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**SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEARNING ABOUT JUST TRANSITION IN
CENTRAL APPALACHIA**

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Abstract

This study utilizes adult learning, working-class, hegemonic masculinity, and political economy theories to explore the education and learning that supports engagement in the Just Transition movement in Central Appalachia. The central research question is as follows: in communities with economies formerly dominated by the coal industry, how does an organization promoting multiple Just Transition initiatives use education and learning to support engagement in this work? The sub-questions that guide this study are as follows: (1) how does the gendered history of the coal industry and the changing political economy of the post-coal reality influence the educational efforts of an organization working toward a Just Transition? (2) how do informal and non-formal learning opportunities attempt to promote a just transition in the region? (3) how have people perceived these informal and non-formal learning opportunities as transforming themselves, their communities, and/or region and nation over the past decades?

In this case study, data was collected between November 2019 and July 2020. Data included 14 semi-structured interviews of Eastern Kentucky members and staff of the grassroots community organization, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. Written documents, curricula of non-formal education, observational data, and the organizational website also served as important sources of data. Field notes and analytic memos were instrumental and aided in the analysis of data.

An important finding of this study is that the organization created a community of practice, which was instrumental in enhancing the engagement of community members in the organization's initiatives. Within that community of practice, there was a dialectical

relationship between non-formal education and informal learning. Additionally, some informal learning occurred which was unrelated to the non-formal education. Another finding was that the changing gendered history and political economy of the coal industry shaped how the organization approached its work. More specifically, the organization moved from attempting to hold the hegemonic coal industry accountable to environmental protections to, instead, pushing for proactive alternatives through Just Transition. Within their Just Transition efforts, the coal industry continued to shape which projects and campaigns were pursued by the organization, including how people grappled with the loss of identity, dealt with legacy effects of the coal industry, maintained a focus on energy production through a focus on renewable energy and energy efficiency, and engaged with voter empowerment. Both non-formal education and informal learning played an important role in the organization fulfilling its mission, which is illustrated throughout this study.

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PREVIEW

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Chapter 1

Overview

This chapter, the first of six, provides a brief introduction to the context and history of coal in the Central Appalachian region. It also introduces the case study organization, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), their Just Transition initiatives, and some of their related non-formal educational activities. Importantly, this overview chapter describes the significance and statement of the problem with my main research question and related sub-questions of the study.

This dissertation explores how a community organization promoting multiple Just Transition strategies uses education and learning to promote engagement in this work in Central Appalachia. This study contributes to the body of knowledge related to social movement learning in Adult Education and social movements in Appalachian Studies. This study is the first study to explore the educational practices and learning in Central Appalachia that have developed to support the Just Transition of the economy. It begins with situating Central Appalachia in the global climate justice movement.

From September 20th to 27th, 2019, over 7.6 million people participated in Global Climate Strikes in 185 countries calling for an immediate phase-out of fossil fuels; this was the largest set of actions in the climate justice movement (Rosane, 2019). There is increasing recognition that communities formerly dependent on fossil fuels need support to transition away from fossil fuel dependency (Pollin & Callaci, 2019). Grassroots organizations describe this work as Just Transition, “a strategy for reconciling the needs of workers with the imperative of environmental reform” (Abraham, 2017).

Since the Central Appalachian region is becoming a post-industrial region, developing an economy which does not depend on coal is more important than ever. Furthermore, the legacy of coal mining and related working-class masculinity shape the process of transformation of the economy.

Adult education for social justice and environmentally sustainable development is a process of learning skills or competencies for social change (Brookfield & Holst, 2010). It is essential to support this transition, though scholars have yet to explore this kind of learning happening within organizations working for Just Transition in Central Appalachia. Since current efforts to transition the Appalachian economy is multi-faceted, examining different educational strategies taken by a community organization and the related learning addresses a gap in the literature and is an important contribution to the academic literature in the field of Appalachian Studies and Adult Education. This dissertation is a case study of the grassroots community organization KFTC and their work on Just Transition. It explores and illuminates the ways in which learning and education occur and are critical components of the organization's ability to successfully advance its Just Transition initiatives.

Statement of the Problem

Changes in economic, environmental, and health conditions in the coal-producing region of Central Appalachia, which includes Eastern Kentucky, East Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and Southern West Virginia, have created a need for education about a Just Transition. This region has long been associated with extreme poverty and unequal distribution of land where outside corporate interests colonized the region through

resource exploitation (Caudill, 2001; Montrie, 2003). The coal industry negatively affects residents' health, miners' working conditions, and environment quality; these negative effects continuously increase (Ahern et al., 2011; Aken et al., 2009; Bell, 2013; Griffith et al., 2012; Lindberg et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the local communities' strong identification with coal mining also continues (Bell & York, 2010).

During the last two decades, increased mechanization of the coal industry reduced employment, increased productivity, and caused greater environmental damage (Carley, Evans, & Konisky, 2018). From 1985 to 1997, direct coal employment dropped by 50%, while production hit its peak in 2011 (McIlmoil, Hansen, Askins, & Betcher, 2013). Since 2011, coal production has dropped, due in part to a shift towards an increase in low-carbon natural gas development and environmental regulations (Carley et al., 2018). Coal employment declined as the industry shifted to different forms of mining that enable the coal companies to maximize profits. One example is mountaintop removal mining (MTR), where explosives are used to remove mountaintops. Then, the "overburden," or mountain above the coal seam, is pushed into the valleys below to expose the coal seams (McIlmoil et al., 2013). This type of mining produces two-and-a-half times more coal per worker than underground mining (Hansell, 2018). The increasing negative effects of the coal industry on the environment and on health, as well as a significant drop in employment in recent years has spurred an increased focus on transitioning the economy to one not dependent on coal mining. The region is close to a post-coal moment and needs to build a new economy.

Just Transition is a social movement that brings together grassroots organizations in different locations and is a relatively recent convergence of different approaches that integrate environmental and economic justice issues (Abraham, 2017; Tarus et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). As a result, there has been minimal research on educational practices in this movement in Appalachia. This research seeks to fill this gap.

Additionally, this research is significant to the field of adult education because the identification of adult educational practices that result in engagement can serve as a model to improve adult education for other community organizations in Appalachia and for other fossil-fuel dependent economies. For example, individuals involved with social change efforts could acquire greater knowledge of issues, develop skills, and enhance effective practices of community organizations and collective action while increasing critical consciousness (Niesz et al., 2018). This analysis identifies ways in which a community organization bolsters informal and non-formal learning through the creation of reflexive practice and communities of practice. With the recent growth of the global climate justice movement and deindustrialization occurring across the globe, identifying effective educational practices can improve adult learning, which enables people to better support policy reform and job creation that is rapidly needed as communities shift away from fossil fuels.

This dissertation is based on a qualitative case study of a community organization working on Just Transition in Central Appalachia data with data collected between November 2019 and September 2020. Case study research explores in-depth a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2003).

Research Questions

The central research question is as follows: in communities with economies formerly dominated by the coal industry, how does an organization promoting multiple Just Transition initiatives use education and learning to support engagement in this work? The sub-questions that guide this study are as follows: (1) how does the gendered history of the coal industry and the changing political economy of the post-coal reality influence the educational efforts of an organization working toward a Just Transition? (2) how do informal and non-formal learning opportunities attempt to promote a just transition in the region? (3) how have people perceived these informal and non-formal learning opportunities as transforming themselves, their communities, and/or region and nation over the past decades?

Background

Background for this study summarizes the history of the region and the organization, as well as the structure of the organization and its mission—all of which are crucial for understanding context.

After the Civil War, the local economy of Central Appalachia began shifting away from subsistence farming towards logging and underground coal mining; timber and coal left the region to develop the Industrialized North (Billings & Blee, 2000; Montrie, 2003). By the end of the nineteenth century, absentee landowners owned two thirds to three-quarters of the region, leaving most of the resident population without land ownership or title (Montrie, 2003). Much of the conversion of land ownership occurred following the rapid growth and demand for coal to supply steam engines and the railroad

system (Hansell, 2018; Stoll, 2017). Coal camps began opening in the 1880s and maintained a unitary system of power affecting all aspects of the miners' and their families' lives, including company-owned housing (Eller, 1982, 2008; Gaventa, 1980). The start of coal mining varied across the region; for example, in Harlan County, Kentucky, coal was first shipped out of the county in 1911 following the completion of the L&N Railroad (Eller, 1982). By the end of the 1920s, the region was transformed due to industrialization (Eller, 1982).

Following World War II, mechanized contour strip mining spread and expanded, particularly in the 1950s. Currently, various mining methods are used in Central Appalachia. Depending on geology, contour mining, auger mining, and underground mining are among the various approaches to extracting coal, each resulting in different amounts of environmental degradation (Strobo, 2012). Following a movement to ban strip mining, the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act was enacted in 1977, which served to regulate the practice (Montrie, 2003). Community organizations have formed across the Central Appalachian region in attempt to hold the coal industry accountable to that law and to pursue environmental protection. Since this period, the role of the coal industry in the economy has had booms and busts, but coal industry employment has declined over time; yet, the communities still identify strongly with the coal industry, despite its damage to their communities and their livelihoods (Bell & York, 2010).

Case Study Description

KFTC was created in 1981 in Eastern Kentucky and has evolved to be a statewide, multi-issue organization that works on a range of different economic, social, and environmental justice issues. This organization emphasizes leadership development of its members and has been at the forefront of environmental justice organizing, as well as Just Transition work in the heart of the coal-producing counties of Eastern Kentucky. The non-formal education and informal learning in this organization is integral to engagement in its work and is the focus of this case study.

In 1981, the organization grew out of a participatory research project sponsored by Highlander Research and Education Center called the Land Ownership Task Force, which consisted of six Appalachian states documenting that out-of-state companies owned most of the land and paid very little taxes in the coal-producing regions (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1981). According to Kentuckians for the Commonwealth's (1991) book documenting their first ten years, KFTC was formed in Eastern Kentucky and originally called the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition to push for the unmined minerals tax. During the 1980s, another core issue that KFTC worked on was the broad form deed in which coal companies could strip mine a property owner's land without permission. This eventually led to the Save the Homeplace campaign that resulted in changes to Kentucky's Constitution to protect landowner's rights.

Over time, the scope of the organization's work expanded to be statewide; some of the additional issues on which they worked included hazardous waste incinerators, out-of-state garbage, and oil and gas issues. In the mid-1990s, KFTC started addressing

economic justice issues, which included welfare reform and the role of money in politics. The organization also protected Black Mountain, the highest mountain peak in the state, from surface mining. Local issues have ranged from use-of-force policies in Louisville, limits on logging in the Daniel Boone National Forest, water privatization in Lexington, and a living wage. The organization also worked on comprehensive tax reform, raising the minimum wage, voting rights for former felons, sustainable energy, and voter registration.

At the time of the study, KFTC membership was approximately 12,000 dues-paying members with fourteen chapters across the state, four of which are in Eastern Kentucky. The active involvement varies from chapter to chapter and depends on the time of year. There is currently a larger number of members in the urban centers than rural communities. Many people make phone calls during the legislative session or prior to elections. This organization helped citizens develop strategies to address social, economic, and environmental justice issues in communities in Eastern Kentucky degraded by coal, including Just Transition work (Kentuckians for the Commonwealth [KFTC], 2021). Each chapter has a representative and alternate on the Steering Committee, which is the main decision-making body for the organization; they also have five members on the Executive Committee that makes decisions between Steering Committee meetings. There are also organizational and issue-based committees that develop strategy, including the Land Reform, Economic Justice, and New Energy and Transition committees. Governance committees include the Personnel, Leadership Development, and Finance Committees. KFTC's 23 staff members play an explicitly

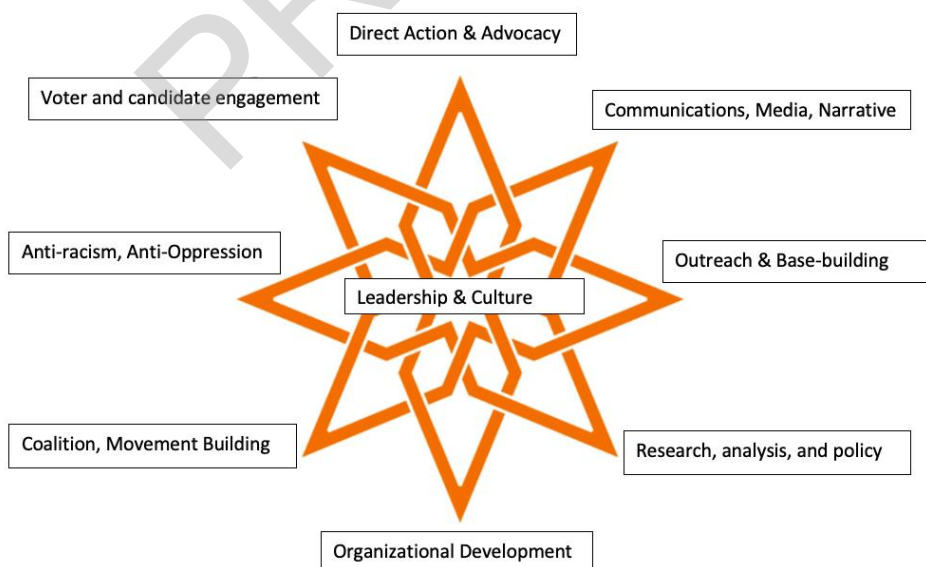
background role and help KFTC members develop their own stories and speak for themselves.

Figure 1 highlights core organizational priorities for KFTC. This diagram was shared during one of the Empower Kentucky Leadership Network virtual trainings. All of the different elements in the diagram are a part of KFTC’s community of practice.

Numerous elements of this diagram are involved with KFTC’s Just Transition work. For example, the Communications, Media, and Narrative element of the work includes highlighting stories of successful examples of Just Transition. Communication is both internal and external to the organization, which includes the development of print materials and website resources that educate people about this work. The Research, Analysis, and Policy work element of Just Transition includes the Empower Kentucky

Figure 1

KFTC’s Diagram of Key Organizing Strategies



energy plan, which engaged 1,200 Kentuckians in the development of the plan through workshops, listening sessions, house parties, interviews, and an online survey (Empower Kentucky, 2021). Synapse Energy Economics supplemented this public process with data. The environmental justice analysis of the state is another example of research conducted that contributes to Just Transition. The Direct Action and Advocacy elements are consistent with the organizing that KFTC members are most engaged with and are often informed by non-formal education. Reflecting on practice also is a part of the learning process. The Coalition and Movement Building element related to Just Transition includes the regional Alliance for Appalachia, the Climate Justice Alliance, and the Green New Deal Network.

One of the efforts that increased over time, which is relevant to this study, is the emphasis on elections within KFTC's organizing work. This work touches on many of the organization's key organizing strategies. The coal industry's stranglehold over the local and state politics in the state is one of the reasons voter engagement has become a bigger part of KFTC's work. Initially, their electoral work was non-partisan, which included voter registration, candidate surveys, and candidate forums. According to participants, they sought to infuse the issues into the public dialogue. In 2010, they created a political action committee to support candidates that were reflective of their vision as shared by one of the interviewees. This included a focus on local and state-level elections. This shift in strategy was due in part to the shift in the legislature towards more conservative values and the lack of progress on many of the organizational goals.

Just Transition Initiatives

For this study, I explored the education and learning related to Just Transition initiatives being pursued by KFTC in the coal-producing region of the state. Many different initiatives were occurring across the region. Although I focused on several specific Just Transition initiatives, KFTC members described their engagement with other parts of the organization overall. The direct action and advocacy work explored in this study included challenges to environmental injustices and pursuit of Just Transition Alternatives. Environmental justice campaigns, the Benham Saves Project, rural electric cooperative organizing, and the creation of the Empower Kentucky energy plan are among the campaigns that the organization has worked on over time. I describe these Just Transition initiatives in detail to illustrate some of the main ways that KFTC pursues this body of work. I also describe three of KFTC's non-formal education activities related to Just Transition.

Environmental Justice Campaigns

First, according to their website and interviews, there are numerous examples in the history of the organization of coordinated action against the coal companies that broke laws and whose actions resulted in injustice (KFTC, 2021). This included pollution to groundwater and surface water, damage to people's homes from blasting, subsidence, flooding, stolen land, and crumbling roads from overweight coal trucks. Mountaintop removal mining and valley fills has been the most egregious form of coal mining, resulting in the destruction of thousands of miles of streams and negative impacts on people's health. Related campaigns have included challenging mining permits, pushing