

ABSTRACT

Palmerton, Pennsylvania--a company town in Appalachia--is the location of one of the nation's most contaminated sites from heavy metals. Placement on the national priority list for federal decontamination in 1982 provoked a firestorm of community protest. Many residents publicly announced that there was not a problem in Palmerton. In the early 1990s the federal Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) cited current as well as historic sources of pollution the cause for concern.

In 1990, six women gathered to raise the first public voice that spoke "otherwise" to the normative (industrial) discourse in the town. Within one year they had organized a grassroots group, the Palmerton Citizens for a Clean Environment (PCCE), to support USEPA clean up goals and to ensure that current industrial operations were abiding by environmental regulations. PCCE's goals included environmental reform and relief from toxic exposure.

Using critical ethnographic methodologies, the research produced rich descriptive data about PCCE members' activities, beliefs, values, and the contexts in which learning transpired. Critical ethnographic techniques and grounded theory allowed the investigation of the construction of a counter-public sphere and the means and methods used by it to transform oppressive social structures.

Interviews with informants revealed a community script that was an epistemology of complex identities but with an industrial cadre at the hegemonic center which dominated community processes of socialization. The industrial influence contradicted democratic ideals and revealed power in the public sphere through public institutions. Respondants expressed that in Palmerton there existed a "dominant public system" with a minority of the populace participating as cultural producers. Members of PCCE reported feelings of "living scripted lives" within a central constructed reality that was a blueprint of exploitative social plans and social control. The study found that the collective community narrative was omnipresent, even when some people expressed private sentiments contrary to the dominant shared view.

Informants identified numerous tools used by the zinc industry and its surrogates in the community to exercise control and to capture and maintain a privileged narrative space for the industrial discourse.

From borrowed public spaces (such as the public swimming pool) and private locations (kitchens and other domestic sites), PCCE emerged to contest the community script by simply “telling our stories” and “asking menacing questions.” Rather than relying on “fugitive knowledge,” that is, knowledge constructed by themselves (local folks outside the supervision of a professional knowledge elite), members appropriated “official knowledge” and applied it in an “oppositional way.” The unfolding of consciousness and behavior followed a pattern that included: (1.) Initial feelings of isolation, (2.) Discerning the presence of others like themselves, (3.) Making acquaintances of “resistant intellectuals” who “thought otherwise” to the community narrative, (4.) Resolution to raise unsheltered questions and to work as a part of an emergent citizen group dedicated to the public articulation of specific knowledges not examined by the dominant social group, (5.) Making the commitment to confederate in sisterhood and solidarity for the public articulation of specific knowledges previously held anathema, (6.) The journey into praxis; discernment and performance as pedagogical practices, (7.) Animation to contact potential “sympathizers” outside of the group, (8.) Integration of the “girls” (self-descriptor) as the group crystallized in the quest for environmental reform and critical eco-literacy, and (9.) Confidence to engage in pro-active encounters of educational outreach to possible antagonists. Ultimately, the act of coming together was a transformative performance that changed the women’s sense of agency.

Learning for the women--organic intellectuals in the community--was most often embedded in concerns about motherhood and domesticity which became “generative themes” for community development and community education. Asking menacing questions--initially an unconscious pedagogical activity--brought about “problem-posing dialogue” for critical learning. The women’s questions probed social behaviors and experiences in everyday life in a way that allowed critical-democratic dialogue to materialize.

The educational dynamics of the grassroots community encompassed four arenas: (1) personal learning projects, (2) organizational self-education, (3) community development, and (4) education of federal, state, and local government agents to the lived experiences of some of Palmerton's residents. PCCE was a creative and dynamic "learning network" that utilized multiple educational resources, and merged the competencies and gifts of local nonenvironmental-professionals with those of science specialists outside the community. The grassroots group illustrated that power politics of an elite group of knowledge-makers (scientists) are not necessarily immutably bound to official knowledge. It is insufficient to say that dominant knowledge inherently transports specified politics and power arrangements.

PCCE was engaged in a transformative process to ensure that Palmerton, a Community-at-Risk, would become a Community-at-Promise; caring, hope and possibility were its central moments. The theme of hope, faith in ordinary people, a sense of personal and community pride, and courage repeatedly emerged in the interviews with PCCE members. Ethics saturated their rationale for: assigning responsibility to the industry, taking up a practice of caring, a pedagogy of hope, feelings of pride and courage, and for mobilizing the desire for a bright future. In the absence of the federal and state environmental agencies and local government to fully protect health and the environment, PCCE members became the new civil authorities in the community.

Radical democratic processes in PCCE are a microcosm of the larger public sphere where there exists a fundamental gap between constitutional, legal, and regulatory commitments to a clean environment and the harsh realities of people's lives. Environmental reform for PCCE consisted of rewriting the boundaries of environmental discourse from the vision of an industrial ethic to that of a human-centered one; from one premised on singular and narrowly prescribed notions, to one based on a diversity of information; from a static one rooted in education that reinforced the *status quo*, to one that flowed from the perception that there are multiple ways of seeing; and from the constricted borders of science, to one that integrated science with ethics infused with hope in an equitable future.

PCCE created a new place--an interrogative- and narrative-space--from which alternatives were articulated and individuals engaged in the social practice of learning; it allowed formerly unsayable utterances to have a voice; it gave shape to what could be thought in a milieu that formerly was impregnated with controlling citizens' consciousness. The working-class women became a model of civic courage. Member's stories were more than tales of the struggle to grow grass in a polluted town. They revealed a journey which led to growing a grassroots movement that significantly changed the landscape of Palmerton.

This study situates critical educational research in the realm of the environmental justice movement. It rethinks educational commitment to democratic processes through the filters of critical eco-literacy. Locating the ethics of naming industry and other social institutions as agents of marginalization and power was paramount. The work explores authority, sense-making and power relations in the context of educational dynamics at a specific hazardous waste site, Palmerton Pennsylvania.

Too often adult education fails to link critical empowerment and critical (eco-) literacy to education for social change and radical democracy; the present study embarks on redressing this lacuna. The research situates adult education as a political activity, a process of hope and a practice of freedom. It locates adult education at the frontier of critical democratic dialogue relative to the environment.

The enterprise positions "liberatory adult education from the grassroots" as a process of desocialization where socialization to an industrial narrative meant becoming adults in the shadow of cultural domination. It illustrates that activist learning can be effectively oriented toward social change. The adult education efforts of PCCE, although not articulated in educational terms, involved: dialogue; sharing authority; a commitment to radical democracy where everyone had a voice in the knowledges that were produced; and utilizing members' understandings, values, and beliefs about pollution in the resolution of environmental problems. It illustrated that working- and middle-class women are fully arrayed, as cultural producers, to develop strategies for social change. The undertaking depicted how a group of adult learners produced a counter-cultural public sphere which led to a greater sense of agency than that

produced by isolated individuals. It showed the value of distance education through computer technology in maintaining local control while providing access to broader environmental education and information without the concomitant intercalation of (mainstream) outside groups into the local landscape. Finally, it contributed to my own growth as an environmental activist.