

Humans of Learning Sciences

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Learning in Social Movements

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Mon-Lin Monica Ko, Dr. Joe Curnow

Monica Ko 00:07

Welcome to the humans of Learning Sciences. I'm your host, Dr. Mon-Lin Monica Ko. The Learning Sciences is an interdisciplinary field that studies and supports learning in classrooms, after school clubs, museums and the outdoors. And while the learning scientists are united in their central commitment to trying to understand learning, there is a great diversity in how we do that work. And even in how we define learning. This podcast tries to take stock of and amplify these diverse perspectives. Our conversations will go beyond what you see on a website profile, CV or scholarly publications. We want to dig deeper, and understand the person who was behind the work will ask questions like: What experiences formed your view of learning? How do you conceive of the learning sciences? And where do you think the field needs to go next, as your host, I'll be learning right along with you through these conversations and hope that they inspire even more dialogue about what it means to study and support learning. Join me on the humans of learning sciences podcast.

In today's episode, we will talk with Dr. Joe Curnow, currently an assistant professor at the University of Manitoba. Joe studies the learning that happens as people participate in social movements. Our conversation begins with Joe recounting her early days as an undergraduate student at Northwestern, as an organizer on Chicago's north side and working on fair-trade policies in Washington, DC. She talks about how she became politicized and started to see that the issues that she cared about were really just indicators and outcomes of larger societal issues in our economy and trade policies. We focus a good chunk of our time talking about her most recent work, including the article called *Politicization in Process: Developing Political Concepts, Practices, Epistemologies, and Identities Through Activist Engagement*, linked in the episode description. That article, among others, came out of her efforts to describe the learning processes that she saw happening and also for Fossil Free U of T, an on-campus activist group at the University of Toronto. We also talk about the relationship between organizing, learning and taking action. Much of this is contextualized. In a book that's been formative for her career called *We Make a Road by Walking*. The book is a transcript of a facilitated conversation between Myles Horton and Paulo Freire. I learned so much when I read it in preparation for this episode. And it really highlights the resonances that I see between Joe's scholarship and the work of those who inspire it, as will to be the case with every episode, you can find the articles we discuss, as well as related work in the episode description.

Welcome to the podcast, Joe.

Joe Curnow 02:44

Hey, thanks, it's really a pleasure to be here with you.

Monica Ko 02:48

So, over the last, probably almost decade, a lot of your work has been really thinking about participation in social movements and the learning that happens, both in the process and then as a result of that participation. And I want to talk a lot about your work. But I want to go back a little bit and take a few steps back and think about your pathway to taking this up as the focus of your scholarship. Right out of college, you kind of dove into organizing. So, I wanted to know, was organizing kind of in your blood? Was it something that drew you to this work? Was there an event? Or a specific issue that you were just impassioned by? How did this all get started?

Joe Curnow 03:29

That's a great question. And I think it very much underpins my relationship to the questions that I ask in the learning sciences spaces, but also my work in social movements today. So, I got my start doing like liberal - sorry, that won't work for American audiences. I got my start doing work that was very much charity-oriented. So as a young person, I was running programs for the American Red Cross, working in homeless shelters, driving youth programming. And then I went to university and went to Northwestern and was in a lot of the community development classes there. And there was one particular class with John McKnight, where he brought in Greg Galluzzo, who is a fairly famous organizer, and he's the person who mentored Barack Obama when he did his brief organizing stint. And Greg Galluzzo came into our class and was like, "People who do charity work; that stuff is garbage. It doesn't...it masks the problem. It doesn't solve anything and it's total trash."

And it really agitated me like in the ways that I now know as an organizer, you know, later, was very much intended to. But it got under my skin in just the right way that helped me to start thinking about challenging power relations and how organizing was very much about, "how do we reorganize the way that the power is distributed and that resources are distributed rather than reinforce existing power relationships through charity, where we're just having some people with power, decide who gets to have things and who doesn't?"

So that was the start and from that class, and a class with John McKnight, and I got pulled into doing community organizing in Chicago's north side. And it was very much confrontational work. It was around immigrant rights; it was around people who had been in prison and trying to expunge records. And it was, it was confrontational in the ways that Chicago organizing is, and so calling elected officials to account in very direct ways, going to their houses, talking to their faith leaders, these kinds of things. And so that was like my entree into organizing for building power. And then I was also doing work at that time, with around fair-trade and got pulled into the international leadership around fair-trade organizing on student campuses with United Students for Fair Trade. And through that I got, that's where I got much more brought into a kind of anti-racist, anti-colonial politics that was focused much more on consciousness

raising. And so those two, like those two approaches to organizing came together for me in those moments, and that's where I got my start.

Monica Ko 06:43

I know that you, you're saying sort of the brand, or the flavor of Chicago organizing, and I know that you did some of that work in DC as well. How would you sort of contrast those experiences of organizing in those two, two spaces? What was unique about it, and what brought you ultimately back to Chicago?

Joe Curnow 07:01

So, when I was working in Washington, DC, it was with United Students for Fair Trade as the national staff person. And, so, I was coordinating campaigns across North America, on campuses to get their food service providers to source fair-trade, coffee, tea, cocoa, bananas, that kind of stuff. And we were very much focused around popular education. We were mentored through really amazing folks in Latin America as well as in the US around really robust approaches to consciousness-raising. And, so, we spent a ton of time thinking about the campaigns that we were doing on campus actually as what we would call the gateway drug. And, so, we were actually like a lot not interested in fair-trade. By the time that we ended, like I think many of us came in, because we thought fair trade was interesting, and would help a lot of small farmers' co-ops. But by the end, I think most of us rejected the whole concept of fair-trade certification in favor of like anti-capitalist and politics and anti-colonial politics. But we knew that, like, a lot of not very political students came into their trade organizing because they wanted to help people or because they thought the campaign was an easy thing to do. And, so, we wanted to use that angle.

And, so, we, we really use the fair-trade campaign as kind of a bait and switch where we were like, "Okay, how do we get people into a conversation about the structure of our economy and trade and trade policy and the things that like?" There's a lot of people were like, "Oh, I didn't really want to get into trade policy." But we thought it was important. And it was a gateway into conversations about much larger systems. And so that was how we were approaching it. And we did really amazing work actually in bringing people in and politicizing them. And then often we saw them leave the fair-trade movement and go to other forms of political engagement. And we were like, "Yes, that's a win!"

And, so, when I left it was because of a frustration where we were doing this really interesting politicization work and consciousness-raising but we weren't able to win anything of substance. And I was like, in Chicago, we were winning things. And I wanted to go back and try to think about what it would look like to win racial justice campaigns and to win anything material for people because that is one of the core tenants of Alinsky-style organizing is like, we want to have concrete wins that make immediate change in people's lives. So, when I went back to

Chicago, it was to try to bring these two approaches together. And I talked to a lot of the organizers, the older or like old guard organizers, who had, you know, worked with Alinsky and had mentored the generations between in interface organizing and they were like, “You can't talk about race, like, it is divisive, and it doesn't bring people together.”

And I was just really unsatisfied with that because I've been doing really interesting work with young people that made space for anti-colonial work in ways that were like 100% not perfect, but which were in the conversation and trying to figure out how do we do anti-oppressive politics and when and so when I eventually went to grad school, it was because I couldn't find space to reconcile those in the, the, like, organizing spaces that I was in. And I think that's actually changed a lot over the last 10 or 15 years. But at the time, that was, that was a really heavy lift for people. And that's how I came to the learning sciences.

Monica Ko 10:42

Yeah, I mean, I think it's so interesting that you talk about, I mean, I think organizing and activism. There's always this concrete, tangible issue, right? I think about Ferguson, I mean, there's something that sparks and moves people that feels like, it's oppressive, it's in the media, it's immediate. But I feel like what you're what you're saying, and also what I see in your work, is that part of the process of learning is that it is coming to an understanding that those events are not the thing; they're manifestations of larger systemic issues. And that seems like where the learning happens, right? There's...you can, you can have participation, you can have people out on the streets, but understanding at the core, the more invisible processes and structures and politics, you know, that really allow these things to happen. It feels like that's where the learning is happening.

Joe Curnow 11:32

I think so, but also, and this ties into later work and I didn't have this, I wasn't thinking this when I was doing this work in Chicago, or in DC, but like, I think it's also this really big shift around identity where like, what people believe is possible. And what they think is necessary and who they want to work with and be aligned with is part of that learning and that shifting. And, so, I think that's actually a really big piece of, of the learning and becoming activists that was really salient for me as a young organizer.

Monica Ko 12:05

So, tell me a little bit about your introduction to the learning sciences. I know that your graduate school degree was in adult education, right, at the University of Toronto. But I'm curious about what drew you to the field? Did you feel a sense of kinship and belonging? I mean, the learning sciences is this really diverse space. And it doesn't have the history or didn't have the origins of studying adult learning and social movements, right. So, what was it

that drew you to this space? And what resonated with you? How did you see yourself in some of the work that was coming out of the learning sciences?

Joe Curnow 12:40

So, in 2014, I was at the ICLS, in Boulder, which was a really important point of entry for me in terms of getting exposed to the larger learning sciences community, and meeting people whose work I'd read like Ben Kirshner's work for the first time and having really great conversations and feeling like there is potential here. That's also when I met Susan Jurow, who has been a great collaborator, and all of these people who were doing work that was beginning to bring the political and social movements into focus in the learning sciences and, in particular, I was in the session that I think often gets pointed to as a key moment for the learning sciences and the work that emerged on learning and the relationship to power politics, privilege and ethics.

So, in that session, I had a paper that had come out of fair-trade work around activists becoming. I was on a paper with Indigo Esmond and Dominique Riviere, where we were looking at austerity organizing in Toronto and using sociocultural approaches to theorizing it. And Shirin Vossoughi, Angela Booker and Paula Hooper had a really important paper that I think often gets pointed to as an anchor around politics, and the importance of attending to power in the learning sciences. That session was, I think, extremely well received, and has, I think, played a role in shaping the work that has come sense and making space for a lot more people and a lot more diverse voices and perspectives to be in conversations around socio-cultural theories of learning. But it was also for me a moment where I didn't, I didn't feel like I fit in the learning sciences. And I remember some of the questions that came out, directly questioned like, what uh, this doesn't seem very objective, like, what do you how do you navigate that? And I remember looking at Indigo and being like, "What is happening here?" I thought the questions of objectivity and standpoint got resolved in the 80s in most fields, and it felt to me super retro and I felt like I couldn't answer the question because the epistemological assumptions were so different, or I couldn't answer it without being really snarky. And, so, I think there's often for me been a little bit of fit challenge in the learning sciences because I orient to questions of standpoint, epistemology, and objectivity from a really different place. Like my training is more around feminist thought and black feminist thought, in particular, and indigenous scholarship that is challenging your western ways of knowing and being that I think very much underpin a lot of the theories that we orient to, historically, in the learning sciences. And, so, I think there are totally people who are doing this work at this point. And I feel like I have a home and community and there's the people who are doing the work to bring politics into focus, have been that for me, but I don't always feel a strong kinship or a clear link to older learning sciences work. And some of that is not to say that it wasn't there, but that I haven't had a relationship with it in a really strong way, partially because I was trained outside of learning sciences programming, so I don't have those actual

relationships with people that help you to understand the politics behind it and the social movement work that they were doing in their own lives, that is, like that their work is steeped in, but it's maybe not made explicit.

Monica Ko 16:49

Let's now turn to some of your most recent work. You have a piece that was published in the American Education Research Journal in 2019, about politicization. You conceptualize that process as a learning process. And you investigate how individuals actually become politicized. It was really interesting for me to read because, at least in the United States, the words politicization, politicized, polarization, these words kind of go hand in hand and have particular connotations. And I think your work really brings new light and maybe pushes back on those conceptualizations. So, can you give us a little brief overview of the context of that study?

Joe Curnow 17:33

So, I worked with Fossil Free U of T, which was the environmentalist campaign at the University of Toronto trying to get the U of T's Board of Governors to withdraw our endowment from the 200 fossil fuel companies that had the largest fossil fuel holdings. Interestingly, this week, Meric Gertler, who's the president of U of T did say that he was going to withdraw after he rejected us, and 2016. So, we won just long the long game. So, I worked with folks over the course of several years in a participatory research project. The people who really came up, like became the core research team, were all activists in the campaign. Mostly it was folks who had been vocal participants who I had been interested in tracing their development over time. And through our conversations, and through the stimulated report interviews, they became like the core team of people who are really committed to understanding, like, answering the questions we had about when people become *rad*, like, "Why is it and how does it happen?" So, I think for us, the question was, and I think often is with activist communities, when we're successful at getting people to think about social conditions structurally, and systemically, why is that when we are able to move people into higher stakes actions that confront power more aggressively, like, why does that happen? When people really become activists, what is, what are the conditions that make that possible? And how do we do it with some intent? I think many of us think of that as one of the core projects. And so that was what we were looking at.

Monica Ko 19:15

So, it sounds like you weren't necessarily setting out to study the process of politicization.

Joe Curnow 19:18

We did not intend to theorize politicization. But as we looked at our data, which was super cumbersome about like 15,000 minutes of video of every meeting and debrief session and action that we did, it was overwhelming. And we basically made these huge flip charts of like

every action that had happened as timelines, that we had annotated, and like, had them pinned up on every wall of this boardroom in OISE (Ontario Institute of Studies in Education). And we looked like conspiracy theory theorists. Yeah, it was wild. And, so, for months, we were sitting there and we're trying to say, like, okay, so what is it that we're actually trying to explain? Because what we were trying to explain there's kind of a sniff test to it. Like, we know that these people became activists and like this but, like, how do we explain it to people who don't? And we're like, "Well, we just know." And, so, trying to explain what the phenomenon was that we were trying to get behind was actually how we ended up with this kind of theoretical definitional project. And I think we're still working on understanding the "how" of how it happened in detailed, interactional way, because the data is so overwhelming. And because I think it's actually really complicated. And there's a lot happening over the span of two years. But that is how we got to this big theoretical question was because we were trying to say like, "What is it that we're, we're even talking about?"

Monica Ko 20:56

I love that, because in your description of how you approached, how you came upon the problem, stumbled upon the problem. And even in describing your methods for trying to gain traction on what that problem was, it feels so learning sciences to me, because I feel like for me and my understanding of the field, one of the unique features is that we foreground the problem and then you take the methods that are appropriate for that problem, and that's how you tackle it, right? Like, that's the framework, but you have to understand what the phenomenon is before you bring these methods, right? So, I love that the problem comes before figuring out what the right approach is. I think the other thing that really comes to mind when you describe that is, I think, learning scientists really infatuation with trying to understand mechanism, right, processes, how is it that something is happening? I mean, I think that is also really a trademark of the field is that we seek to understand interactional processes, whether that's for some people that's in the individual, for others, it's between individuals. But yeah, that just really resonated with me in terms of how many others and learning sciences try to go about their scholarship.

Joe Curnow 22:16

Absolutely. And I think the tools are what has kept me in the learning sciences, being able to move between micro-interactional analysis and these longitudinal pieces is really hard. But I think if I didn't have the kind of models and tools that the learning sciences provides, like, I don't know how I would move through this data. Because I wanted that that fine grained analysis, I wanted to be able to say like, "yes, this is these are the mechanics" so that we can recreate them for other activist spaces. But it also had to be like in the wild, right, like a lab setting would never work for this kind of thing. And, so, there are a couple of things that really anchor me in the learning sciences. And those are definitely some of them.

Monica Ko 23:04

So, in 2019, you wrote a piece in the American Education Research Journal, or AERJ, where you present a framework for politicization, as a socio-cultural learning process, and a process that involves interconnected shifts along four dimensions, the development of, one, understanding about political concepts; two, practices; three, epistemologies, and; four, identities. And in that paper, you talk about people's movement into two spaces, sort of the radicals, who are the activists who are trying to mobilize folks around this issue, but also trying to get people to see, as you said, the underlying infrastructure and policies and systems that were, in some ways, upholding some of these injustices, right around fossil fuel divestment, that inherently it was part of a larger problem. And then you also outline folks that you called "Reasonables", who really wanted to see the issue as an isolated problem and phenomenon that needed to be addressed through clear policies, right? They wanted to address divestment, but they didn't want to see it as part of a larger system. You talk about a participant named Graham, who, really, I find I found this interchange really telling that he said, "you know, do we have to solve racism to stop climate change? I don't think that's true," right? And it really reflects, I think, some polarization within the group. And I wanted to ask you, in terms of, you know, your work in activist spaces, is there room for both people, right, like, is the goal always to shift people into the more *rad* terrain? Or do you think that efforts sort of along both those fronts can overall make an impact?

Joe Curnow 25:08

I think that our that my work, that my political commitments are very much oriented to bringing people into political consciousness that centers anti-racism and anti-colonialism and understands how those are tied to other systems. I think there will always be people doing the work from different places. And I think there is space. And there's like, there's often been a lot more space for those folks than for folks who we would frame as radical. But I think the work is very much oriented to, to politicizing people, to bringing folks in. And the reason the reason that I think that is, is because often the space that the reasonable is are working from, in terms of their political analysis, in terms of their epistemology, forecloses the participation of Black and indigenous people and people of color. It ignores a lot of history. And it makes it impossible for people to participate, other people to participate fully. I think we saw that in Fossil-Free U of T, it's certainly something I've seen in many other activist contexts. I think we see that in US politics right now along the polarization, because what is becoming polarized is like the very existence of Black and indigenous people, people of color, there's, their core-ability to exist in the world and, and be safe. And, so, there's not a lot of room to work around that when your existence is part of what is being debated. We see this with trans communities, we see this in queer communities. And, so, it's not, I think there's like a false equivalence thing that can happen. And I'm very intentional about not falling into that, because they're not asking for similar kinds of things that, that we can just say, "oh, like, yes, these are the same things. We need to make space for these reasonable goals and their political approaches", when their

political approaches actually do a lot of harm. And they're, in many cases, very violent. But that violence is masked by systems of power, which have made them normal and have made them acceptable to a lot of people who, who share the identities and like the same kinds of standpoints as people who are making those stay in place.

Monica Ko 27:22

I love that in this article, I got to see sort of the texture and terrain and also some conflict, you're really within that space that, you know, you can't take for granted that when people are shared the same space and they're saying the same words, that they're coming with the same assumptions, right, about what the problem is. And I think that's why that 2019 piece is so powerful is that you, you uncover that by really trying to ask this question of like, what's not only what do people understand about what the problem is that you're trying to solve, but how do they engage? What kind of practices do they engage in to try to solve those problems? What are the op - What are those assumptions that they're operating under?

And, so, I really love that there was this portrayal and people on both ends, and also this discussion about the people in that middle space, the moderates, right, who really vacillated I mean, in some ways, they were reflecting some of the some central assumptions, and stances folks who were in the radical space, who identified maybe as radical and others other times they were really much more aligned with the reasonableness. But that, you know, as a process that people are undergoing these transformations, because there are these multiple dimensions at play, right?

I am curious about when you talk about those four dimensions. And this is coming from someone who studies learning in very different spaces, and seeing sort of multiple dimensions as shifting, as constituting learning. For those four dimensions, are there some that begin much earlier in the process of politicization? Are they happening concurrently? I know this is a complex question. I'm sure it's individualistic, too. So, in the AERJ piece, you lay out a framework for politicization, as involving ships in four dimensions. And so, one question I had reading, reading that piece was to try to understand if there was one of those dimensions that was more difficult to shift, or I guess, maybe put differently, if you saw shifts in one dimension earlier on, and shifts in another dimension later on, and you know, I have this, maybe this hidden hypothesis that the identity, movement and identity is something that maybe comes much later. It feels like that's a that's something that maybe is not the entry point into politicization.

Joe Curnow 30:00

I love that question. I think I would want to think about it longer, but my hunch is actually different. My gut is that the identity piece is for young activist, one of the easier moves, right? I think there is this way in which being radical is like the cool thing, and so people start to

identify with that once they're in the space, right? And getting them into that space is maybe a different thing. And you know, I don't want to universalize any of this. But I think about Lila, who was one of the co-authors, and is someone whose features pretty significantly in all the writing that we've had come out of the project. And there were these moments when Lila was very young when she was, you know, 18, when she came in to the campaign, and very, like she got on board with the team that was radical and wanted to be part of that community.

And I think often didn't have any of the political concepts, like she was learning them and was extremely open to them because of the identity stuff. And there was this one time, I remember, her being like, some one of the other members had talked about structural adjustment programs. And she was like, "yeah, those are bad." And I was like, Lila, do you have any idea what those are? And she was like, and, like, she was totally enthusiastic and, and trusted the analysis that other people had, and didn't yet have, have, like, the real tools to articulate or the historical context or anything. And like, definitely got there and could totally tell you quite a lot, even though it's not directly relevant to the work, but because it was part of this broader activist context and activist identity stuff that she was committed to. I think the epistemological shifts are actually the hardest thing for people. And that maybe shouldn't surprise us from what we know about learning and epistemic shifts, but especially that the things that challenge the core ways that people understand knowledge to be constructed. That was, that was a big move for a lot of folks in the campaign. And the ones who didn't move, it was often along these questions of epistemology. And this was as we were having conversations with some indigenous folks and some accomplices of indigenous folks who we're working with our group to think about indigenous ways of knowing and being and the ways that many indigenous epistemologies are, are, are so different in terms of how they relate to objectivity, reliability, trustworthiness, relationality, broadly. And, so, I think that was really hard. And that was actually one of the places where we saw the most friction, and the most problematic stuff get said in the group was when there were these core pressures on what they assumed, what some people assumed was just like, like the most basic like obvious thing in the universe, and like, you could not question that.

This is not like a tidy answer for a podcast. But those were the messiest conversations in the places where people struggled to reconcile shifts in worldview, and the political consciousness and their identity, because they really wanted to be on side on some cases, and just like, didn't understand whiteness, or didn't understand questions of gender and masculinity. And so those were, those are super hard.

Monica Ko 33:50

This makes me think about your gender and education piece, which is entitled *Pedagogies of Snark*, I love that title, by the way, *Learning through Righteous, Riotous Rage in the Youth Climate Movement*. And this piece is about the women's caucus that again, in that same

context of Fossil Free U of T. And you really focus here on emotions, humor, anger, and the role of, of these emotions in mobilizing and building solidarity around women, for women, who were part of the movement. So, on page seven, in that piece, you write, “Our data set demonstrates how snark was used to validate, investigate and connect participants grievances and or experiences of radicalized and misogyny.” One thing that I was really drawn to is how snark transformed anger and marginalization into a collective problem. Can you give us an example of what that looked like in the group? I just think, you know, the word that was that I found in here that I kept on going back to was that snark was a workaround, like there was a sense in which there was an issue that there was anger, and people felt some kind of way about some aspect of what was going on. And the Snark is what allowed, that opened up space for there to be a response to it.

Joe Curnow 35:18

So, this paper was really fun to write with Tressan and Sinead and Lila because it let us look at data from moments that were, I think, extremely difficult, but also really fun and make some sense of them collectively. And this is my favorite paper because I think their voices come through. And it just is fun. And I don't think there's that many academic pieces that I've written that are super-fun, which is maybe a “me” problem. But the early women's caucus meetings where there weren't all that many, but the first one was really awkward and a little bit hard, because we were asking people to share experiences of gendered marginalization. And it was just like, tough. Yeah, like the tone was, was weird. And at one point somebody, I think this is in the paper, right? Someone stood up and was like, “Actually, like, I have some shit to talk” as as she was leaving, and that like open things up and really change the tone of all of the work. And that kind of snarky shit-talk became a tool for getting things into the space so that we could interrogate them as like, social objects. And sometimes it was with intent to do some political analysis. And sometimes it was just like blowing off steam. I don't think people should think that this was just like, a very formal, fancy process, like it was not. And it became still an extremely important learning space for a lot of the folks who are in the room. And it became an important learning tool for people who weren't in the room and who were brought into the conversation later. And all of those conversations were difficult. They're talking about things that people are not used to talking about and don't have a lot of tools for talking about. And, so, the, like snarky joking, kvetching was a way to open up a little bit of room for people to talk about things in a way that was more fun. And, and that still allowed them to, to dig into stuff.

Monica Ko 37:38

You know, I first actually, when we talked about arranging for this conversation, you sent me a book that you said, had really influenced your work. It's called *We Make the Road by Walking*. It's a conversation between Miles Horton and Paulo Friere, if I can get that right. Oh, you have your copy, too! Yours looks a little bit more dog eared than mine. But, you know, so I was reading this very slowly. And then at the same time looking through your work. And I could see

the thread lines and the resonance between them. You know, and I had all these questions prepared about, you know, don't you see any tensions between activity and, you know, basically social movement in the academy? But you know, after reading this, I was like, "Oh, it all makes sense. It's part of this big...right?" And so, it was really lovely to be able to see the thread lines of both your inspiration and how that moved into your own work. I think the chapter that really stood out to me in this book was chapter three, which was about the ideas and Horton and Freire have, certainly have very, very overlapping views on things but they also had some differences. So in in this book, *We Make the Road by Walking* on page 115. Horton says, "Saul Alinsky says that organizing educates. I say that education makes possible organization. But there's different interest and emphasis." Later, on in page 116, he writes, "He says, if there's a choice, we'd sacrifice the goal of organization for helping people grow. Because we think in the long run, it's a bigger contribution." And I wonder for you, if you've had experience in your work, where organizing was successful, but not learning or vice versa?

Joe Curnow 39:26

I think this is a great question. And I have so many examples of this. I'm thinking about my work right now. And this is back to my, I don't want to say it's non-academic, because it's always related and in relationship to this thinking in this scholarship, but in the work in my life. So, my union at the University of Manitoba is about to be on strike on Monday. And, so, I'm doing a lot of work coordinating the political campaign. We'll also have a new premier on Monday, which for us audiences, like the governor. And, so, there's all of this, this work in this moment, and it feels extremely pressing. This is also a union that hasn't been particularly number driven, historically, but it's is trying, I think, really earnestly to shift toward that. And, so, we are in this moment where the stakes are pretty high, and time is feeling extremely crunched. And, so, I think I and other people who are on the organizing and communications committee are feeling very pressed towards making decisions and moving quickly to build the kind of power that we need to win to win something.

And that has meant in a very real way that we have made the choice to do that instead of doing the kind of popular education stuff that I think in other contexts would be the priority for me. And, so, we're not bringing people along in quite the same way, we're not taking the time to build infrastructure, so that new people are being brought into these conversations, and in that kind of space of legitimate participation, but that is peripheral, where they're like getting exposed to stuff and learning some of the ideas behind why we're doing it. But I think instead, we're just like, we're doing stuff, everyone's taking on stuff. And we're not talking about why and we're not starting from where people are at in a good way. It's not great. It's, but, it is the set of choices that we're making. I think in contrast, abolition work that I do police and prison abolition, in Winnipeg, we are starting new post projects and processes. And we're going extremely slow. And then those faces I think we have, are, consistently making the choice, that it is more important to be building relationships and to be doing political education around

process. And, certainly, it also is not perfect, but I think there's lots of times when I make the choice that like the campaign or the target is actually not the point. And this has something to do with the union work as well, where we're doing work to...we're setting up elected official meetings for all of our members in the writings that they live in to their districts. And we know that a lot of the conservative elected officials are not probably going to change their point of view.

But it's still an important thing for our members to be in those meetings, to be able to share their experiences on our campus with constrained resources and what that means for recruitment and retention. And to see the way that elected officials treat them, I think that kind of moment of having an elected official, ignore you or tell you that, that you they don't care or blow off your meeting is an important part of the process for people to then understand that like deeper forms of political engagement are needed and more confrontational actions might be the tool that we need to think to, I think otherwise, it can feel like this is out of nowhere, or it's inappropriate. And I think people want to believe that their elected officials care about them. And so having the counter evidence is actually a really important piece. And, so, there are lots of times where these are intention, I think people are always learning from what they're doing. And people are always taking making sense of the social conditions that they're immersed in. But I would I often will facilitate in a much slower and more intentional way that is oriented to consciousness raising. But sometimes we make different choices around time and urgency and resources, and that those are just choices that people are constantly making in this work.

Monica Ko 43:41

Yeah, and I think I what I hear you saying, too, is that, as someone who's trying to facilitate learning, that there are all sorts of things that you're sensitized to including, yeah, time urgency, what you can get done, how that relates to particular objectives, too. And that it really sounds a lot like the same process that many teachers or you know, right, like, you know, you're constantly juggling. And so that's the complexity is that there is no one social movement that you can go into and say, here, here are the, you know, key things and we've got to do X, Y and Z, a lot of it has is comes out of sensitivity to where people are, what the goals are, and what works and where, right. And that's where I feel like your work as a learning scientist is so important, because it's not about having a bag of tricks, but it's understanding the complex processes that you need to be attuned to.

Of course, we're going over time, but I do want to ask you, I have this larger question about the relationship between mobilizing, organizing and learning. And I wonder if you think back to, if you think about where you are now, and where you started, you know, your motivation for going into graduate school? What are some key nuggets that you've learned, that are important? When you think about these things, these processes coming together? Mobilizing,

organizing and learning - especially for people who are really interested in being in that same space?

Joe Curnow 45:15

Oh my gosh, that's such a hard question! Like what are the things that I could take away? It's so hard to see when you're like, in the work from day to day, but when I talk to other organizers, either in Winnipeg or friends from Chicago or DC and other places, I think some of the things that I have learned are around some of the questions of identity.

I remember talking to a colleague who I organized a lot of anti-racism work with senior citizens, folks in their 70's, 80's and 90's, in Chicago, and the identity stuff was really what she was excited about. She's like, "that we can work with, because we can get people to be enthusiastic about the kinds of ideas that we're working with. And then if that opened up space for them to be trying new tactics, then, then that's amazing that we can do that, on if that potentially shift some of these worldview questions and like, great." And, so, for her that was an "in." I think, for other folks, bringing some of the organizing experience and the methodologies of organizing the come out of Midwestern academy or Alinsky style interfaced work, those are all really helpful. I think also thinking about popular education cycles. And this, of course, comes out of Horton and Freire work. But I think there's this other book, educating for change that a lot of Canadian educators use quite a bit. And I think that's a really useful model for folks to think about how do we design our organizing spaces so that they are centering education? And even if we're not organizing all of our campaigns around it, can we organize our learning spaces around those and start where people are at and bring in new information and let people do the collective work of problem posing? And but always for change, right? Like, we're not learning just to learn in the abstract. This is always an applied process of creating significant change in our communities.

Monica Ko 47:26

I feel like these are questions that, you know, like you were saying, when you're entrenched in it, it's hard to see right? But I'm just curious about, you know, just from your trajectory, it's, I feel like we're always trying to figure out where, where have we come? How far have we come? You know, what are some benchmarks of growth in different in different aspects of our work?

Joe Curnow 47:45

I feel like I have tools. I feel like I have, like, an overall theory of change that I bring to the work. I feel like I like, I'm better at asking questions. But I'm also like, in the mess a lot more. And, so when people like, give me an answer, I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, it's a disaster. Let's start from here and like, make it super messy. And then people like, what have I done?" This is probably not a good like podcast tidbit.

Monica Ko 48:12

No, no, this is perfect. It's a perfect place to do it. Because I don't think we admit that enough is how messy that work is because it's hard to communicate, you know, and it's not palatable to publishers, and reviewers. I'm so glad that it's out there because I think, like you were saying, it provides a framework one for me, as someone who's an outsider, to see that space as a learning environment that can be designed, right? Like you think about people mobilizing behind an issue. And I think for me, the focus is, what's the thing that they're standing behind? But, I think what you bring to light is as a facilitator, as a participant in that space, it's an opportunity to design for learning, right? And, so, what are the different facets that I can become aware of as someone who's operating in that space? Yeah, so I feel like it's a huge contribution.

It also makes me think about this idea of the messiness that you talk about that you're in it, and that you, you don't have all the answers. And that's kind of the point. It reminds me of what Paulo and Myles talk about, you know, in these moments, where people come and say, like, what is how do we do this? Tell us, right, the important thing there is to really foreground the learning and the process and you say, I don't know, we don't know, there's a level of authenticity to that learning space, because no one's gonna help you get to the end and say, "gotcha, we knew it all along!" Right? And I think sometimes we get into in schools where I do most of my work, teachers often feel like, because they have the content knowledge that we're trying to co construct, we're trying to build knowledge together, but they have goals that the students don't have. And it feels like in these spaces and social movement, when people are participating and trying to get things you know when they're trying to organize. There's no clear solution. And, so, what happens is always emergent, and I think the mess well you know what we see my as messy feels like a really really authentic learning space. And that's why it's so great that your work helps highlight what's happening in that space for people who don't know very well.

Joe Curnow 50:09

I think you identified exactly what for me was like the biggest gift from We Make the Road by Walking when I first encountered it, which, when I was doing the fair-trade organizing, we took groups of students to Nicaragua and also to East Africa to do exchanges with farmers' cooperatives, and then had youth and farmers come up to North America and do exchanges with us. But I took this big group of students to East Africa for several months, and was really trying like to get to do popular education as I understood it. And we were doing all these workshops about fair trade and sessions. And people were getting so mad at me because they're like, "You are this is just a fishing expedition, the you know, the answers, and we just want you to tell us." And I was like, my book is so marked up because I got it right after I got back and was like, yes, like, they are able to describe similar scenarios of people just wanting

the answer, but also helped me to see how I was actually like not offering what I knew or providing the resources and like setting them up in a way. And I think that yeah, the questions that you that you're raising around, like, how do we as educators create spaces for co-constructing learning, while also being fully present? And bringing what we have to bring is part of the, I think, the lifelong challenge of like reading the room and bringing information, and also not for closing space for participation and discovery. So, yes, I think this book is such, so amazing for helping people to work through those questions.

Monica Ko 51:17

One last question, where do you hope Learning Sciences goes next?

Joe Curnow 51:58

I hope that the learning sciences continue toward the hard questions around power politics, ethics. I think that there's been a lot of movement in the in recent years, where we are seeing really important work that asks us to think about ideology, that asks us to think about how learning is always political, and it's never neutral. And I think that, that for many folks, that's been obvious for decades. But I don't think that that's necessarily a core assumption of the learning sciences because there are such diverse approaches. And I think that that is actually a really important work.

I also think that we need to do quite a bit more to think about how to make our discipline and our tools and our theories, anti-racist and anti-colonial, to think about the epistemic foundations, where they come from, and how so much of your western knowledge gets unmarked, I really look forward to I think there's this big crop of students coming up, who come from, like, communities that haven't been very visible in the learning sciences, or at least in the materials that I was brought up reading. And I'm really excited for those voices as they're moving into publishing and doing special issues. And I think that's really important and powerful. And I hope that that changes the field, I think it has to. I think there's it's a big moment of change. And I am interested in how that will be taken up across the learning sciences broadly. And not just in the pocket of like, equity-oriented learning sciences folks, or socio-cultural folks like I really am interested to see how the community broadly takes up challenges to worldview and work around race and gender, and maybe class eventually. And disability. I feel like these things have often been made invisible in our field. And, so I'm really interested to see how these social relations come up and how they get treated, and how they get taken seriously as shaping the learning environment and shaping the learning that happens in different ecologies.

Monica Ko 54:24

Thank you, Joe. And I look forward to your work as contributing to that, that future movement.

Joe Curnow 54:27

Thank you so much. I feel like this conversation has been a pleasure. And it's always nice to think about the work. And it's really nice to have someone spend so much time and attention in reading our research group's work and reading the source material. It's really this very thoughtful and nice. And I appreciate the time.

Monica Ko 54:44

Thank you for coming on the show and I hope this conversation sparks many other conversations about how we can we can better foreground these issues in the field.

I'd love to hear what you took away from this conversation and connections that you see to your own work. Send us an email at humanslspod@gmail.com and find us on Twitter at [@humansLSpod](https://twitter.com/humansLSpod).

This podcast is co-produced by Andrew Krzak and Mon-Lin Monica Ko. Our work is made possible by The Learning Sciences Research Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Thank you for listening!