

## Adult Learners and the Work of Amnesty International

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**Abstract:** This study explores how various adults perceive their work and learning in a chapter of a human rights-based non-governmental organization using the Characteristics of Adults as Learners (Cross, 1981) model of adult learning.

Human rights have been promoted by non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International (Thakur, 1994). At the center of protest work is education campaigns of various forms to raise the consciousness of people and teach them ways to agitate (Buchanan, 2002). Volunteers and others who deal with Amnesty International learn in various ways (Marlin-Bennett, 2002).

Adult learners arrive at learning with various backgrounds and characteristics. Adults also learn with varying levels of time commitment. The learning can be directed in different ways. These issues can be dealt with in an adult learning model that is used to find the best strategies to help the learning of adults with different characteristics (Cross, 1981).

Adults make up a significant part of the people who deal with Amnesty International in one way or another. Understanding how the diverse characteristics of these adults may affect their learning inside Amnesty International can improve instruction and also the activism that results from it. Research on the applying of an adult learning model to the education of adults with diverse characteristics in Amnesty International is needed. This is a problem in terms of adult learning research but subsequently is a problem for the promotion of human rights.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the characteristics of adult learners in an Amnesty International chapter and find ways to improve the learning and subsequent human rights promotion that goes on. This study explores the following questions: How do adult learners in Amnesty International fit into the Characteristics of Adults as Learners (CAL; Cross, 1981) model? How do the characteristics of these adult learners specifically affect their learning in Amnesty International? How can learning opportunities be improved in Amnesty International in order to promote better understanding and human rights activism?

This study is important because adults are an important group in the promotion of human rights. First this study explores the nature of Amnesty International. Then the CAL (Cross, 1981) model is explained as a theoretical framework. Then the methodology, results, and conclusions of the study are discussed.

### Amnesty International

Amnesty International is sometimes considered an international watchdog group publicizing and fighting human rights violations through non violent protests (Thakur, 1994). After various political struggles to release political prisoners internationally, Peter Benenson with the help of several other people founded Amnesty International in the early 1960s in Britain. Amnesty International quickly developed from its beginning as a series of publicity campaigns to a full fledged political movement. Amnesty International would eventually become a Noble Peace Prize winning volunteer organization with various branches through out the world. Amnesty International uses events, workshops, conferences, letter writing drives, and

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various other forms of education and protest to campaign for the release of prisoners of conscious through out the world (Buchanan, 2002).

Amnesty International has teamed up with educational institutions to promote education on human rights through experiential learning, service learning, and other strategies (Marlin-Bennett, 2002). The work and materials of Amnesty International is used by many organizations (Lohrenscheit, 2002). Global educators and English language teachers have used materials and activities that incorporate the work of Amnesty International into their curriculum (Cates, 1990). Amnesty International is a non governmental organization that plays a complementary role to the work of the United Nations and the promotion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Thakur, 1994). Working with Amnesty International has had a strong affect on young people and students because they often see the results of their campaigns. A letter writing campaign for example can lead to the release of a prisoner giving the writer a sense that they have made a difference in the world (Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1999). Education within the larger institution of Amnesty International and outside of it has been researched (Marlin-Bennett, 2002). Research is needed however on education within Amnesty International to volunteers of various backgrounds who join small local chapters and who must learn to do the work needed to participate in events.

### **The Characteristics of Adults as Learners Model**

Cross (1981) integrated various adult learning theories such as andragogy and experiential learning into the CAL model. The CAL model focuses on the personal and situational variables that affect learners and learning. The personal issues include the learner's stage of development, age, life phases, and intelligence abilities. The situational variables include whether the learning is done full time or part time, whether the learning is compulsory or voluntary, and how the learning is administered. Much of adult learning is self directed and problem centered. The CAL model suggests that different learning strategies may have to be used to accommodate learning with different personal and situational characteristics than their peers (Cross, 1981). This study uses the CAL model as a theoretical perspective to explore how the learning that goes on in Amnesty International can improve to accommodate the different personal and situational characteristics of the people who work and learn in one of its branches.

### **Method**

This was a qualitative study using participant observation of Amnesty International meetings, surveys and semi structured interviews to answer the following research questions: How do adult learners in Amnesty International fit into the CAL (Cross, 1981) model? How do the characteristics of these adult learners specifically affect their learning in Amnesty International? How can learning opportunities be improved in Amnesty International in order to promote better understanding and human rights activism?

### **Sample**

Four adult learners, with whom the researcher had been previously acquainted, were purposely chosen using the convenience sample technique and given pseudonyms. The participants were personally contacted at an Amnesty International meeting. The researcher acted as a participant observer and also contributed data to the study under a pseudonym. The researcher attended three Amnesty International meetings to find the participants. This chapter of Amnesty International meets on the first Wednesday of each month and the researcher attended meetings in the fall of 2010 for the purpose of this study. The researcher is a long time member of the chapter he observed.

## **Data Collection**

The participants were given a survey with the three research questions and participated in semi-structured interviews with probing questions based on their answers. The survey was primarily a discursive tool. The participants could write on the surveys or discuss answers with the interviewer. Note taking was used to collect verbal responses. The respondents were given a minimum of 20 minutes to complete the survey and the interview and more time was given if the respondents needed it. The collected data and preliminary interpretations were shared and member checked with the respondents and revised if needed.

Before data collection, the researcher briefly explained his research aims and the CAL (Cross, 1981) model and gave some examples of how it could apply to his own education within the organization. The researcher briefly showed how the survey could be answered and what the semi structured interview would be like. During the semi structured interviews, the researcher used open ended questions about learning and questions specific to the CAL model (Cross, 1981). The participants for example were asked to describe the education process within the organization and, as the interview went on, were asked about their life phase. The nature of the probing questions in the semi structured interview depended upon the individual responses of the participant. If a participant, for example, discussed their intelligence abilities as being related to visual learning, the researcher would ask questions about the visual facets of what went on in the education process in Amnesty International. Because the researcher was also an observer, the researcher would ask about behaviors observed during the meeting that were pertinent to the research study. If the participant, for example, was observed using downloaded information with a higher font type than other participants, then the researcher would ask about that in the semi structured interview.

Observation was also important in gaining information about the characteristics of the adults learners because during discussions in the group, the participants would frequently mention these characteristics as part of the meeting. When the participants, for example, discussed leaving a position in the group where they have to study a human rights case because work and family only allows for part time learning, the researcher took note of this and then brought it up during the surveys and interview sessions.

As part of the case study method, the researcher also made notes and graphs about the setting and collected any documents or resources related to the meeting. The researcher also used graphic organization to describe discussions during the meetings since they could be important for the research done after the meetings. Actual time spent conducting the interviews varied as participants were eager to help in the study. The study was helped by the fact that in this group members were used to keeping discussions going long after the meetings as a way of keeping touch with each other on a personal level. The data was analyzed, summarized, and coded for themes related to the CAL (Cross, 1981) model using the constant comparison method.

## **Results, Findings, and Discussion**

The following is a summary of what was learned from the participants Joyce, Karen, Roland, Adam, and Daniel in this study for each of the research questions.

### **How do Adult Learners in Amnesty International Fit into the CAL Model?**

Joyce's personal variables including being a married professional in her early 30s. She is stable, mature, and is at a point in her life where she can concentrate on social issues. In terms of situational variables, Joyce learns about Amnesty International issues in a part time, voluntary basis either online, through social networking, personal communication, or through chapter meetings. She learns the most through doing things and watching the example of others. Joyce

has had activist experience in other organizations promoting social justice issues before becoming a member of Amnesty International.

Karen's personal variables include being employed at a community college in her early 30s. Karen's situational variables include being stable, married, and mature. Like Joyce, she believes she is in a window in her life where she can spend time on Amnesty International issues before other events distract her from it. Karen learns about Amnesty International issues in a part time, voluntary basis either online, through social networking, personal communication, or through chapter meetings. She learns the most through doing things and watching the example of others. Karen also has had activist experience in other organization promoting social justice issues before becoming a member of Amnesty International. Karen is also an experiential learner who learns best by doing and following examples.

Roland's personal variables include being a mature lawyer in his 50s. He is very connected to online resources because of his work but prefers to read print copies of resources when possible. This is due in part to his eye sight issues. In terms of situational variables, Roland learns about Amnesty International issues in a part time, voluntary basis either online, through social networking, or through chapter meetings. Roland is very organized and while communicative, is shy with people. Roland's degree of participation in certain social events is tied to his comfort level with the ideology and personality of the people involved. For example, Roland dreaded going to a protest event he was interested in because he feared the crowd would be shrill communists who would act in a way that is counterproductive to the cause.

Daniel's personal variables include being a single musician in his late 40s who is very creative, passionate, and organized. Daniel learns about Amnesty International issues in a part time, voluntary basis either online, through social networking, through workshops and conferences, or through chapter meetings. Daniel is an avid traveler and has taken on case study materials provided by Amnesty International to make presentations. Daniel is the longest serving member of this chapter by several years and has experience in all facets of what is done in Amnesty International.

Adam is a single stable and mature educator in his late 30s who learns from reading, observing, note taking, and critical reflection. Much of his learning of Amnesty International issues is done at chapter meetings, reading from the chapter's newsletter, personal communication, and by attending events related to Amnesty International. Adam brings to Amnesty International knowledge of social justice and cultural issues that he uses to understand and discuss new issues presented to him at Amnesty International. Adam has been a member of the chapter for several years. Adam learns from Amnesty International in a part time volunteer basis.

All the participants demonstrate verbal, reading, language, and communication related intelligences. While their participation in Amnesty International is compulsory and part time, their roles in Amnesty International demand more time and energy be spent on Amnesty International than is the case for other members of the group. Because all the participants take on leadership roles in the Amnesty International chapter, the learning is problem centered not just in the sense of learning about larger Amnesty International issues but also in managing, interpreting, and teaching that information to the other members in the chapter and to people who attend the meetings for the first time and could become potential members. Because these other people have different backgrounds and differing knowledge about Amnesty International, they have many questions and problems that Joyce, Karen, Roland, Adam, and Daniel must resolve.

In essence, their problem centered learning is often centered on the problems of these other Amnesty International participants.

### **How do the Characteristics of These Adult Learners Affect Their Learning in Amnesty International?**

Both Karen and Joyce have taken the formal role of co-presidents or co-leaders in the AI chapter. They are both in charge of running the Amnesty International meetings, coordinating events, and coordinating the members involved in those events. This means that both Joyce and Karen bring the educational materials to the meetings. Karen in particular creates the monthly newsletter the chapter publishes and sends out through the chapter's email list. Karen and Joyce have taken over a leadership role once held by a law professor and practicing attorney who has left the chapter to take on a leadership position in the larger Amnesty International organization. They are basically running the meeting in the exact style their predecessor ran it. They have both effectively social learned from the role model of their predecessor and are follow her example. They are also learning by doing, especially Karen whose hands on work on the newsletter where she is organizing and presenting information informs the way she understands that information and how she presents that work in the meetings.

Joyce has also tapped into the learning she has gained from other organizations and people. Joyce, for example, has learned to incorporate Amnesty International into a wide range of events, including art exhibitions and nightclub events, and to link the Amnesty International chapter to local public television, educational institutions, and other activists and activist groups she has encountered in the past.

Roland's technology savvy coupled with his need to learn from reading hard copy documents leads him to print out much of the online information Amnesty International distributes. Roland uses the resources of his law office to make copies for himself and extra copies for the people who attend the meetings. These copies use a large type that is good for the eyes of older learners. It also creates a tangible educational tool he and others can write on to make notes and to keep for future reference. These copies also are a good discursive tool for him to be social with the group and yet be on task and on topic.

Daniel uses his artistic creativity to recreate Amnesty International information into other forms. Often he makes postcards that members can use to write on behalf of a prisoner of conscience. He also uses his musical talents and connections to advocate for issues through concerts. His study of the case study material given to him by Amnesty International is then reinforced by his presentation of what he has learned from them to the rest of the chapter participants. While Daniel maybe learning experientially, he is also using organizational skills as the chapter's treasurer. Daniel keeps track of who pays their dues and of budget issues.

Adam and Daniel sometimes take on the role of informal experts in the chapter. Daniel is often asked by Joyce and Karen to explain how Amnesty International has done things in the past. Because Daniel has done every role in the chapter, he can refer to his experience. Karen and Joyce encourage Adam to present what he has learned at the events. For example, Adam attended a conference on diversity with workshops on a range of issues such as human trafficking, religious tolerance, immigration reform, racial, ethnic, gender discrimination, and conflict resolution. Adam took notes and observed and then had to summarize what he learned and critically reflect on it for the chapter. This allows everyone in the chapter to learn about these issues and give new members a sense of what is possible. Through critical reflection Adam takes broad issues and makes them personal. Through observation and note taking, he

makes confusing issues into easier concepts to understand. He usually tries to create a personal example of what he has learned and to describe his thinking and decision process.

### **How Can Learning Opportunities be Improved in Amnesty International?**

Karen and Joyce have learned from their predecessor how to run an Amnesty International chapter by following that role model and doing the work. The predecessor is a valuable tool, but had Karen and Joyce taken on leadership roles without a model, they would have had to figure out what the ideal of leadership would be for themselves and how it would affect their work at Amnesty International. This plays itself out in many ways. Their predecessor was a lawyer who ran a meeting the way a lawyer in a firm would. The main points are brought up and then each person going in a clockwise direction would speak, and there would be a verbal vote on issues. Karen and Joyce follow this model. Without the model, they could have chosen several other ways to hold a meeting. Karen and Joyce, for example, could choose to have an anonymous vote which would keep participants from feeling pressured by others. New leaders need a mechanism for seeing all options instead replicating old leadership styles.

Adam finds it necessary to not only critically reflect on Amnesty International issues and to personalize them but to try to help new members make a personal connection to and critically reflect on Amnesty International work. Missing from Amnesty International work is a way for new participants to feel comfortable with all their actions. Through observation, Adam has noted, for example, that a new member may come and want to do something about a particular political prisoner, but when given the names of several prisoners throughout the world they know little about, these new members feel overwhelmed. These new members are insecure about lending their names to causes they have not fully investigated. Adam sees this and in discussions makes it clear to members that they should not feel pressured to deal with all the Amnesty International causes, that they can respond later, or that they can choose to do nothing at all. The void Adam senses is a kind of discussion of the etiquette, personal assessment, and protocol one needs for being the kind of activist Amnesty International encourages. A participant can be overwhelmed when their values have to be put into practice in less than ideal conditions in an institution like Amnesty International. An overwhelmed participant can quickly become someone who does not return to Amnesty International and is lost as a social justice resource.

Daniel as an expert on how things were done in the chapter. He reveals that while Amnesty International as a larger organization is strong, its chapter is a fragile, grassroots organization that is dependent on a small group of people. Without Daniel who is a treasurer, there is no mechanism for memory in the chapter. There is lacking a way to learn about the chapter in detail as there would be in another organization. The way that Daniel is able to coordinate events like a concert on short notice or that Karen and Joyce can take over the reigns of the chapter and network it with other groups is complex. This is based on having learned a lot from previous role models and from work they did in other organizations. There is no formal mechanism in the chapter for a novice to learn to do that. Karen and Joyce have noted that individuals in other chapters have created an Amnesty International 101 course that goes over the basics of being an activist. This could be a power point presentation and video with some activities and resources. Karen and Joyce hope to incorporate that into the chapter in the future as something that would be done before each meeting. It is important because life stage changes may cause Karen, Joyce, and others to change or reduce their roles in Amnesty International.

Roland's adaptation of online materials into a large font type hard copy reveals that a small fragile grassroots organization like the Amnesty International chapter does not have

limitless resources to help learners with a diverse set of needs. It is unfortunate because people with challenges like these are often in situations where they need to protest to help themselves and others. Ironically, they may also be in a better position to dedicate time, money, and energy to a protest than someone without the same challenges.

Roland, Daniel, and other members have been improving the social networking capabilities of the chapter. This allows resources specific to the chapter to be assessed by everyone in the chapter at all times. This is important because more people are in the chapter than appear in the events or in the meetings. Adam also sees opportunities to improve learning in the bookstore the chapter meets. New members who need some background on a subject could be given a book list that they can use to find resources there with for example.

### **Suggestions, Implications, and Conclusion**

More work needs to be done with grassroots organizations to help learning processes. In conclusion, this study shows that characteristics of adult learners affect learning and the pursuit of social justice. Further research is needed in the education process within human rights organizations like Amnesty International because these groups can help people whose rights are in danger. Also as the population of activists age, there is an in flux of people who may join or leave organizations like these. Furthermore, one of the most important tools in fighting for human rights is education and the way people within organizations like these learn from each other affects what they teach to people outside their organizations.

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