

Community organising by the book:
A critical appraisal of Midwest organiser training as a possible model
for the Australian Environment movement.

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Few Australian environmental non government organisations (ENGOS) commit significant resources to the provision of intentional activist learning opportunities. Activist education and training is sporadic and uncommon in most state and national ENGOS, consistent with an emphasis on short-term campaign goals rather than longer term movement building. This purpose of this paper is to document and critique the content and educational orientation of one potentially appropriate model for organiser training in Australia: the one-week training course for community organisers conducted by the Midwest Academy (MWA) in the United States.

Learning to save the world

Environmental and other social change activists face a daunting challenge. The problems effecting their constituency and the planet grow worse by the day, powerful opponents wage counter-attacks and social change organisations rarely enjoy sufficient resources to provide for staff development. Activists working with established environmental non government organisations (ENGOS) in Australia often report being left to “sink or swim” (Whelan 2001: 32). They often learn necessary skills and abilities in the context of intense campaigns with minimal mentoring or time out for learning.

The development of intentional activist education may be advanced through detailed case studies of programs and institutions conducted elsewhere. This paper provides a descriptive and critical examination of a popular activist course conducted by the Midwest Academy (MWA) in the United States. The Academy provides a significant case study. MWA has a long association with leaders in the peace, anti-nuclear and civil rights movements and is held in high regard by a range of social change organisations. Course are generally over-subscribed and include prominent activists from across the nation.

Terminology in this paper draws on both Australian and US conventions. Committed movement advocates are referred to as either activists or organisers. The act of sustaining a strategic effort to exert social influence is referred to as either campaigning or organising.¹ Training is used as both a present participle and as a noun.

The article is written from the perspective of an activist participant, researcher and adult educator.

Organising for Social Change

The Midwest Academy was founded in the mid-1970s. The Academy has offices in three states and a core staff of five. Funding is derived from philanthropic sources and fees for services.

The Academy has three main programs or services. Firstly, MWA is best known for their one-week “Organising for Social Change” training course for community organisers. The course is conducted five or six times each year in a variety of locations across the United States. It has also been conducted in Korea, though the trainers do not consider the course well suited for delivery in other countries as it is strongly influenced by US social and political factors.

The second major program is the Grass Roots Organiser Weekends or GROW training which involves weekend retreats with campus organisers once every two years. Participants in the GROW program are trained to lead weekend retreats with campus organisers and generally do so twenty or more times during the following two years. GROW trainers are highly regarded by US social movement organisations. They are often recruited and progress from campus organising to occupy high-profile positions with state and national community groups.

Thirdly, MWA provides campaign advice and support on a consultancy basis to community organising groups. For example, MWA were engaged as consultants in 2000 by a public transport advocacy coalition based in Chicago. The group was campaigning to stop a freeway from being built and have freeway funds redirected to improving transit. Considering the group’s campaign resources to be inadequate for the purpose, MWA helped secure philanthropic foundation funding to engage sixteen interns (trainee organisers) to work with member groups of the coalition. During their ten week placement, these interns were charged with coordinating public events to build the coalition’s resource base and mobilise (or *turnout* in MWA parlance) the constituency in readiness for subsequent campaign stages.

Similarly, MWA was engaged by Sacramento-based Para Transit, a community-based service provider and advocacy organisation working on transit access for the disabled and other disadvantaged transit users. The primary goal of this consultancy was to ensure the passage of legislation increasing transit funding generally – a Bill that would increase Para Transit’s funding. The Academy helped Para Transit develop a campaign strategy, identified groups with whom a coalition was built and facilitated a series of weekend retreats for Para Transit’s staff and board including training and strategic planning.

Course content: the building blocks of community campaigns

During 2001, MWA offered their Organising for Social Change training course in five US cities. I attended the course in Redwood City, California, between 16 and 20 July, 2001 as a participant and observer.

Two of the trainers for the course, Jackie Kendall and Steve Max, are co-authors of MWA’s training manual *Organising for Social Change*. [The third co-author, Kim Bobo, no longer participates in this training program.] Steve and Jackie have been with MWA since the mid 70s and 80s respectively.

The third trainer at the Redwood training, David Hunt, is a prominent US advocate, known for his effective organising to secure affordable housing for low-income African Americans. In the late 1990s, David’s organisation engaged MWA as consultants. With Jackie Kendall’s advice, the organisation campaigned to secure a major policy change and three-quarters of a billion dollars in housing funding, managed by David’s organisation. David remains active with this organisation and also works MWA as co-facilitator in training courses and consultant to advocacy organisations.

The course attracts organisers from across the USA, with between thirty and fifty participants per course. The majority of organisers attending the July 2001 course were employed by advocacy, community development and service-delivery

organisations. Participants were involved in issues including constitutional reform (statehood for Washington DC), housing equity, fair wages, transport for disabled and disadvantaged people, nuclear disarmament, ethical investment and environmental issues. Only a few participants identified as volunteers: the majority were salaried professionals. Many spoke of having received prior relevant training within their organisations to enhance their media skills, volunteer coordination and financial management. Several had been referred to the course by organisers who were familiar with the Academy, the course and the manual. The MWA approach to organising and organiser training seemed well-known and highly regarded.

The MWA training program focuses on a form of community organising described as *direct action organising* which is based on three central principles or aims:

1. Win real, immediate, concrete improvements in people's lives
2. Give people a sense of their own power
3. Alter the relations of power

The Academy advocates *issue campaigning*, an approach geared toward issues rather than problems. While inequitable wages or pollution for instance are problems, an issue is *a specific solution to a problem*.

To illustrate the difference between direct action organising and other responses to social problems, Steve Max asked workshop participants to consider how they might respond if a baby was left outside their door in the night. If they *thought like an organiser*, Steve suggested, they would not take the baby in, or hand it to social welfare organisations. Organisers might instead ring the bells of their neighbours and have an impromptu meeting to discuss the problem. An organiser might ask neighbours whether child abandonment is a recurrent problem, whether support services for parents are adequate and encourage a collaborative response. Taking care of the problem (the baby) personally would be inconsistent with the three principles of direct action organising.

The limitations of direct action organising were acknowledged. As one approach to social change, it was not depicted as being suitable for all situations or problems. Direct action organising is most appropriate for problem that are felt both widely and strongly.

In MWA parlance, participants in a social change campaign are defined as constituents, members, targets, leaders and organisers. *Constituents* are members of the general public directly effected by the problem. These people often become *members* and supporters of community groups engaged in a social change campaign.

Individuals who are able to make or influence desired decisions concerning the issue are *targets*. A *primary target* has the power to make the decision. A *secondary target* has influence over the primary target and might, therefore, become important if organisers are not successful in achieving the desired result with the primary target.

Leaders are elected representatives and spokespeople of community groups. *Organisers*, on the other hand, support and advise groups. They may also coordinate elements of campaign administration, but their primary role is strategic. The differentiation between leaders and organisers highlights an interesting contrast between the dominant Australian ENGO campaign approach and the apparent US/MWA community model of organising. While environmental activists in the Australian environment movement tend to act as campaign facilitators, coordinators and spokespeople, the MWA approach discourages organisers from becoming campaign spokespeople or lobbyists. Drawing on trade union history and the approach to organiser training associated with legendary activist-educator Saul Alinsky, the MWA course strongly recommends organisers work behind the scenes.

The five day course comprised approximately twenty sessions of between sixty and ninety minutes. Topics are listed in the table below.

Fundamentals of direct action organising	Community organising films and videos
Understanding the relations of power	Recruitment
Choosing an issue	Joining and forming coalitions
Organising and storytelling	Preconditions of social change movements
Context of our organising	Media guidelines, exercise
Strategy guidelines, exercise	Accountability guidelines, exercise
Action guidelines, role play	

Table: Organising for Social Change course sessions

Course pedagogy: educational orientation inherent in delivery

Trainers utilised educational strategies associated with both traditional and progressive popular adult education orientations. Traditional pedagogy more commonly associated with the education of children was reflected through the use of lectures to present expert knowledge, multiple choice tests to assess comprehension, instructing participants to take notes from overheads and seating arrangements. Other aspects of course delivery were more consistent with a liberal, progressive educational orientation, andragogy (Knowles 1984) and popular education. Trainers incorporated experiential and participatory learning processes such as role plays and story-telling, group exercises and relationship-building.

Approximately half the training sessions took the form of lectures, an educational strategy generally avoided by adult educators seeking to empower or *conscientise* (Freire 1972). This apparent mismatch of intention and pedagogy was particularly evident in two sessions exploring contemporary socio-economic trends and issues. The sessions took the form of lectures embellished by complex overheads and handouts which illustrated, through compelling evidence, social trends constraining and prompting activist campaigns. Many participants were engaged in campaigns tackling the very trends outlined in these sessions. Their work provided them with first hand experience of these trends on a daily basis.

Popular educators would tend to suggest such sessions should draw more heavily on participants' knowledge and experience. The Highlander Centre, for instance, bases its organiser training on "bringing people together to learn from each other."² Similarly, Saul Alinsky's training activities with generations of campus, union and community organisers drew primarily on participants' experience (1970: 67). Knowledge shared and created in this way may be no more accurate or instructive than that presented in the MWA overheads. In drawing discussion to a close and turning to his overhead transparencies, one of the facilitators commented, "We generally workshop this section, but people generally arrive at the same conclusions." The processes of reflection and dialogue, however, have educative outcomes unlikely to arise from transcribing from a list. Popular educators consider the generation of knowledge from experience and dialogue to be empowering and conducive to action. Paulo Freire decries *banking education* whereby educators deposit knowledge to learners' accounts. Foley (1995: 5) refers to this approach as *front-end loading*. This approach seems at odds with the audience and purpose of the MWA course.

Other sessions (approximately half) were more participatory in nature, including group exercises and role plays. Participatory sessions generally followed lectures on the same topic, providing participants with opportunities to consolidate and demonstrate their grasp of the concepts introduced. Several role play sessions were based on the hypothetical "Wallsboro – Watson's Hill" scenario in which a community responds to the discovery of dumped toxic substances in a playground. These sessions called on participants to develop campaign strategies and form community coalitions to combat the problem.

A second scenario based on community opposition to a proposed freeway was also developed through role play. This second scenario prepared participants for a final role play exercise in which they planned, conducted and evaluated a public meeting or *accountability session* calling on an elected representative to oppose the freeway, lobby his fellow representatives and support diverting funds to public transport improvements. This role play seemed ideally suited to the three Para

Transit board members whose organisation has engaged MWA's support in a very similar campaign.

Participants in the MWA course received a copy of the *Organising for Social Change* training manual, which was referred to throughout the course and contained most content incorporated in workshop overhead transparencies. The Academy has also developed a more detailed resource kit for the campus-based GROW trainers, referred to by Steve as a "canned version" of the workshop GROW participants are trained to lead.

Critical appraisal: strengths and weaknesses

The relative merits of the MWA model of direct action organising compared to other campaign models was not explored during the course. When participants raised questions pertaining to campaign situations not readily tackled using this model, trainers would respond: "Direct action wouldn't work for that." Familiarity with a range of campaign frameworks or philosophies would seem a desirable outcome of intentional activist education.

Participants' personal experience was not drawn into the training program to the extent advocated by adult education theorists favouring experience-based, problem-based and learner-centred approaches (Foley 1995: 184, Stirling 1996: 18, Knowles 1984). Personal experience was integral to a story-telling session during which participants related accounts of experiences that lead them to their work as organisers. Generally speaking, however, trainers' experience was considered a more significant frame of reference in most sessions than that of participants.

Participants were captivated by the MWA trainers' reflections on decades of relevant organising experience in the peace and African American civil rights movements. The stories of seasoned activists helped build workshop participants' sense of the history and achievements of their movements. Adult learning outcomes might have been enhanced, however, by placing increased emphasis on encouraging

participants to relate the concepts explored during the course to their own past and present challenges. An increased emphasis on personal experience might also have been achieved by encouraging participants to relate their experience to the solutions generated during workshop sessions.

Several films were screened, depicting historic campaigns. These helped participants explore and evaluate strategies employed. A similar exploration of actual campaigns in which participants were engaged might have created a more immediate association between emerging insights and organisers' daily challenges.

The MWA training relied heavily on expert knowledge, an approach generally avoided by popular adult educators. Popular educators strive to become co-learners, to promote horizontal relationships between themselves and participants (Hamilton 1992: 19) and to view knowledge as dynamic and dialectic, rather than reified or commodified (Newman 1999).

The MWA trainers responded to participatory sessions by evaluating the strategies employed and proposing alternative strategies. While participants' comments and anecdotes were also invited, trainers were cast as experts. The dichotomy of expert versus novice knowledge was also evident in the use of one or more daily quizzes to measure participants' grasp of material covered. Short multiple choice tests were administered at the beginning of each day. Feedback on the results was given the following morning. Facilitators reported on the proportion of correct responses, suggesting each question had a right answer. Given participants' roles in social change, it seemed surprising the learning atmosphere cast learners as passive recipients of prescribed content.

A democratic learning environment can be created simply by seating arrangements. This is certainly the case at the Highlander Centre where groups of up to thirty are seated in rocking chairs in a circle. Newman (1999) comments on one radical feminist adult educator's practice of sitting in a circle with participants while facilitating. The Midwest Academy course, by contrast, cast trainers as experts who

stood at the front of the room while participants sat around a horseshoe of desks, conveying somewhat hierarchical teacher-learner relations.

At the same time, it could be argued that lectures have their place in organiser training. Educators relying exclusively on experiential learning are considered by Newman (1999: 83) to offer a self-indulgent and decontextualised form of learning. Newman (1999, 1994: 166) urges educators to *define the enemy*. This might be achieved by ensuring change-oriented learning includes the study of political history and social trends. Newman illustrates this through describing a group of peace activists in the United Kingdom who equipped themselves by reading technical and political literature. It is a truism to say that few activists are familiar with the history of their social change movement. The failure to value and pass on movement history is arguably a limiting factor in movement building and effectiveness. The two “context for our organising” sessions addressed this need.

The MWA course is referred to as training rather than education. This differentiation is considered significant by educational theorists. Brookfield (1985: 46) considers training prioritises skills, and behaviour, commonly transmitting knowledge to trainees in a manner defined by the trainer. He describes adult education, on the other hand, as,

activity concerned to assist individuals in their quest for a sense of control in their own lives, within their interpersonal relationships and with regard to the social forms and structures within which they live ... developing in adults a sense of their personal power and self-worth.

The inference that organising can be broken into transferable ‘chunks of knowledge’ also evident when one trainer suggested the rare combination of skills and knowledge required by highly effective organisers “can be taught”. By contrast, trainers speculated whether effective social work required an *organising gene*. This resonated with Saul Alinsky’s semi-humorous speculation (1970: 71) that organising ability may be the result of a miracle “from above or below”.

The manual comprehensively and coherently covers course content, developing a framework for organising which, while somewhat formulaic, provides a template for action. Course participants appeared to readily grasp the principles and elements of the MWA campaign approach to the extent that they were able to skilfully roleplay aspects including coalition-building and accountability sessions. The manual is logically structured and offers a concrete reference for organisers and their organisations.

The educational orientation evident in the promotion of close adherence to a manual and testing course participants for content comprehension stands in stark contrast to organiser training conducted at Highlander and by Saul Alinsky. Despite the cult status of his texts *Rules for Radicals* and *Reveille for Radicals*, Alinsky considered learning organiser manuals by rote an inadequate training as each campaign situation presents unique demands. *Rules for Radicals* (1970: 71) is critical of *would-be organizers* who, when “confronted with a puzzling situation ... would retreat into some vestibule or alley and thumb through to find the answer.”

Adult learners become more inclined to share personal experiences as they develop relationships with each other. The Midwest course utilised ice-breaker exercises, group exercises and story-telling, elements during initial sessions, helping people gain a sense of trust, belonging and openness. These relationships and resultant dialogue might have been enhanced by placing less emphasis on expert exposition which comprised, perhaps, more than half the available time. As participants had prepared a profile detailing their experience and interests, these could have been placed on display to assist people in identifying common interests and initiating dialogue.

Applicability to Australian Environment Movement

Many aspects of the Midwest Academy course are culturally and historically specific to the US organising community in the 2000s. State and national legal and

political systems, movement history and Activist terminology and concepts are quite different in the two nations. ENGOs in the US are typically much better resourced than their Australian counterparts due to the US philanthropic tradition and legislation. Advocacy groups in the US not legally confined by their tax-deductible status are much less likely to conceive strategies which lie exclusively *within the system* than Australian groups which overwhelmingly favour *insider tactics* (Hutton and Connors 1999), relying on institutionalised processes to influence policy.

Other aspects of community organising are sufficiently similar in the two nations that Australian course participants would relate course content closely to their experience. Ascendant corporate autonomy, the concentration of media ownership, reactionary right-wing tactics, patterns of civic behaviour and the generic toolbox of activist skills and tactics are mirrored.

The immediate appeal of the MWA course and manual to the Australian environment movement is that it offers a coherent campaign model. Direct action organising, as detailed in MWA manual, provides a template for social change which can be interpreted and adapted to particular circumstances. The model integrates elements of campaigns such as planning, media work and coalition building in a logical way, in contrast to skill-oriented training within Australian ENGOs where these skills are developed out of context. *Organising for Social Change* is a practical and accessible manual to which course graduates can refer during their organising. The text is a highly regarded reference for many US advocacy groups. The academy urges activists to critically appraise power relations and broader social factors, an emphasis not strongly evident in the environment movement. Finally, MWA's course and manual provide movement trainers elsewhere with a comprehensive model which can be replicated or adapted.

Notes

1. The Australian spelling for “organise” is used throughout, except in citations.
2. Highlander Mission Statement, cited on Grass-roots.org On-line available at <http://www.grass-roots.org/usa/highlander.shtml>

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