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The University of Movements

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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Based on three and half decades in higher education, I agree with [Stephen Sterling](#) that most formal institutions of higher education have fallen woefully short of their transformative potential. In my experience, the prevailing combination of academic individualism, disciplinary fragmentation, interest-group competition, moral relativism, and ahistorical thinking—along with external political-economy constraints—have undermined the attempts of most universities to develop coherent curricular and pedagogical responses to the exigencies of the age.

But I invite us to think beyond the sphere of higher education, and beyond the sphere of formal education more generally—important as both are—because we can find some of the most profound innovations in transformative education in the informal sphere.

Many social movements today are engaged in conscious processes of social learning—processes of generating, disseminating, and applying knowledge within and across movements. Indeed, “social movement learning” has emerged as a phenomenon that is now being widely studied.¹ This field reveals the fact that pedagogy has become a central element of movement learning. The most effective movements have developed decentralized pedagogical processes that build capacity at the grassroots for transformative action. Such processes involve fostering the capacities of individuals and groups to read their own social reality, analyze the social forces at play, initiate creative and empowering actions suited to their particular social context, reflect on those actions, refine their efforts over time, and thus contribute grounded insight to the wider process of collective learning within a movement. The best pedagogical practices also train for discipline, long-term commitment, and resilience in the face of repression by those seeking to preserve the status quo.

These insights from social movement learning can also be taught within formal institutions of higher education, as I have been doing for a number of years now. For many of my students, this opens new horizons of possibility they have never been exposed to in all their prior years of education. I encourage them all to find their place within diverse movements for transformative change, and some of them do.

Outside of my work in higher education, I participate in the movement building work of the worldwide Bahá'í community, whose pedagogical structures and practices are a source of rich insight. The Bahá'í community has constructed a global network of training institutes—open to people of all backgrounds and beliefs—focused on capacity building for transformative change. These training institutes have already been established in thousands of neighborhoods and villages around the world, through a decentralized system of study circles, supported by an evolving scheme of coordination that grows in complexity as the system expands. This decentralized structure enables replication wherever local protagonists are interested and willing to volunteer their time and energy.²

The training offered through these study circles prepares people to take creative initiative within an evolving framework of learning-in-action. Within this framework, insights generated in every neighborhood and village contribute to a global learning process. At the frontiers of learning, in neighborhoods and villages that have advanced farthest in their efforts, new patterns of community life are emerging, along with new institutional structures to support them.³

Through this method, Bahá'í training institutes foster what Gandhi would have described as a radical “constructive program” that seeks to build a new, more just social order within the crumbling shell of the old order.⁴ In some places, privileged elites have sought to repress these efforts, and considerable resilience has been required by the protagonists of change. In all places, the work is difficult. It requires sacrifice of time and energy across years, which the training institutes have learned how to foster.

Perhaps most relevant to this discussion, these training institutes have an explicit focus on the transition to a new global order, premised on recognition of the oneness of humanity, and organized around the principle of social justice. In other words, this movement is not focused on advancing specific policy objectives or partisan political outcomes. Rather, it is focused on

the construction of a peaceful, just, and sustainable civilization that is global in scope—one that values cultural diversity as a source of collective richness and strength.

In this context, these training institutes explicitly question many ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying Western modernity. Their pedagogy is based on a reconceptualization of the subject of learning, the object of learning, and the process of learning.⁵ And, while cultivating the intellectual capacities of participants, they also foster a form of moral empowerment that seeks to ensure the integrity of the movement, develop the capacity of participants to discern the moral worth of prevailing social constructs, and develop the motivation to translate such discernment into transformative action for the common good.

To date, the accomplishments of these training institutes are modest but noteworthy. However, they can be viewed as initial proof of concept regarding the transformative potential of informal, decentralized, movement-based pedagogy. When this experience is viewed alongside the pedagogical efforts of many other contemporary movements—from the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil to the Zapatista movement in Mexico to Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa—and when the global process of social learning across all such movements is viewed as a whole, one can discern a global body of knowledge gradually being generated about the pedagogy of transformative change.

Endnotes

1. Refer, for instance, to María Isabel Casas-Cortés, Michal Osterweil, Dana E. Powell, “Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study of Social Movements” in *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2008): 17–58; Laurence Cox, “Movements Making Knowledge: A New Wave of Inspiration for Sociology?,” *Sociology* 48, no. 5 (2014): 954–971; Aziz Choudry, “Social Movement Knowledge Production,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research in Cultural Studies and Education* (New York: Springer, 2019).

2. For an overview of this system, see chapter 4 of Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá’í Studies, 2020). Refer also to chapter 16 in Paul Hanley’s *Eleven* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2014).

3. For insights into these new patterns of community life, see www.bahai.org/frontiers. For insights into some of the institutional structures emerging alongside these new patterns of community life, see Michael Karlberg, “Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?” in *The Bahá’í World: 2005-2006*, ed. Robert Weinberg (Haifa, Israel: World Center Publications, 2007), 133–156.

4. See Mahatma Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (Ahmedabad, India: The Navajivan Trust, 1945).

5. A discussion of these conceptions can be found in Sona Farid-Arbab’s *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2016).

About the Author



Michael Karlberg is Professor of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. His research and activism focus on the need to move beyond the prevailing culture of conflict and competition in order to establish a more just and sustainable social order based on recognition of the organic oneness of humanity. His publications include *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence*; *Reframing Discourses for Peace and Justice*; *Discourse, Identity, and Global Citizenship*; *Discourse Theory and Peace*; *The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest*; and *Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression in Iran*. He holds a PhD in communication from Simon Fraser University.

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