental concerns. This campaign was demoralising and exhausting for many of Brisbane's transport activists. Debates over campaign strategies and political orientations also created tensions within and between community groups.

Then in 1997 the Council announced plans for a six-lane freeway, to be called the City Valley Bypass. The road was promoted as the solution to inner city congestion. However, local residents and environmentalists were concerned by the proposal and began meeting at the home of a prominent community organiser. An informal network was born.

People had a variety of motivations for participating in this campaign. Many fitted the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) stereotype. NIMBYism hinges on local and immediate organising to oppose Locally Unwanted Land Uses (LULUs). NIMBY groups also had broader concerns such as as the loss of parkland and cultural heritage, increased traffic, noise and air pollution and related impacts on urban amenity. Of particular concern was the fact that the proposed freeway would dissect Victoria Park, Brisbane's oldest reserve, which provided sweeping lawns, attractive trees and gardens and habitat for water birds.

Victoria Park also has significant value as a site of cultural value. The park follows the course of an ancient string of lagoons, where the region's original inhabitants camped at the time of Brisbane's early European settlement. Indeed, the Turrbal people had maintained relationships with the Victoria Park area for thousands of years. Only one small pond remained, York's Hollow, which was named after the Duke of York, a prominent Aboriginal elder at the time of European settlement.

These potential impacts galvanised and mobilised groups from suburbs across inner-northern suburbs, many of whom had been involved in successful campaigns against the same road proposal during the preceding decade.

Members of the network helped each other learn more about the proposal. Representatives met with Council engineers, transport planners and local representatives. Delegates debriefed after these meetings to share their emerging understandings. Their discussions focused on emerging opportunities to infiltrate Council's tight power arrangements and how best to articulate the anti-bypass position and mobilise the community.

One of the key areas of informal learning concerned campaign tactics. Anti-freeway alliance activists held diverse dispositions toward power-holders. The two 'natural leaders' in the alliance represented extremes of this continuum. While the network operated as a collective, without designated office bearers, Richard and Anne emerged as leaders, perhaps due to their high level of commitment. Both were spokespeople for residents' groups opposed to the freeway. Richard's group expected him to represent their organisation with a high degree of diplomacy, graciously accepting situations in which BCC might exhibit a lack of willingness to modify their plans. Accordingly, Richard enjoyed a close working relationship with City Councillors proposing the freeway. Anne, by contrast, had a long history of community leadership and influence often entailing confrontational tactics. As a result, she had become a key target of Council's aggressive public relations strategies and was labelled a radical extremist. Her group gave her a free reign regarding public statements and endorsed her 'head-kicking' style.

Novices joining the campaign were exposed to both extremes. Meeting time was allocated to exploring and assessing the relative merits of adversarial and diplomatic tactics. Network meetings often closed with an evaluation session (see Ritchie 1999) during which participants briefly shared their feelings about how the campaign was proceeding and how meetings could be improved. This evaluation process also helped define and value participant learning and identified the activist skills and understandings related to both sustainable transport and social change processes that campaigners felt they were developing.

It's not easy being green: overcoming ignorance and structurelessness

The draft road proposal contained thousands of pages of technical information. Activists familiar with such documents helped others interpret the proposal, identify potential impacts and critique Council's justification for the road. The group also recruited transport and land-use planning experts to help interpret the documents and identify weaknesses susceptible to criticism or legal challenge. Flaws in reasoning, data gaps and under-exaggerated impacts were identified and simplified into fact sheets and *sound bites* for media spokespeople.

Campaigners learned about different options for funding transport infrastructure. A strategic leak to Opposition Councillors and the media on this point contributed to the Council dismissing the "build-own-operate-transfer" option that would have been a very costly funding arrangements. In addition to gaining specific knowledge about transport infrastructure funding, novice campaigners were exposed to an apparently effective strategy. The funding exposé unfolded exactly as planned by the campaign network and was highly embarrassing to Council. Activists who had previously doubted the network's capacity to exert influence reported renewed confidence.

Campaigners needed an inside view of Council's decision-making processes. Legal advice on this point gave campaigners confidence to utilise Freedom of Information legislation. Novice activists were encouraged to help secure and interpret the voluminous documentation of Council's deliberations. Documents obtained through this search included a risk management strategy that identified the legal and political obstacles Council believed it faced in proposing, assessing and constructing the freeway. Discovery of this strategy was a significant milestone in the group's evolution. Most campaigners espoused a strong commitment to open and accountable democratic procedures and uncritically believed that majority opposition to the road would naturally lead to a Council decision to revise their transport plans. The Council's apparent willingness to refute, attack, marginalise and divide anti-freeway elements of the community forced members to reconsider their naive political analysis.

Ironically, campaigners had utilised a legal instrument associated with openness and had learned the importance of cunning. It was evident they needed to develop a similarly mature and coherent strategy. Effective engagement in the democratic process demanded a high level of acumen and creativity.

Discovery of the risk management strategy provided an important affirmation for group's members as many political risks identified as high impact had already been realised through sustained community opposition. The sense of achievement that followed this and similar discoveries helped build a belief that change was possible. This resonated with Alinsky's (1970) advice that organisers should steer groups toward initial campaign tactics likely to meet with success. Novice activists whose initial tactics successfully achieve intended objectives are likely to develop confidence in their ability to effect change and to learn required activist skills - particularly if they perceive a pattern of success in progressively more challenging campaign objectives.

Activist learning opportunities were also enhanced through the conscious resolution of obstacles such as ad hoc organisational structure and process. During initial stages of the anti-bypass campaign, the community groups aligned in opposition to the freeway were referred to collectively as the Northern Brisbane Residents and Owners Coalition. Ten to twenty community activists met on an ad hoc basis in members' homes and offices. The focus of energy shifted rapidly from fact-finding to strategic opposition to the freeway proposal. But a lack of structure and routine became an obstacle to active recruitment. It appeared newcomers were also overwhelmed by the apparent expertise of seasoned campaigners and reluctant to take on responsibility. Despite positive media coverage and evident community support, the campaign did not appear to gain momentum. Council showed no signs of prevarication.

An opportunity to learn, an opportunity to teach

At the time of the campaign, I was coordinating a community education program with the state's peak non-government environmental organisation, the Queensland Conservation Council (QCC). The program promoted sustainable transport through both education and advocacy. For several years, I had been researching 'teaching and learning for environmental activism' at the same time as being a full-time advocate and activist educator.

QCC fitted Bill Moyer's (1990) stereotype of a "Professional Opposition Organisation" (or POO). Most staff held degrees in environmental science and received funding and support for professional development. Anti-bypass campaigners, by contrast, participated voluntarily and represented variety of backgrounds: business people, professionals, tradespeople, students and unemployed people. Their participation in the campaign was oriented primarily toward achieving one short-term outcome: stopping the road. Members often commented that they had no interest in activism as an ongoing pursuit and would much prefer to be home watering the garden than attending endless meetings.

QCC was slow to join the campaign. As an 'umbrella' organisation that supported and coordinated conservation groups across the state, QCC generally prioritised long-term and regional concerns. QCC did not believe the transition to more sustainable transport patterns would be achieved by campaigning against specific road proposals. The organisation's strategies were generally consistent with Dryzek's notion (1997: 92) of *democratic pragmatism*: advocating environmentally oriented policies through research, government committees, lobbying and submissions. Transport campaigners at QCC also developed and trialed systematic behaviour change programs to engage specific neighbourhoods, schools, universities and workplaces and promote cycling, walking and public transport. QCC worked on social, cultural and institutional change rather than short-term battles with politicians and planning decisions. By participating in this campaign, QCC hoped to assist activist learning in three ways: (a) by promoting a broader view of sustainable transport, (b) by imparting specific campaign planning tools such as power-mapping and media strategy and (c) by fostering organisational learning within this community coalition.

As an established campaigning organisation, QCC offered potential benefits and disbenefits to the nascent anti-freeway network. On the one hand, QCC's organisational capacity offered smaller community group the resources to adopt routines. Seasoned QCC staff and volunteers were generally willing to share their experience and skills. On the other hand, QCC was, to some extent, inflexible in its campaigning approach and politics.

The organisation's administrative support led to more regular network meetings that were minuted and generally more purposeful. For instance, tasks were carefully tracked from one meeting to the next and agendas were negotiated and followed. Exposure to this professional face of community organising was a new and significant learning opportunity for many alliance members. Participants were encouraged to facilitate meetings, take minutes, propose tactics for consideration, observe and evaluate campaign activities. Experienced activists encouraged and affirmed novices' tentative contributions, thus providing mentorship and modelling and contributing to a learning culture. Several budding activists participated with the express objective of enhancing their advocacy abilities. The campaign was no longer primarily reactive. Rather, the campaign focus came to encompass a longer-term view. Activists began to speak of the anti-freeway battle as one chapter in a long-term social change movement from car-dependency. Campaign outcomes unrelated to this specific freeway proposal began to be valued.

Getting angry, getting even

While initial campaign activities emerged spontaneously during the irregular meetings, QCC encouraged the alliance to plan more strategically. One useful planning tool was 'power-mapping', a structured and participatory process I had developed by facilitating activist workshops. Campaigners brainstormed lists of individuals and organisations who could

potentially influence the freeway decision and those who would be effected. Cards bearing these people's names were organised and re-organised on a desk or the floor, graphically exploring power relations, affiliations and networks. A consensus configuration emerged depicting individual and organisational disposition. Stakeholders were categorised as freeway champions or supporters, those without strong views, potential freeway opponents and active opponents. Stakeholder motivations were also analysed. What factors explained these disposition and could they be influenced?

This dynamic power map became a useful reference when contemplating potential strategies and appeared to lead constructively to the broadening of the alliance and helped identify campaign opportunities. The map suggested that campaign support in conservative suburbs would enhance the campaign's political leverage and prompt conservative local and state government representatives to take up the issue. Although most participating groups had left-wing tendencies, there was no reason why the alliance should exclude conservatives. This led alliance members to help build two new residents' groups and stage the campaign's most successful public meetings.

Disgruntled residents packed public halls to exert pressure on Council and attract media coverage. Seasoned alliance spokespeople resisted the temptation to dominate these media opportunities. Instead, emerging groups were encouraged to learn and practice advocacy skills and increase their autonomy. Core alliance members provided political advice, helped to draft media releases, contributed to newsletters and leaflets and mentored emergent local leaders. As a result, local media coverage and resultant community awareness and anti-freeway political pressure in these suburbs increased dramatically. Local groups planning media releases regularly liaised with QCC's professional advocates to draft statements and rehearse interview responses.

The network became increasingly formalised, taking on attributes of established non-government advocacy groups. With a name change, website and logo, the Inner Northern Coalition (INC) regularly dominated local media. The coalition met regularly and initiated a regular newsletter for distribution to households in target suburbs to communicate campaign momentum and success. Electronic communication effectively broadened the circle. Designated spokespeople issued media statements consistent with the agreed campaign strategy. Member groups were encouraged to maintain parallel media and community strategies so long as these were consistent with INC's statements.

Group members' expectations concerning coordination, consensus and the campaign's prospects of success increased dramatically. Nonetheless, group cohesion was regularly tested. Times of conflict involving difficult decisions often presented potent learning opportunities. For instance, the group's second attempt to gain access to Council documentation under Freedom of Information legislation uncovered potentially explosive material. Leaders of alliance groups met to peruse the material and agree upon strategy. Despite consensus at this meeting, one activist leaked material to the media within hours. Although the resultant media coverage generated sought-after controversy, the impact was much less effective than anticipated. Despite failing to achieve their desired outcomes, campaigners discussed how the incident had highlighted the importance of media strategy.

Just as activists' own learning was valued, community education was also considered crucial to the campaign. INC tactics were based on the assumptions that (a) City Council's plans would be shelved in the face of sufficient vocal dissent and (b) the most certain trigger for such dissent was awareness-raising. Council inundated the community with pro-bypass messages through leaflets, media campaigns and other public relations strategies. With minimal funding, the INC sought to balance the scales. Leaflets were designed and printed en masse. By helping to draft, edit and distribute these materials, novice activists gained skills in community education.

Fortuitously, an international circus troupe erected their tents in the path of the intended freeway. INC volunteers gave leaflets to patrons each evening for a month. Although patrons were shocked to hear about the freeway, this failed to mobilise the community and dissent

remained at levels readily managed by Council's media strategists. The anti-bypass sentiment and activity reported in suburban newspapers could generally be traced directly to the core group. INC spokespeople were increasingly stereotyped by Councillors as unrepresentative and as 'greenies up trees', a reference to tactics emerging from an earlier anti-freeway campaign.

In an attempt to popularise anti-Bypass sentiment, the alliance orchestrated a series of demonstrations, media stunts, community arts projects and other public events. These events helped create a sense of identity for the campaign and attract new supporters as well as funding production of attractive banners and placards. During rallies in the park, the intended route was marked with lime and appeared on the evening news. Bands and performers drew a small crowd to a rally followed by an all-night vigil. INC organisers invited the region's Aboriginal groups including Turrbal spokesperson, Maroochy Barramba, and her family to join them in the park. Maroochy recounted ancestral stories to the group during a fireside vigil. The coalition's legal advice was that Council had extensive powers to prosecute protestors who slept in the park, but the demonstration proceeded.

Your City, *Our* Say

The INC developed innovative communication strategies. Seasoned environmental communicators in the group seized on the idea of subverting City Council's expensive "Your City Your Say" public relations strategy, a well-orchestrated program entailing glossy materials distributed city-wide and targeted mail-outs soliciting citizen comment. Activists attended community events to solicit anti-bypass comments on Council's "Have Your Say" feedback forms which were then faxed to the Mayor's office.

A community education grant was secured to publish and print a tabloid for distribution to 80,000 households. "Our City Our Say" contained contributions from anti-freeway community leaders, business people, local historians and others. This publication appropriated the colours and fonts of Council's public relations literature, utilised simple yet powerful graphics to convey the road's potential impacts and provided sample letters to politicians and media outlets. It was distributed by volunteer teams coordinated by resident groups across inner northern suburbs.

During the community coalition's eighteen month campaign, participating activists had given as much time and money as they could afford. Council was due to make a decision.

One last-ditch strategy the INC considered was a legal challenge. With expert advice, the groups had successfully broadened the terms of reference for the road's impact management plan. The resultant study had not fulfilled these demanding requirements. INC members speculated whether a judicial review could be mounted on this procedural neglect. Lack of expertise, lack of funds and, perhaps, a failure to recognise the value of legal action and outside expertise meant this strategy was not adopted.

The people, united, will sometimes win and sometimes lose!

The day of judgement arrived. Council papers leaked to the group foreshadowed a vote on the road's funding. In a desperate attempt to stop the vote, INC members rallied to Council chambers, smuggled placards into the gallery and warned the media to expect a rowdy mob. Anger toward Council was palpable. Coat-and-tie-wearing activists joined the jeering and placard-waving and several were evicted. Despite impassioned speeches and vigorous interjection by Councillors and protestors the vote was carried. Councillors aligned with the majority party (Labor) were not permitted a conscience vote. Yellow billboards heralding the freeway's promised benefits reminded campaigners daily of their defeat. Public relations material declared the road would actually improve air quality!

Community campaigns often start too late, after key political decisions have been made. Activists outside the alliance reacted spontaneously to the commencement of construction.

Trees were spiked along the freeway route. New groups sprang up to protest against the destruction of heritage buildings and trees.

Alliance meetings were not convened for several months. Several campaigners contested the local government election as independent candidates, successfully making the bypass a lead issue during the election campaign. The core group finally gathered at a cafe to reflect on the campaign. Although they acknowledged defeat, activists valued the campaign's learning outcomes and the networks they had built. Rather than focusing on shortcomings of the campaign, the group concluded their local communities would resist LULUs with increased vigour and effectiveness in the future.

Learning about learning

Several observations concerning learning for environmental activism might be drawn from this campaign:

1. Environmental campaigns offer excellent opportunities for activists to learn social change skills and acquire confidence.
2. By recognising the learning opportunities inherent in campaigns, activists and activist educators can maximise and harness this potential.
3. While much activist learning is incidental, it need not be unconscious or neglected. Specific opportunities for overtly valuing learning include group discussions to identify learning opportunities and to reflect on and evaluate learning outcomes. A *learning strategy* can become an important element of a *campaign strategy*.
4. Mentorship in the context of environmental campaigns offers a potent and appropriate learning opportunity for novice activists.
5. Immediate campaign goals such as blocking development or influencing regulatory decisions often obscure equally significant outcomes including activist training and movement building. Reactive NIMBY campaigns are especially likely to focus on immediate objectives at the expense of longer-term movement building.
6. The 'siege mentality' arising from rapid environmental degradation and the alienation of community members from decision-making, coupled with acute resource restraints, may result in environmentalists prioritising immediate over long-term objectives. Learning and movement building are infrequently factored into campaigns to an extent commensurate with their potential.
7. Reorienting campaigns to identify, value and harness activist learning opportunities has the potential to contribute to a more inclusive, skilled and effective environment movement.
8. Research by and with activists offers rich locations for inquiry with potentially significant social and environmental benefits. Collaboration of this nature requires parties to resolve their sense of alienation from the 'other'.

Activist organisations can readily enhance activist learning opportunities. Campaign planning, analysis and evaluation processes that are inclusive and continuous provide excellent opportunities for novice activists to develop political acumen and advocacy skills. Novices benefit from opportunities to observe and participate in increasingly complex and challenging campaign activities. Recent recruits can be asked to assist with meeting minutes or distribution of publications before progressing to drafting correspondence and accompanying lobbyists to political briefings. This progression should provide opportunities for leadership such as coordinating working groups and facilitating meetings. Accomplished activists can offer encouragement and mentorship to novices, making learning an explicit, conscious component of each campaign.

In this community campaign, active citizenry was modelled and practiced, leading to experiential and participatory learning. Activists 'cutting their teeth' in this campaign went on to occupy leadership roles in other social change campaigns, sharing their knowledge and experience to build the capacity of grassroots community activism in the region. Learning

through social action, as reflected in this community campaign, is a potent strategy to build knowledge, commitment and motivation.

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