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Social Movement Literacy: A Conceptual Overview¹

Jason Del Gandio²

This article provides a conceptual overview of social movement literacy (SML). The purpose of SML is to help the general public become more proficient at reading and understanding the nature and function of social movements. Social movements are invaluable contributors to our collective lives, but very few people—outside of activists and specialized academics—consciously educate themselves about movement activity. SML is envisioned as an interdisciplinary, public pedagogy endeavor that brings together both scholars and activists in the attempt to establish core skills and knowledges that enable people to recognize, discuss, perhaps participate in and, if need be, intelligently critique the ideologies, political motivations, and tactics of social movements.

Introduction

This article provides a conceptual overview of *social movement literacy* (SML). The basic purpose of SML is to help the general public become more proficient at reading and understanding the nature and function of social movements. From abolitionism and women's suffrage to Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, social movements are invaluable contributors to our collective lives. But very few people—

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outside of activists and specialized academics—consciously educate themselves about the histories, conditions, goals, tactics, and influences of social movements.

SML is my own creation, having emerged from my participation in and formal study of social movements. I envision SML as an interdisciplinary, public pedagogy endeavor that brings together both scholars and activists in the attempt to create an open and flexible pedagogical agenda. The learning outcomes of SML must be transferrable across movements—in other words, SML is not reducible to learning about a handful of specific social movements. Instead, SML seeks to establish a set of core skills and knowledges that enable people to recognize, discuss, perhaps participate in and, if need be, intelligently critique the ideologies, political motivations, and tactics of social movements. Six of those skills/knowledges are presented here. Before outlining those skills/knowledges, I address the need for SML, chart out some of its broad parameters, and briefly describe the politics of such a project. I conclude by inviting other educators, scholars, activists, and social change practitioners to take up the call of SML and apply and expand it in whatever ways they deem necessary.

The Need for Social Movement Literacy

Social movements have helped to establish many—if not most—of the basic rights, liberties, and freedoms that we cherish and champion: the right to vote, a 40-hour work week, labor regulations, housing regulations, worker rights, anti-pollution laws, consumer protections, work place safety, minimum wage, more inclusive college curriculum, anti-discrimination laws, civil rights, gender equality, free speech, environmental protections, and so on. This list does not even touch upon issues of human rights, the ending of wars and genocide, the curbing of nuclear proliferation, and the fight for everyday equality and respect. Social movements also provide visionary guidance for accomplishing a better humanity: everything from Gandhi's "be the change you wish to see" to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "dream" of the beloved community. Such examples demonstrate how social movements contribute to social progress and human development and often produce not only political but also moral imperatives. Even social movements that

we might vehemently oppose—such as White nationalism, the men’s rights movement, or the Westboro Baptist Church—contribute, albeit, negatively, to the social fabric. My value judgments are obviously relative to my politics. But controversy, debate, and value judgments are part and parcel of social movements. Regardless of one’s political allegiances, the ability to understand why and how people collectively accomplish their own sense of justice is a worthy and even necessary literacy.

Some people might argue that activists are the ones responsible for helping others to understand the goals and messages of social movements. This is true, but only partially so—*both sides* bear responsibility. Activists must communicate effectively in order to inform and persuade their audiences, but those audiences must strive to properly understand social movement activities—for it is only *then* that audiences are able to truly accept or reject the messages that are being communicated. If the first is a teachable/learnable skill for activists, then the second is a teachable/learnable skill for non-activists.

My scholarship, pedagogy, and activism influence my conception of social movement literacy. My scholarship focuses on the theory and practice of social justice, with a particular interest in how people communicatively accomplish radical change and liberation. My pedagogy focuses on teaching students about activism, community organizing, and social movements. In my seventeen years of activism, I have been involved in many movements and causes: I participated in the global justice movement, the anti-Iraq war movement, and the Occupy movement; I have worked on issues of free trade, economic inequality, Latin American solidarity, anti-sweatshop labor, and more recently prison reform/abolition; I am an ally for feminist causes, the LGBTQ movement, and Black Lives Matter; and I unapologetically stand on the side of the oppressed, marginalized, and forgotten.

I must also acknowledge that my sociocultural experience as a White, middle-class, academically-trained, hetero North American cisman has conditioned me to see the world through critical analysis, logical delineation, and rational debate/discussion. This undoubtedly influences my approach to this project. It is safe to assume that people and communities of differing standpoints would conceptualize and

operationalize SML in very different ways. In that sense, then, SML necessitates a *plurality* of social movement *literacies*, each of which can and should be applied to one's own unique circumstances.

Given my background in communication studies, I have spent much time helping activists and organizers improve their communication and rhetoric.³ My interests shifted during Occupy Wall Street (OWS) when I met numerous people expressing confusion about the movement. I originally interpreted such confusion as a psychological self-defense mechanism that shielded them from the ideological implications posed by OWS. While that analysis may be accurate to some degree, I began to wonder if people lacked the basic skills to properly assess the goals, tactics, and messages of OWS and other movements.

Recent controversies attest to our society's dearth of social movement literacy. Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl halftime performance was labeled anti-cop and anti-White (Ward, 2016). But Beyoncé is a Black artist who performed in February during Black history month in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement. She was paying homage to her African American heritage while situating that homage within current affairs. National Football League quarterback Colin Kaepernick brought attention to U.S. race relations by kneeling during pregame national anthems (Zirin, 2016). He was called anti-military and anti-American, was told to leave the country, and people burned his jersey (Henderson, 2016; Boren, 2016). These actions continued even *after* he explained himself. The #NoDAPL standoff between the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline received little to no national media coverage for the first several months (Tapahe, 2016). It was not until people were arrested, tear gassed, attacked by dogs, and shot with rubber bullets that national media began covering the story. This media blackout implies that political uprisings of indigenous populations are unworthy of coverage until people are physically harmed.

³ See, for instance, Del Gandio (2008) and Del Gandio & Nocella (2014).

It's possible that these and similar reactions are motivated by reasons other than an inability to "properly read" the actions. People might genuinely disagree with Beyoncé and Kaepernick, the media cannot cover every uprising, and there might be "political" reasons for smear campaigns and/or ignoring stories. But these explanations cannot be so easily disentangled. Both the inability *and* unwillingness to acknowledge history and current affairs (Beyoncé), to contextualize political actions and consider explanations (Kaepernick), to recognize the emergence of legitimate social movements (#NoDAPL), and to decipher the symbolisms of oppression and resistance (all three) point back to *deficiencies* in social movement literacy. I argue that people would be less likely to misconstrue, smear, lash out against, and/or ignore social movement activity if they were more adept at reading such activity.

Responding to the Literacy Need

SML is driven by a basic question: How can we help the general public become more skilled at reading and understanding the nature and function of social movements? Tentatively, I believe there are at least three basic stipulations that undergird an SML program.

Collaboration between Scholars and Activists

Such a program should involve collaboration between scholars and activists as each contributes something unique. Scholars tend to generate abstract knowledge with a focus on meta-reflection, while activists tend to generate experiential knowledge derived from practical activity. This is not to propose a false dichotomy between the two; instead, each group highlights different forms of knowledge that can and should contribute to social movement literacy. At the very least, activists provide a first-person, on the ground perspective while scholars provide a third-person, bird's eye view. At the very most, the embodied and frenetic experience of activism and the reflective and analytical approach of scholarship come together in a synergetic creation of a grounded and informed pedagogy. It should be noted, too, that such collaboration already happens—some scholars are participatory-observers within social movements and/or pursue *participatory action research*, and some activists generate scholarly knowledge and *militant*

research.⁴ In other words, segments of these two worlds *already* collaborate, and SML simply highlights that collaboration.

Transferable Skills and Knowledges

The skills and knowledges of SML should be transferrable across movements. SML is not reducible to learning about a handful of specific social movements. Instead, SML establishes a set of core skills and knowledges that enable people to recognize, discuss, and perhaps participate in and/or intelligently critique, the ideologies, political motivations, and tactics of social movements. Just as the capacity to read transcends specific texts, the capacity to intelligently interpret and discuss social movement activity transcends isolated movements. SML is not asking people to acquire tomes of historical knowledge about all the movements of the world. Rather, basic skills and abilities must be developed that enable people to infer sensible conclusions. Of course, some movements may be more challenging to interpret than others. I assume, for instance, that campaigns for raising the minimum wage are fairly easy to understand (even if one disagrees) since wage-labor and the struggle to pay bills are common experiences. But Black Lives Matter (BLM) may be more complicated since many people may presume, for instance, that the civil rights movement ended racism, that the election of Barack Obama signaled a post-racial society, and that the criminal justice system treats everyone fairly and equally. Such presumptions render the BLM movement unnecessary and even unintelligible. The BLM movement also involves a strong current to not only reform, but to actually abolish, the prison-industrial complex and police forces (Coker, 2016). These goals are incomprehensible to most people, and understanding such goals demands research and perspective-taking. First, one must research the intricacies and downfalls of the prison-industrial complex and decide if current day policing is inherently necessary for a democratic, civilized

⁴ Participatory action research is conducted by scholars who act *with* communities that are trying to achieve social change, and militant research is conducted by activists to understand and improve their chances of winning their political struggles. For more on these, see, respectively, Grimwood (2015) and Hughs, Peace, & Van Meter (2010).

society or if it is a *product* of a socio-historical juncture built to sustain hierarchy, inequality, and White supremacy. Then second, one must adopt the perspective of those who see police as occupying colonial forces. As journalist Matthew Harwood (2014) argues, in the new era of American policing, “cops increasingly see themselves as soldiers occupying enemy territory, often with the help of Uncle Sam’s armory, and where even nonviolent crimes are met with overwhelming force and brutality” (para. 7). Such an insight provokes reflection: How would my life be affected by such an antagonistic relationship with police? Would I see police as friend or foe? Who do I call in moments of need and crisis? Will I feel more or less safe when police arrive? This perspective-taking skill, as well as the research skill, can be taught and learned to facilitate social movement literacy.⁵

Public Pedagogy

SML should be approached as a public pedagogy project. Public pedagogy involves educative experiences that precede and exceed the boundaries of institutional schooling. Such experiences are equally if not more important than the operations that commonly occur within the classroom (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010). It makes sense for SML to begin in academic settings—the academy’s resources, educational mission, and dedication to knowledge-production can fund initial developments. But confining SML to campus classrooms reinscribes socio-economic divisions and institutes a predatory relationship between the academy and movements. It seems unethical that people put their bodies—and sometimes lives—on the line while others sit comfortably in classrooms discussing the risks and dangers of said people. This is not to say that every academic must become an activist. But it is imperative that SML

⁵ I should also note that some movements actually resist intelligibility—they do not want to make themselves available for interpretation by the powers that be and they do not seek affirmation from others. They are self-affirming in their withdrawal from the power dynamics of the larger society. But even in this case, the capacity to recognize this motive as a form of political resistance is an SML skill.

develops a core mission of moving beyond the walls of the academy to engage the wider world of social movement activity. Doing so ensures that SML pedagogues

take responsibility for how the knowledge that they produce is used instead of hiding behind pretenses and protestations of innocence . . . As engaged intellectuals we understand that we are entangled within world systems of oppression and exploitation . . . Our choice is to stand alongside or against domination, but not outside, above, or beyond it.” (Conquergood, 1995, p. 85)

In brief, SML invites educators to become

“permanent persuaders and not just orators,” with the understanding that “such persuasion takes place not merely in the isolated and safe confines of the universities but in those spheres and public cultures of daily life in which subordinated groups bear the weight of the mechanisms of coercion and domination. (Giroux, 2011, p. 65)

I believe that SML can accomplish this mission by following the models set forth by Gender and Women Studies, Black Studies, Latinx Studies, Queer Studies, Disability Studies, Critical Animal Studies, etc.

These fields of study are situated in the academy, but *at their best*, have a direct relationship to the movements that spawned them. They do that by contributing to national discussions on relevant matters, articulating agendas and positions that are of interest to their constituents, and educating public audiences on a host of interrelated issues. These efforts are often diffuse, acting as an intelligent and critical voice within the cacophony of social/cultural chatter. That is to say, these branches of study have become institutions that advance interests of particular populations, but they neither represent nor speak for those populations. These branches of study do not own the identities or issues that they study. Likewise, SML is neither the first nor last word on social movements. Its basic mission, instead, is to facilitate the public's ability to understand social movement activity, which can and should occur both inside and outside of the classroom. Academics are not the sole arbiters of this agenda. Activists, organizers, community members,

nonprofits, journalists, religious leaders, and anyone else can take up and advance the public pedagogy of SML.

The Politics of SML

Social movement literacy follows in the tradition of other justice- and liberatory-based pedagogies, some of which include: civic literacy (DeVitis, 2011; Milner, 2002), critical literacy (Lazere, 2013; McDaniel, 2006), and media literacy (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012; Potter, 2013; critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux 2011; hooks, 1997; McLaren, 2006), critical communication pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 2007), feminist communication pedagogy (Cooks, 2001), critical performative pedagogy (Alexander, 2010; Pineau, 2002) and public pedagogy (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010); communication activism pedagogy (Frey & Palmer, 2014); and service learning (Sheffield, 2011), civic/community engagement (Stoecker, 2016), and participatory action research (Grimwood, 2015). This list is obviously relative to my own interests and scholarly expertise, and other SML practitioners can easily cite alternative traditions and sources. But these pedagogies share in common a basic understanding that political participation is a taught and learned behavior and that all education is political. Social movement literacy is no exception. As currently conceived, SML involves a three-pronged political agenda.

SML seeks to *challenge the perceived "otherness"* of social movements. It is safe to assume that most people see social movements as foreign entities existing outside of their own personal experience. Becoming literate in social movement activity decreases that psychological distance, enabling one to understand why and how others can challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of, for instance, capitalism, national chauvinism, White privilege, patriarchy, heteronormativity, speciesism, or the military-industrial complex. It also enables one to understand how and why nontraditional political actions (sit-ins, die-ins, labor strikes, and public occupations) are necessary for social progress and/or advancing political consciousness. SML is essentially a process of *desensitizing* people to social movement operations.

SML seeks to *cultivate empathy* for those who collectively fight for social justice. The working assumption is that desensitization leads to identification and, therefore, empathy. Social movement participants are commonly perceived as alien and/or threatening. But SML seeks to sway people to see social movement participants as heroic, dedicated, and courageous.⁶

SML seeks to *create conditions* for the possibility of more social movement activity. Desensitizing the public and cultivating an empathic orientation creates the possibility that more people will participate in social movement activity. At the very least, it creates a more supportive environment for those involved with social movements, which makes it more likely that those already predisposed will find it easier to act. At the very most, those who were previously confused or opposed might actually join social movements. The basic point is to cultivate a social *milieu* that is more sympathetic to and conducive for social movements.

Six SML Skills and Knowledges

Below are six skills and knowledges necessary for understanding social movement activity. This list is by no means exhaustive; other skills/knowledges could be added, and each could be further explained and nuanced. But based on my experience—as both educator and activist—these six provide a solid starting point for developing a social movement literacy program.

(1) Reading the Conditions: SML involves the ability to recognize and articulate the specific conditions that make possible the emergence of each particular social movement.

This skill involves deciphering the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical conditions. It also necessitates digging below the surface and looking for interlocking complexities that motivate the emergence of each movement. Why here, why now, and why is it taking this particular form? It is not

⁶ This assumption about desensitization-identification-empathy is supported by social scientific research investigating the relationship between perspective-taking and empathy (Gerace, Day, Casey, & Mohr, 2015), perspective-taking and racial sensitivity (Todd, Bodenhausen, & Galinsky, 2012), and perspective-taking in interpersonal relations (Gerace, Day, Casey, & Mohr, 2013).

enough to say that Black Lives Matter is a response to racism or to the killing of Black people. Both are root causes, but these phenomena have been ever-present within our society since the inception of the United States. So why are we witnessing the rise of a new Black freedom movement in the second decade of the 21st century that is dedicated to direct action and intersectional politics?

First and foremost, it is a response to the legacy of White supremacy (Garza, 2014; Taylor, 2016, p. 167). In previous eras, White supremacy manifested itself in the forms of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the ghettoization of Blacks. Movements then emerged in response to each of those conditions—respectively, the abolitionist, civil rights, and Black power movements. While these movements share a constant through-line of Black freedom, each is uniquely positioned within and against its particular conditions. Even the closely-aligned civil rights and Black power movements were differently situated. The first was largely southern-based, seeking racial equity and integration into White America by way of legal means (Brown vs. Board of Education, the Civil Rights Bill, and the Voting Rights Act). The second was largely northern-based, seeking Black liberation and independence by way of extra-legal means, involving everything from armed self-defense to the reconstruction of Black identity, culture, and consciousness. Black Lives Matter is the latest iteration of this lineage, and it is responding to the conditions of its day: the racialization of the war on drugs, the militarization of the police, stop and frisk policies that disproportionately affect people of color, mass incarceration and the rise of the prison-industrial complex, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the extra-judicial killing of Black people.⁷ Alicia Garza (2014), one of the creators of #BlackLivesMatter, connects these conditions to White supremacy and state violence:

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement [that] Black

⁷ For more on these conditions, see Alexander (2010), Davis (2003), and Taylor (2016). On the lineage of the Black freedom struggle, see Kelly (2002). On the unique conditions of the civil rights and Black power movements as seen through the lives of Dr. King and Malcolm X, see Cone (1992).

poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence. Black queer and trans folks bearing a unique burden in a hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us is state violence; the fact that 500,000 Black people in the US are undocumented immigrants and relegated to the shadows is state violence; the fact that Black girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war is state violence; Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities bear the burden of state-sponsored Darwinian experiments that attempt to squeeze us into boxes of normality defined by White supremacy is state violence. And the fact is that the lives of Black people—not ALL people—exist within these conditions is consequence of state violence. (para. 12)

A plethora of other supporting conditions also contributes to the rise of this movement: social media, live-streaming, and instant communication; twenty-four-hour news cycles; the first Black president who, according to some, did not do enough to address Black suffering (Gebreyes, 2016; Taylor, 2016); Black feminism and its focus on intersectional analysis (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993); and even Occupy Wall Street for priming the public mind for large-scale direct action.

The ability to decipher such conditions—whether those of Black Lives Matter or any other movement—does not happen on its own. One must read, listen, watch, and *actively pursue* such knowledge. However, being *social movement literate* means readily asking, what conditions are motivating this movement? From there, one pursues the arduous work of researching to understand.

(2) Reading the Communication: SML involves the ability to recognize, analyze, and understand the verbal, visual, embodied, and mediated communication of social movements.

This skill involves attuning one's "communicative imagination" to the significance and complexities of meaning-production and human interaction (Engen, 2002, pp. 41-42). That is to say, one develops the ability to see social movements through the lens of communication. All species communicate to one degree or another, and humans are particularly adept at generating collectively shared meaning through the use and manipulation of signs and symbols. Social movements take up this activity through particular forms of communication and meaning-production, foremost of which is rhetoric-as-persuasion (Simons, 1970). Everything from speech-making and public protest to external recruitment and internal debate involves influencing the thoughts and behaviors of others. Social movements also persuade through the creation of *new* discourses. Here, rhetoric does not simply communicate about the world; it also *communicatively-constitutes* new ways of perceiving and experiencing the world. Sojourner Truth, Emma Goldman, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, the Young Lords, ACT-UP, EarthFirst!, the Zapatistas, as well as millions of unknown social movement participants generate new meanings and symbolisms that move people to think and act differently.

The famous Chicago 7 trial testimony of the 1960s counterculturalist Abbie Hoffman is a particularly apt example. When asked for his place of residence, he replied, "Woodstock Nation." The court challenged him to explain.

It is a nation of alienated young people. We carry it around with us as a state of mind in the same way the Sioux Indians carried the Sioux Nation around with them. It is a nation dedicated to cooperation versus competition, to the idea that people should have better means of exchange than property or money, that there should be some other basis for human interaction. It is a *nation* [emphasis added]. (Levine, McNamee, & Greenberg, 1970, pp. 140-141)

Hoffman was not simply communicating *about* the 1960s hippie counterculture; he was also helping to communicate it *into existence*. His trial testimony simultaneously gave voice to *and* invited

people to take up particular sentiments and practices. Such ideas may appear unintelligible to outlying groups. This is due in part to the novelty of the countercultural movement—one's cognitive mapping may be unable to process the possibility of creating a radically alternative culture/nation within the larger, pre-existing American society. Hoffman's testimony, as well as the entire countercultural phenomenon, thus appeared communicatively indecipherable to many people of that time, including the trial's government-appointed judge and prosecutors. But this highlights the need to expand one's communicative imagination. Social movements, by necessity, challenge the boundaries of reality, which then obliges one to become versed in reading the communicative building blocks of that reality-expanding process. One can't read social movements without being able to properly read the communication; it's simply not possible (which harkens back to the misplaced criticism of Beyoncé and Kaepernick and the inability to recognize #NoDAPL as a major national story).

(3) Reading the Frames: SML involves the ability to recognize how framing (by both insiders, such as activists, and outsiders, like the mass media) can influence perception and understanding of social movement activity.

Framing is inherent to all human interaction and involves everything from word choice and narrative detail to the cinematic editing of Hollywood movies and the perceptual priming used by advertisers. All communication—whether it be linguistic, visual, nonverbal, mediated, or otherwise—reflects and deflects various values, beliefs, and views (Burke, 1966) and includes and excludes particular versions of reality (Whorf, 1956). Framing is studied by numerous scholars of varying disciplines. For the purposes of this essay, it suffices to understand that framing “is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner” (Kuypers, 2006, p. 8). Framing works by “contextualizing individuals' meaning construction” (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012, p. 490), which then influences “the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our

actions” (Lakoff, 2004, p. xv). In brief, each frame makes possible particular interpretations, and changing the frame changes how people think about, process, and orient to the topic of discussion.

This has obvious implications for the development of one’s social movement literacy. Social movements are inherently political, public, and controversial, and various actors, driven by different interests, offer and are invested in competing frames. Are the Black Lives Matter events that occurred in Ferguson and Baltimore best characterized as *riots* or *rebellions*? Is a brick thrown through a Nike storefront window an act of violence or a legitimate form of anti-corporate activism? Are P.E.T.A. and Greenpeace crazy radicals or arbiters of social conscience? Are anti-war protesters anti-American or pro-peace? Do anti-street harassment activists unfairly attack men for complimenting attractive women or are they fighting against the micro-violences of patriarchal rape culture?

The ability to recognize the implications of these different frames boils down to developing a healthy skepticism of *all* frames, even the ones you agree with. How does each source frame the issue? What are the unspoken assumptions of each frame? What values, beliefs, and meanings are emphasized and deemphasized? What views are constructed and excluded? SML goes further, still, by asking people to develop the ability to *accurately* read social movement activity *across* competing frames. This skill involves locating the various consistencies that run through the differing frames. This is not necessarily a search for an “essential” or “true” understanding. That may be the case in some instances. For example, the climate justice movement is motivated, in part, by scientific evidence and the very real effects on both rural and urban environments, the displacement of island and coastal populations, and species extinction. In this case, certain kinds of truths are direly important for combating climate denial, advancing particular legislation, and motivating people to act in order to avoid catastrophe. More generally, though, frame-analysis involves comparing the implications of each frame, obtaining information from a diversity of sources to help one assess the accuracy of those frames, and coming to a principled stance on which

frames should be accepted and/or rejected. Performing this procedure obviously intersects with all the other SML skills/knowledges.

(4) Reading the Tactics: SML involves the ability to identify and understand social movement tactics.

Tactics refers to the specific methods that are strategically deployed to achieve particular goals. Some of the more publicly visible and “spectacular” tactics include protests, marches, rallies, sit-ins, die-ins, kiss-ins, tree-sits, banner-drops, building occupations, culture jams, boycotts, strikes, walkouts, work stoppages, street theater, and political satire. An inability to recognize these activities as tactics contributes to common misperceptions of social movements as chaotic, unorganized, uninformed, riotous, and unconsciously disruptive, violent, and/or ineffective.

It may never occur to casual observers, for instance, that a group of people lying on the ground in front of a military recruiting office is enacting an anti-war protest *tactic* referred to as a die-in. This is not to suggest that the protesters don’t have a responsibility to rhetorically and theatrically mark their action as an anti-war demonstration. But an individual who is literate in social movement activity would be able to recognize it as a demonstration regardless of how well the protest is executed.

There are at least four basic steps for identifying tactics: acknowledging the socio-political context (a war is occurring); identifying the location (military recruiting office); attending to the embodied actions (people lying on the ground); noting the signifiers (people covered in red paint, people holding protest signs); and processing the verbal message(s) (anti-war speeches, pamphlets, and signs).

Occupy Wall Street is another example. Many people were unable to understand the occupation of public space as a tactic, and therefore asked, often disparagingly, why are they doing this? What do they want? What’s the purpose? But a brief analysis of the event reveals the tactical logic. First, the *socio-political context*: economic inequality has been steadily increasing for the previous forty years; in 2008, the economy collapsed and the Great Recession began; the Bush Administration and later the Obama Administration used taxpayer money to bail out the corporate banks responsible for the economic crash.

Despite the myriad of concerns and demands offered up by individual occupiers, the underlying two-pronged issue was economic inequality and a lack of political accountability. Second, the *location*: people were occupying Wall Street, which is both the literal and symbolic epicenter of corporate power; occupying Wall Street was therefore an attempt to occupy that power. Third, the *embodied actions*: physically occupying public space was an attempt to call attention to the issues; occupiers also used forms of direct-democracy—such as consensus decision-making, general assemblies, the people’s microphone, and small working groups—in order to redistribute power back into the hands of everyday people. Fourth, the *signifiers*: people camped out in tents, signifying a rejection of the system and their daily routines; people conversed and debated in small groups, signifying a rejection of “massification” and a reinvention of town hall-style discussion; people engaged in other forms of communal living/action, signifying a rejection of atomization and a desire for unity-and-diversity. And fifth, the *verbal messages*: declaring “We are the 99%” and designating the 1% as the opposition signifies a class consciousness and an analysis of power—that the masses of people are tired of being governed by a small, self-interested elite addicted to greed and private wealth. This brief five-step analysis reveals that Occupy Wall Street was more than a fortuitous or chaotic co-mingling of disparate individuals and ideologies—it was a tactic for challenging a corrupt system and reinvigorating a democratic spirit.

(5) Switching Perspectives: SML involves the ability to switch between one’s own political worldview and the worldview of various social movements.

Only by seeing the world through the eyes of the social movement can one truly appreciate that particular movement. This does not necessitate agreeing with the movement, but it does necessitate temporarily empathizing with the movement’s basic impetus. Why and/or how is it that these people are demanding these particular changes at this point in time? What is the specific injustice that people are addressing? Why do they believe that their solution will ameliorate that injustice? Such political empathy deepens one’s ability to speak to, defend, and/or critique the movement in question.

Nonhuman liberation is a challenging and therefore helpful example.⁸ Groups like the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) seek “total liberation” of all species and use disruptive and often illegal tactics: releasing and/or rescuing animals from factory farms, laboratories, and vivisection facilities; destroying animal research compounds; squatting in and spiking trees in order to stop logging and deforestation; blockading roads and construction sites; dismantling cell phone and radio towers; sabotaging dam projects; vandalizing luxury housing developments; damaging tractors and other heavy machinery; and even torching SUV dealerships.

The official ALF and ELF guidelines are clear and unapologetic about their liberatory intent. To cite just the ELF Guidelines:

To inflict economic damage on those profiting from the destruction and exploitation of the natural environment.

To reveal and educate the public on the atrocities committed against the earth and all species that populate it.

To take all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human.

There is no way to contact the E.L.F. in your area. It is up to each committed person to take responsibility for stopping the exploitation of the natural world. No longer can it be assumed that someone else is going to do it. If not you who, if not now when? (Best &

Nocella, 2006, p. 407)

Most people probably find this world of nonhuman liberation unintelligible and even unsettling. Although animals and the environment are recognized as having basic legal protections, they are not commonly perceived as autonomous subjects on equal footing with human beings. In this sense, then, liberating animals and/or the environment is as incomprehensible as liberating rocks and dirt. The use of

⁸ Some of the following has been adapted from previously published material (see Del Gandio, 2014).

illegal and interventionist direct action is even more challenging. Why would someone destroy a housing development or university research facility to save trees and rats? Like Abbie Hoffman's trial testimony cited above, this communicatively-constituted worldview challenges imaginative boundaries. Nonhuman liberationists, following the philosophies of deep ecology and social ecology, believe that all species are equally and intrinsically valuable. Within this worldview, the living environment as a whole has a *right* to live and flourish according to *its own natural progression*. We are not separate from but rather part of nature and must live in accordance *with* nature.

Developing one's social movement literacy does not necessitate agreeing with the principles and practices of nonhuman liberation. But one should seek to understand why the movement does what it does. Doing so helps to expand the possibilities of one's own mental and moral universe and invites critical reflection: how, and to what degree, am I implicated in the systems and habits that they critique? Is my political framework too limited and my worldview too narrow? Should I be more alarmed and outraged by the systematic exploitation and destruction of nonhuman life? Such political/existential questions are no doubt unsettling. But it is by sitting with unsettledness that we can genuinely understand "the other" and respond thoughtfully and intelligently to the nonhuman liberationist movement. Such a sentiment is very different from the kneejerk reactions commonly circulated throughout society.

(6) Discussion and Debate: SML involves the ability to discuss and debate the pros and cons of different social movements and the complexities thereof.

This involves the ability to describe, analyze, and critique the political goals, tactics, and effectiveness of social movements. This can refer to social movement activity in general or specific activities of specific social movements. For the former, one might discuss the political effectiveness of nonviolent direct action. For the latter, one might discuss the political effectiveness of shopping mall die-ins used by Black Lives Matter activists or the encampments used by #NoDAPL water protectors.

People can also discuss and debate the philosophies and goals of specific social movements. For example, some basic tenets of the Tea Party movement seem plausible—eliminate excessive taxes, national debt, and deficit spending, and abide by the U.S. Constitution and promote civic responsibility (Tea Party). Tea Party participants believe that the U.S. federal government is an institution of power teetering on the brink of tyrannical control and that such power should be redistributed back into the hands of everyday people. This appears to be a sensible position, at least on the surface. But delving deeper reveals that the Tea Party platform is not so candid. Although it has mobilized a grassroots following, it was originally organized as an astro-turf movement. The billionaire Koch brothers funded the movement (Mayer, 2010) and Fox News provided enthusiastic coverage. Furthermore, the Tea Party does not characterize capitalism as an institution of power, which is troubling since corporate money dominates the political system and gross economic inequality riddles our society.⁹ The Tea Party movement also trends toward a White, middle-class, and middle-aged demographic, thus challenging its supposed populism. These same Tea Partiers then claim a victim-status within the wider sociocultural system, believing, for instance, that their own traditional gender, racial, and sexual identities are no longer valued as they once were. While perhaps true, this devaluing of traditional identities is not an issue of “victimization” since no one is being abused or oppressed. Rather, cultural changes have challenged the hegemonic status of those traditional identities. In this sense, then, the Tea Party’s claim of victimization expresses a desire to recover a dominant role in society, which is a longing to oppress and subjugate others.

The ability to participate in such nuanced conversations is one of the ultimate goals of SML as it demonstrates, by way of necessity, competency in all the other skills/knowledges. The hope is that this competency elevates public discourse, enabling people to engage in critical-minded dialogue about oppression, resistance, activism, and justice. To paraphrase Freire (1970/2000), this capacity for dialogue

⁹ As of 2014, the average CEO-to-worker pay ratio was 303-to-1. In 1965 it was 20-to-1 (Mishel & Davis, 2015).

is a precondition for humanization, for it is through dialogue that we become vulnerable, open to the possibility of our own transformation—a transformation that then reverberates throughout society.

Of course, there are different ways to enact this SML competency. Some people are more suited for oral discussion and debate while others are more comfortable with the likes of poetry, music, visual design, or theatre. In this sense, *discussion and debate* is a generic phrase for describing one's capacity to engage the topics and controversies relevant to social movement activity.

Concluding with an Invitation

There is still much to flesh out about social movement literacy: developing actual curriculums for both traditional, in-class settings and alternative, outside settings; developing learning rubrics and outcomes for different students/populations; adapting and developing SML for both movement-based and non-movement based audiences (i.e., activists and non-activists); making connections to other academic and activist traditions not mentioned here; thinking further about SML's political agenda; and devising strategies for getting SML into the hands of the educators and activists who will put it to good use. Given the nature of the project, it's imperative for others to take up, expand, and apply SML's mission in whatever ways they deem necessary. Then, *together*, we can use our collective means to foster a more humanizing, revolutionary culture that is sympathetic to and even desiring of social movement activity.

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