



Dušana Findeisen,

Slovenian Third Age University

Anna Grabowska,

PRO-MED sp. z o. o., Seniors' Club at Gdansk University of Technology

Older People's Learning from Engagement in Massive Social Conflicts and Collective Actions

Abstract

The authors deal with massive social conflicts, collective actions and opportunities they offer for experiential and transformative learning and learning by doing. Massive social conflicts and collective actions are bound to change economic and political structures requiring also a simultaneous change of ideology. Participants in massive social conflicts – particularly those who are young - learn best from the ideology of social movements. Moreover, participating in collective actions requires collective cognitive and emotional engagement. As a result of it, the participants' values and identity change, as well as their behaviour. In the course of their life, current older people have had opportunities to participate actively in social movements, therefore their contribution to the contemporary cyber mobilisations, notwithstanding the specific nature of those, may be decisive and influential.

Key words: massive social conflict, massive social movement, collective action, cyber mobilisation, ideology, transformative learning, experiential learning, learning by doing, identity, value

To a certain extent, in the course of their life, European baby boomers and other generations of current older people have had opportunities to learn from their direct engagement in (or observation of) different types of collective actions taken within *massive social conflicts*: unrests, struggle of classes, workers' movements, social movements, general strikes, uprisings, revolutions, cyber mobilizations. In all cases, direct engagement, passive observation of massive social conflicts have been for today's older people an opportunity to learn experientially, to learn by doing, and/or to experience transformational learning. Consequently, be they aware of it or not, their modified thinking, their modified values and norms, and other types of modified behavior have taken place, as a result of learning.

Massive social conflicts and collective actions

Societies within our Western civilisation are organised on the basis of the traditional representative democracy. In conformity with this type of social organisation social demands are not to be expressed directly but indirectly, voting and elections being some of the indirect ways. Thus, each citizen can express his or her wishes and aspirations through the doings of his or her representatives. On the other hand others have to be civil and patient, waiting for their representatives to demonstrate "civic patience" to come in power.

In a politically pluralistic society minorities will always find a way to express themselves (Dahl, 1971). From time to time wishes and aspirations of social minorities have to be taken into account by those in power, if they want to increase their credibility. Nevertheless, since minorities do not represent the majority, claiming actions have been considered as disturbing illegal means of expression.

It seems that understanding the 20th and the 21st century without understanding their social movements is rather impossible. Mobilizations of the 20th century are struggles for independence, for equal rights, for democracy. Solidarność in Poland being just one of the democratic social movements in Europe. Hungarian revolution in 1956 was a struggle for independence. In Slovenia social mobilisations helped

towards the separation of Slovenia from Yugoslavia. In France social reforms, the reform of pensions for instance, caused important mobilisations. It seems that questioning the social order, distinguishing what is good from what is evil in society is an acquired privilege, but mobilisations and collective actions are nevertheless still considered by many as a disorder, a catching disease, an explosion or in short a pathology of democracy.

Not all collective actions are social movements. Those who share an interest, a profession often have claims they want to be accepted. To this end they may use familiar weapons: a collective action. Thus a collective action, wherever it may appear, may be understood as “an action led by different groups wanting collective aims to take place and be achieved.” (Neveu, 2013, p. 9)

There are very practical political, experiential questions and also scientific questions to be answered in relation to social movements:

Why is it that certain groups mobilise themselves and others do not?

To what extent do mobilisations mirror issues neglected by political authorities?

Do social movements bring changes to governmental institutions and policies?

What is the role of the media in the framework of different mobilisations?

How do governments try to calm down the movements?

Do NGOs and international networks represent new ways to protest?

What about identity and emotions within social mobilisations? (Neveu, 2013)

By having attempted to answer these and many other questions before, during or after massive social conflicts (older) people learn. The transmission of thus gained knowledge and skills over to younger generations is an issue still to be dealt with.

Struggling and constructing identity

In social sciences identity is thought of as individual subjective feeling of personal unity” as well as a permanent process through which one maintains one’s self and adapts it to the environment.

In participation in massive social conflicts all individual, social and collective identity has an important role. It is generally admitted that participants in massive social conflicts are attracted to collective actions under the influence of the identity of the members of their close friends, teachers, family members, people they trust.

Studying, one comes across a great number of “frames of reference”, standpoints and questions encouraging one to think and search for answers. One discovers that there is not just one knowledge but there are different kinds of knowledge and that everything is relative. “In the middle of all this, what about me? What about my values? Where can I build my force from?” These are typical questions asked by those in search of their individual identity. Moreover, these are questions that are typically appearing during life transitions, during and after critical situations etc. (Findeisen, 2003). Participating in massive social conflicts stimulates asking and answering such questions.

Those who participate in massive social conflicts are mostly engaged. Engagement increases the ability to learn. It should be emphasised that any engagement is concerned with values and those who are engaged in something are aware of themselves.¹ Engaged in what they really believe, they become responsible and consequently they respect themselves. They learn that they can perform a task and

¹ Alexis.N. Leontiev (1984) *Activité, conscience, personnalité*. Moscou: Ed. Du Progrès.

do not necessarily yield in when pressure is put on them. When they take a decision, they know that they are responsible for its consequences.²

Emotions are an important part of the process called *building identity*. Identity is an emotional and cognitive process where one by one's doings within a rather stable social environment creates a relatively stable representation of oneself. This representation in itself has an impact on one's ability to learn. When this representation encourages a greater number of agreeable emotions the ability to learn gets increased. The link between the never ending creation of personal, social and collective identity and the ability to learn will in the future require more interdisciplinary research attention.

It has been just emphasised that identity can be best constructed through struggling and engagement. Through engagement one can find who one was, who one is and will become.

Protesting actions support the construction of identity. They enable individuals to take public positions that classify them in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Those who share collective ideas and collective doings meet their need to belong (Abraham Maslow). If, on the contrary, they do not have a clear individual identity, their lack of individual identity can block social movements and events.

Learning from ideology and from practice

Marx, Engels and Lenin argued that revolution in economic and political structures required also an ideological revolution. In order to understand the role of ideology in massive conflicts, one can go back to the unrest called "revolution" of students and workers which took place in France in May 1968. There were conscious students' motivations to take part in this massive conflict and unconscious economic, political, cultural and other determinants behind. Students wrongly thought that they were

² Perry, W.G. (1970) *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years scheme*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.

protesting against the rapport of forces between themselves and the government, oppressing the educational system and they did not understand that there was a struggle between social classes behind this massive social conflict. A struggle of classes that could be seen everywhere: in schools, families and elsewhere. This massive social conflict had a resounding impact on French society that would be felt for decades to come.

The revolution of May 68 was caught in ideology (supported by the French Communist Party). Because it was ideological, this movement could produce an impact on public institutions (schools in the first place) and it would have been important to educate the mass of secondary school students, students and young intellectuals about the ideology of the revolution in which they participated. Young participants in the revolution did not understand the ideology of the movement, precisely because they had an “ideological position” (ideals) towards their movement.

Ideology of social movements particularly encourage learning of their active and passive participants. Ideology of social movements is necessary to make the participants in the movement “walk straight”. Nevertheless now older people participants in massive social conflicts and social movements learned mostly by doing, rarely on the spot but a posterior when their motives and standpoints changed. They learned that upraising was possible, that massive participation in civil unrests, social movements, revolutions can be an extraordinary experience on several levels: on the level of knowledge and skills, on the level of understanding their own and other people’s psychological reactions, doings and feelings (solidarity, engagement, betrayal, fear, courage, shame, joy, enthusiasm), on the level of building their identity.

Cyber mobilisations, internet activism and their learning opportunities

Cyber mobilisation, internet activism what both terms are all about? Can we use cyber activism for strengthening learning opportunities for older people? YES, we

can. Let's start from a definition from Wikipedia³: "Internet activism (also known as online activism, digital campaigning, digital activism, online organizing, electronic advocacy, cyber activism, e-campaigning, and e-activism) is the use of electronic communication technologies such as social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, YouTube, e-mail, and podcasts for various forms of activism to enable faster communications by citizen movements and the delivery of local information to a large audience. Internet technologies are used for cause-related fundraising, community building, lobbying, and organizing."

It should have been stressed that the Internet is a key tool for e-activists especially when a serious violation of human rights occurs. Listservs (electronic mailing list software applications) like BurmaNet, Freedom News Group help distribute news that would otherwise be inaccessible in many countries. Internet activists can also pass on e-petitions to be sent to the government and public and/or private organizations to protest against and urge for positive policy change in areas from the arms trade to animal testing. Many non-profits and charities use these methods, emailing petitions to those on their email list, asking people to pass them on. Gatherings and protests can be organized with the input of the organizers and the participants. There is a huge space for including elderly people in such activities. Why not to fight together for better health treatment or even for benches in a place they are leaving.

One of the most recent examples of e-campaigning was dedicated to **the European Parliament: Discontinue the European citizens' discrimination, based on their location** was implemented on the Avaaz platform⁴ (Fig. 1). Community Petitions is a new web platform, giving people around the world the power to start and win campaigns at the local, national, and international levels. Avaaz means "voice" in several European, Middle Eastern and Asian languages and was launched in 2007 with a simple democratic mission: to organize citizens of all nations to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want. Today

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_activism

⁴ <https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition>.

Avaaz is available in fifteen languages and has a support offered by thousands of volunteers from six continents.

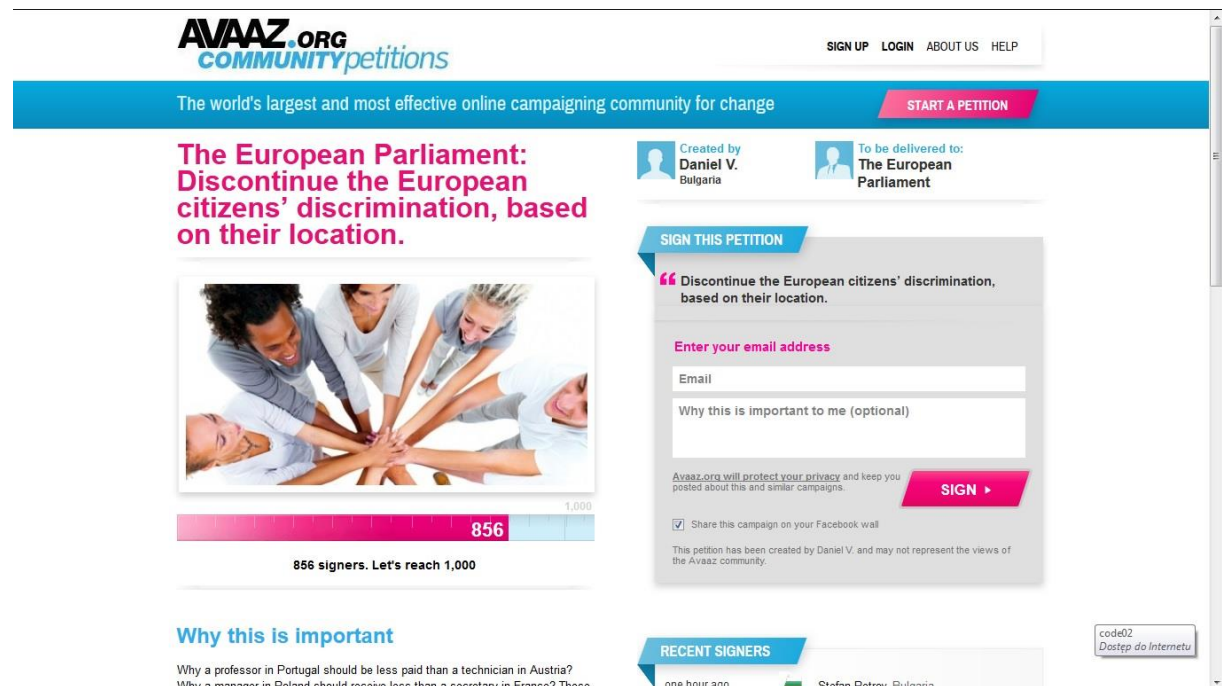


Fig. 1. Example of community petition by Avaaz

Very often e-campaigns begin on Facebook.com which is one of the most famous examples of social-networking sites. It is very easy to be involved in many e-activism or e-campaign groups if only you are a registered user of Facebook.

One of the most remarkable e-activism groups are Active Citizens (e.g. https://www.facebook.com/active_citizens). There are many groups established locally all over the world. Facebook groups established in Poland, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kosovo are listed below:

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/169805673064773/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/active.citizens.pak/?fref=ts>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ac.bgl/?fref=ts>
- <https://www.facebook.com/ActiveCitizenshipKosova?fref=ts>

In order to keep those groups active and vivid Appreciative Inquiry approach / methodology is used. This methodology has two main goals:

1. We have the responsibility to celebrate our success
2. We learn best from what works

There are eight assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry methodology:

1. In every society, organisation or group something works.
2. What is focused on becomes reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. More confidence to travel into the future (the unknown) is experienced when experiential knowledge gained in the past (the known) is brought to cyber mobilisations. Older people are thus particularly well equipped with the past knowledge they gained in massive conflicts and collective actions. Their already validated knowledge is valuable when it comes to cyber activism.
6. Knowledge gained in the past is already transformed when it is transposed to the present and projected into the future.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language used creates reality and reality shapes the language.

It is proved that Appreciative Inquiry works very well as a back bone of the Active Citizens groups and is also recommended for social actions projects [Active Citizens 60+, <http://utw.moodle.pl/>]. The Appreciative Inquiry was used in many Active Citizens projects and one of them is Learn with Grandma (Fig. 2.)



Fig. 2. Active Citizens “Learn with Grandma”

Social software (e.g. Facebook) can be easily adopted as a tool for managing, monitoring, evaluating projects (Fig. 3). It can also support organizing international study visits (Fig. 4). For all purposes listed above it is recommended to start close groups. It is planned to start a dedicated Facebook group for supporting the project “Understanding August 1980”. There will be a platform for communication and gathering materials (e.g. recorded interviews) with people who would like to preserve the heritage and retain a fond memory of Solidarność (Eng. Solidarity) in order to hand it down to future generations while stressing its relevance and universal value. It will be proved that solidarity - understood as the concern about the wellbeing and common interest, and unity with respect for diversity - is still very relevant in modern society and worthy of all efforts of enhancement. Therefore intergenerational education is one of the most important approaches [Grabowska, 2010, 2011, 2012].



Fig. 3. Learn with Grandma in Facebook

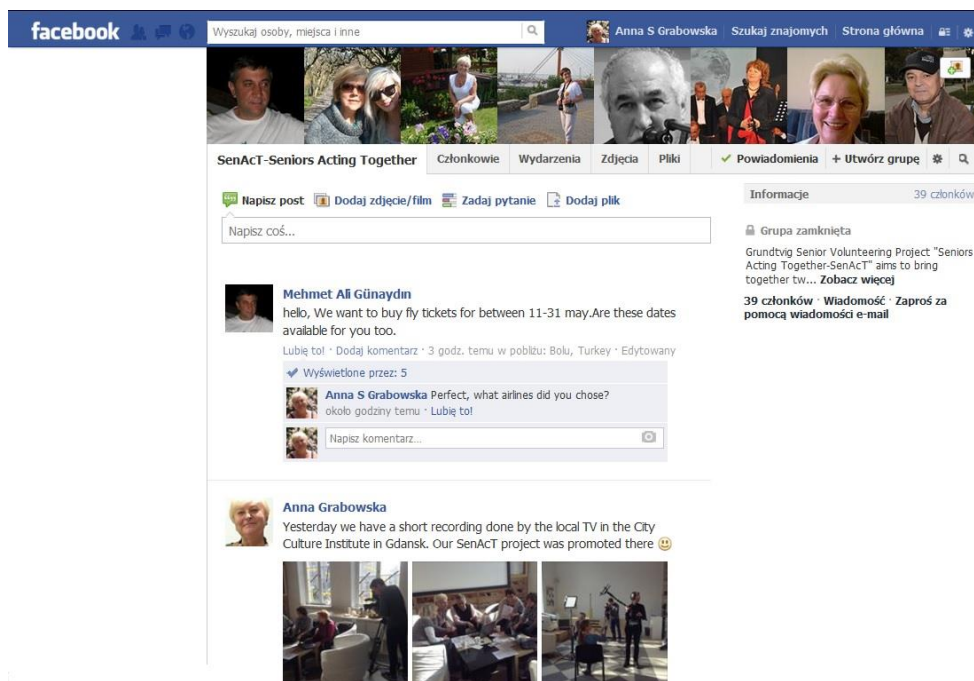


Fig. 4. Grundtvig project – Seniors Acting Together

How can the elderly join learning activities or projects? How can they contact local U3A or other institutions involved in education for seniors? We propose contacting ForAge partners in your country <http://www.foragenetwork.eu/en/page/120-forage-network/>.

You also can find us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Forage-for-later-life-learning-building-on-European-experience/447577198673523>

Conclusion

To a certain extent, in the course of their life, European baby boomers and other generations of current older people have had opportunities to learn from their direct engagement in (or observation of) different types of collective actions taken within *massive social conflicts*: unrests, struggle of classes, workers' movements, social It seems that understanding the 20th and the 21st century without understanding their social movements is rather impossible. Mobilizations of the 20th century are struggles for independence, for equal rights, for democracy. Older people have learned from their participation in collective actions. They have learned about their identity and values and they have learned from ideology when and where it existed as well as engagement leading to clear identity and responsibility. Like other generations older people too learn from today's cyber mobilizations though they are different from massive face-to-face conflicts and collective actions and obey different rules.

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