

## **Everyday Activism**

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### **Paper**

When I think of activism it is the dramatic actions that come first to mind: the Suffragettes chaining themselves to railings, the tree-dwellers of Greenham Common, the Irish Republican hunger strikers during the Troubles, and more recently the committed band of European flagbearers who provide a gently waving backcloth to the daily news broadcasts about BREXIT. Such groups fit the common definition of ‘using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change’ (Lexico, 2019) and attract media attention. However, quieter, smaller-scale, protests can also be effective. ‘Craftivist’, Sarah Corbett, requested a living wage for retail staff at M&S by handing to key personnel, embroidered handkerchiefs bearing illustrated messages soliciting their support; thereby demonstrating that ‘effective activism isn’t just picketing, petitions and marches; it also includes actions that are as subtle as sewing’ (Corbett, 2019).

Within adult education, activism traditionally takes on a flavour of long-term commitment. We have a lengthy list of pioneers, one of whom the late Peter Jarvis, compiled a book about these ‘thinkers’ (Jarvis, 1987). Key contemporary educators documented and explored the achievements of a dozen of their predecessors: names like Mansbridge, Yeaxlee, Tawney, Knowles, Freire – to list a few – will be well known to many who attend ESREA conferences. These pioneers devoted much of their lives to the work of educating and empowering others, pursuing the values that they held important. Thus, activism is imbued with earlier notions where vocation sits alongside beliefs, morality, and ethics.

However, there are many adult educators – me included – who are unable to commit our entire lives to pursuing a single course of action yet contribute to the success of our field, indeed to its continuing existence, as many national governments focus instead on the compulsory and formal educational sectors. On behalf of our students, we engage in what I choose to term ‘everyday activism’, quietly supporting those whose needs sit outside the conventional norms, championing their cause when the need arises; maybe wearing the label ‘difficult to manage’ with a sense of pride as we challenge bureaucratic restrictions and those who enforce them locally.

In my presentation, I will examine the concept of ‘everyday activism’ in relation to my own and colleagues’ work and, without making undue claims for a higher moral code, explain how by aspiring to Kohlberg’s sixth (and rarely achieved) stage of morality which clearly supports a social justice agenda, it was possible to make a difference despite the rules and regulations constraining educational institutions.

I will look, too, at the educator’s role in helping others to find their own voice. Empowerment surely includes both standing up for those in need of social justice and helping them to learn to stand up for themselves if we are not to create new forms of dependency and authority as we challenge existing ones.

**Question:** What it means to be an activist and whose values we represent?

**Keywords:** Everyday activism, Morality, Empowerment, Social justice, Silent support

**References:**

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