Organizing Notes

Learning to Organize
Week 1

Learning to organize is like learning to ride a bicycle. You can read good books about it, watch exciting videos, listen to learned lectures, but your learning doesn’t really begin until you get on the bike and begin to peddle. And, no matter how good the scaffolding - training wheels or parents holding the back wheel - sooner or later you will fall. And that’s the real moment of truth when you either go home, give up, and go to bed or you find the courage to get back on the bike and try again, even though you know you’re likely to fall, because you’ve discovered it’s the only way you can learn to keep your balance. That, it turns out, is how we learn any kind of practice, including organizing. That is also the pedagogy of this course: explain concepts, model practice, create opportunities for you to practice, and debrief. In the way of “scaffolding” that can help prepare to take full advantage of this experience, consider the following.

In discussing the Buddha’s “Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake”, in pointing to the difference between the “raft and the shore,” Thich Nhat Hanh helps distinguish among a framework to structure learning, how we learn, and what we learn.\textsuperscript{1} We may need a good raft to get us across a particular river, but the same raft may inhibit our progress if we hang onto it long after it has served its purpose.

To learn organizing, we need a raft because learning any new practice requires enough scaffolding to deal with the uncertainty, ambiguity and novelty.\textsuperscript{2} And when we face uncertainty, we often feel conflicting emotions. On the one hand, we may be fearful - things will go wrong, we will fail, others will see. We then retract, metaphorically at least, to protect ourselves from danger. On the other hand, we may also be curious - the unexpected can be exciting, bringing new opportunities for growth, calling us to try new things. Faced with the challenge of learning to act in new ways we seem to need to experience enough security to find the courage to risk exploring new behaviors. Learning to balance security and risk is not only key to our own learning, but to the learning of those with whom we work, for whom security may be more

\textsuperscript{1} Thich Nhat Hanh, (1993), \textit{Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake}, “The Raft is Not the Shore” (pp. 30-33), (Berkeley, Paralax Press).

elusive and the risks greater. The framework we bring to learning organizing can serve as our "raft" for purposes of this course - a way to focus on critical tools, attend to key questions, observe the interaction of different elements, and share a common language so we can learn from each other’s experience.

But organizing is fundamentally a practice – a way of doing things, with the “hands.” As Kierkegaard’s story of the helmsman at the wheel of a ship reminds us, learning practice is different from learning theory because it can only be learned from the experience of acting. Acting requires the courage to take risks – risks of failure, making mistakes, losing face, rejection, etc. This is one reason your commitment to your project matters: the more deeply committed you are, the more you will learn because you will be motivated to risk new kinds of experience from which you can learn.

Organizing is also a theory, the work of the “head.” But understood well, theory is not some abstract principle to be “applied” in practice, nor is it how things “really” are. In fact, we theorize much of the time. We reflect on our past experience in an effort to simplify reality enough that we can draw general lessons about what we might expect under similar conditions in the future. We a generating “hypotheses” about the future, subject, of course, to testing.

So if we are to understand organizing practice we also need to pay attention to the theoretical “rafts” that we bring with us from our prior experience. These assumptions may have served us perfectly well in private life, especially when it comes to social interactions, but may not serve us so well in public life. Cognitive psychologists explain that we develop "schemata" to organize our understanding of the world. Schemata enable and constrain. They enable us to make sense of things, generalize, make choices, draw conclusions, and act. But, as stereotypes, they can also inhibit clarity of perception, cause us to see what we expect to see, and make it difficult for us to learn. In a sense, they can be understood as are our implicit “theories” of how the world works -- generalized lessons we learn from our experience, some of which we are not fully aware of, that inform what we expect.

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3 M.S. Kierkegaard, “When the Knower Has to Apply Knowledge” from “Thoughts on Crucial Situations in Human Life”, in Parables of Kierkegaard, T.C. Oden, Editor. (P)
7 Howard Gardner, (1992), The Unschooled Mind, (New York, Basic Books.)
Psychologist Ellen Langer proposes ways to learn to be more "mindful" of our assumptions so they constrain us less, allowing us to generate fresh ways of looking at things; creating new categories, considering multiple views, etc. So using theory "mindfully" requires stepping back from our experience, writing about it, reflecting critically upon it, and drawing lessons from it. And learning from experience requires entering into it with what Gandhi described as a “spirit of experimentation” – with the discipline to place it in perspective, compare it with that of others, and reflect on it analytically. And because organizing is relational – done in interaction with others – the more you can learn to mindfully distinguish among your actions, the actions of others, and how they interact, the easier it will become for you to learn from the data of your own experience.

The facility with which we learn to do new things depends to an important extent on how we approach learning: what educational psychologist Carol Dweck calls “mind-set.” When we try something new and we fail does this tell us something about what kind of person we are: smart or dumb, talented or ordinary, gifted or average, what she calls “fixed mind set”? Or does it tell us something about what we haven’t yet learned what she calls “growth mind set”? If “fixed” we are likely to avoid risk, deny failure when it occurs, blame it on external causes. If “growth” we are more likely to look at our own practice, discern ways to improve, and conclude that we simply have more work to do. Not surprisingly, her research shows that if we approach new challenges with a growth mind set will learn more quickly, resist less, and be far more open to feedback.

Learning organizing is not only a matter of hands and head, but also of the heart. My approach is rooted in a faith tradition that values people struggling interdependently to claim their dignity, a civic tradition claiming an equal right to self-determination, including holding leadership accountable, and a popular tradition of people finding ways to use their own resources creatively to effectively assert their interests. Although some tactics may be similar, the kind of organizing that is the focus of this course is not how to organize an army, a corporation, a marketing firm, or a social service agency. These values, or something similar, however, are found in cultures around the world as people found ways to deal with very similar kinds of challenges. Perhaps the most creative 20th Century innovator of democratic organizing was

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Gandhi. His combination of Eastern and Western traditions created a legacy further developed in the African freedom movement, the American Civil Rights movement, the work of Solidarity in Poland, and elsewhere. Organizing roots can be found, in fact, wherever people learned to collaborate, to challenge abuses of power, and to struggle to create a better life for their children.

To facilitate discussion I use charts because social processes can often be more easily visualized than verbalized. Four basic patterns I use depict relationship, purpose, feedback, and focus. Relational charts depict interactions, balances, and exchanges among parties fundamental to organizing. Purpose charts depict movement or development toward a goal, a peak, and an outcome. Loops - or more accurately spirals - depict ways action leads to outcomes that influence subsequent action. And focus charts show the effect of concentrating diffuse energy and resources on specific targets.

Coaching is one of the key learning, teaching, and leadership tools our pedagogy relies on. Coaching is a way to work with another person to enable them to improve their effectiveness. It is not about giving advice, preaching, making judgments, or telling someone what to do. But it can facilitate learning by enabling people to overcome three forms of challenge that most inhibit performance: motivational, educational or strategic. Motivational challenges have to do with effort; for whatever reason the individual is not motivated enough to take the risks needed to learn, to put in the hours needed to practice, or to put in that last ounce of energy needed to cross a threshold. Educational challenges include not having critical data needed to do the job, not having the skills required, lacking the experience to acquire good judgement. When someone has the information and the motivation, but doesn’t know where, when, and how to use that information to get the desired result – that’s a strategic challenge. We need to learn to distinguish among these challenges because if you are trying to get someone to try harder who doesn’t have the information you’re likely to just make things worse. On the other hand, if they’re very skilled, but, for whatever reason, aren’t putting forth effort, training may not help at all.

Learning to distinguish among these challenges – as well as how to intervene successfully - requires learning how to ask questions, how to listen (with both the head and the heart), how to support, and how to challenge. It is not all about praising people for strengths,

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criticizing them for weaknesses, or telling them what to do. It requires learning to identify a person’s strengths and their weaknesses in order to ally with - or mobilize - the strengths to overcome the weaknesses. Although some coaching may be “corrective” (telling the other person what to do), most coaching is “developmental” (enabling the other person to learn what to do).

Engaging in a new experience, critical analysis of that experience, and reflecting on the values within which that experience is rooted can be very challenging. This is why much of our work is interaction with others – constituency, classmates, colleagues, and instructors. This is not an "extra" but at the core of the learning process. Learning how to challenge, support, and motivate those with whom we work - and to accept challenge, support, and motivation from them - can be one of the most useful lessons you can take from this experience.

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**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What do you most hope to be able to learn in this course?

2. What do you think your greatest learning challenges are?

3. How do you think working on your organizing project can help you learn?

4. What can you do to facilitate your own learning?