



# Think Piece: Change Agents and Collective Experience-Making as Part of Sustainable Transitions in the Face of Climate Change

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## *Abstract*

*While theories of transformative social learning, applied in environmental and sustainability education, tend to operate with relatively short-term learning horizons, this paper aims at exploring the potential of longer-term social learning. It begins by interpreting the 17-year-long process of transforming the island of Samsø to be solely dependent on renewable energy. The focus is on the key change agent and his way of drawing on, storytelling and creating collective experiences. This leads to reflection on the concepts of collectivity, experience and collective experience-making. Inspired by the works of German and Danish critical theorists, who may be unfamiliar to an international audience, emphasis is placed on linking people's everyday sensuous-emotional experiences to collective spaces, enabling collective reflection, exemplary learning about the socio-cultural context they are part of, as well as social fantasy, concrete utopian projects and collective experience-making. Based on this perspective and the Danish context, it is briefly outlined how change agents can enable and facilitate collective learning about climate change, as well as the challenges they face.*

**Keywords:** Long-term learning and social change processes, collective experience-making, Samsø Island.

## *Climate Change, Sustainability and Collective Learning*

In a speech on 22 November 2016, the former chair of the United Nations Plenary, Mogens Lykketoft, emphasised that, among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 'climate action' is by far the most important as the effects of escalating climate changes risk dramatically undermining any efforts to address the other goals. At the same time, efforts to address the other goals run the risk of accelerating existing climate changes. Thus, we are faced with interconnected global problems, meaning that efforts to reduce and adapt to climate changes should be approached as elements of a system-oriented transition to sustainability. The high degree of complexity and uncertainty involved in such a transition, combined with the social tensions arising from climate change and proposals for sustainable solutions (Hulme, 2009), highlight the importance of learning how to identify peaceful and reasonable ways forward. As suggested by Scott and Gough (2003), the overall slogan could be 'sustainable development as learning'. However, at the same time, this process of learning our way forward should not be considered in terms of isolated educational initiatives, but as comprehensive processes arising from issues of public concern, including a multitude of concrete visions, projects, struggles and experiences, as expressed succinctly by Van Poeck (2013: 97) in her suggestion to replace 'Learning for Sustainable Development' with 'Learning from Sustainable Development'.

It is remarkable that such an ongoing, long-term perspective on learning in relation to climate change and sustainability is more or less invisible, not only in conventional public campaigns encouraging small individual behavioural changes, but also in theories of transformative social learning. The concept of social learning is used in several ways but, in relation to environmental and sustainability issues, one key strand can be traced back to the work of Kurt Lewin and his followers on change agent strategies and organisational learning. This work has influenced public planning theory (cf. Friedmann, 1987; Renn, Webler & Wiedemann, 1995), environmental management (Pahl-Wostl, Craps, Dewulf, Mostert, Tabara & Taillieu, 2007; Reed *et al.*, 2010) and, explicitly in relation to sustainable transitions in organisations, Theory U and presence (Scharmer, 2009; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2005). Another key strand of social learning theory can be traced back to Habermas' (1995–97) work on communicative action, which has inspired the so-called deliberative democracy turn in political science, and which can also be seen in some of the key contributions on pluralistic education for sustainable development (e.g. Öhman, 2008) and social learning towards a sustainable future (Wals, 2007). Without ignoring the value of these research strands on social learning, they tend to limit social learning processes to short-term, creative, multi-stakeholder arrangements, such as workshops or other types of facilitated participatory sessions. As a result, there is a need to supplement and transcend such approaches through the development of longer-term social learning theories. I explicitly write 'theories' in plural as I am more interested in developing theories sensitive to history and to different settings than in constructing a single universal-abstract theory. This paper represents a first attempt to develop one such theory.

Compared to the orientation towards short-term social learning processes, five of the six field visits we undertook as part of the collaboration between Rhodes University and Aarhus University, described in the editorial, were organised as long-term learning and social change processes. Among these, I draw on the Samsø case and emphasise three points about the collective experience-making process which has taken place at that island. This is followed by an attempt to clarify the concept of collective experiences, including distinguishing between different types of collectivity. The concept of experience is important as well, not least in combination with collectivity. To further explore the concept of collective experiences, I relate the Samsø case to a lesser-known strand of critical theory. Finally, the scope is widened in an attempt to interpret the current situation in Denmark and the potential for collective experience-making regarding climate change and sustainable transitions.

### *Samsø as an Example of the Role of a Key Change Agent in Collective Experience-Making*

Samsø is a special case for several reasons. It is an island, which makes it a unit clearly distinguished from the surrounding world. It is a municipality and as such has a formal political-democratic and public administrative organisation. In recent years, it has been challenged by depopulation and the risk of losing workplaces, shops, schools, etc. These are important for the community identity among the approximately 4 000 inhabitants. However, the community is also empowered by historical events, not least successfully overcoming the consequences of

the closure of the local slaughterhouse. This is not only a concrete collective experience; it is an experience that, as Papazu (2016) puts it, has been 'storied' by the key change agent of the island's renewable energy project. His way of working with the community is remarkable as it represents a radical departure from what has been done by other renewable energy change agents in Denmark. Firstly, he has drawn on, and expressed, the community's collective experiences. Secondly, he did not apply an instrumental renewable energy 'salesman' approach, but a socio-cultural and economic approach. During our visit to Samsø, he stated that the aim was the survival of the island as a community and not to convince people with arguments about the risks of climate change. He is a resident of the island and thus part of the local community. This, combined with his emphasis on collective experiences and existing socio-economic challenges, could lead one to expect him to act as a conservative and defensive agent. Although he has, in part, built upon his embeddedness in the culture of Samsø, and his storying of the community identity by contrasting the island's values and culture with the attitudes among decision-makers and bureaucrats in Copenhagen, he has combined this with a role as a spokesman for sustainable innovation. He describes himself as a pragmatist in contrast to the 'green radicals', but it is precisely this pragmatism that has made it possible for him, as a change agent, to network with agents at all levels and get support for expensive, innovative renewable solutions that have moved the island far beyond what any so-called green radicals have managed to achieve.

The time span of 17 years for the transformation of Samsø to 100% renewable energy provides fascinating insight into how collective experiences and community identity have developed since the first successful steps. The key change agent's storytelling also seems to have been an important part of the later phase. In this phase, primarily as part of his role as a kind of ambassador, he recounted the success story of Samsø to visitors from all over the world, and travelled around the world himself to exchange experiences with kings, ministers, high-level officials as well as other communities and change agents working to promote renewable energy and sustainable communities. This interaction with the external world made the island famous and thus empowered their identity and, by doing so, also enabled ambitious new projects, such as progressing from a renewable island to a fossil fuel free island.

This interpretation of the case is obviously simplified as there are other important change agents on Samsø, as well as complex tensions among agents. Furthermore, the status of being successful pioneers has also opened doors for funding, thereby enabling changes that would be difficult to copy elsewhere without the same conditions. However, this does not prevent the case from being an interesting example of enabling change agency by:

- drawing on bad as well as good concrete, sensuous experiences in the shared lifeworld of the community members;
- organising and, not least, storying the long-term collective experience-making; and
- coping with internal dynamics in a pragmatic, inclusive way in order to achieve concrete success experiences, strengthening the collective identity both through the experience of joint efforts and through communication to, and positive feedback from, the world outside the community.

## *Collective Learning as Collective Experience-Making*

Inspired by the Samsø case, I now dig deeper into the concept of collective experiences. I do not regard this concept as clearly distinct from the concept of social learning. Although I was initially hesitant in using the concept of social learning, as it is often used to describe short-term processes, it is also used in other ways and can easily be regarded as an open and comprehensive concept which also covers collective learning, including collective experience-making. By collective experience-making, I mean that people joining forces in some kind of collective process of action gain experiences from this process that are sensuous-emotional and, at the same time, always social and as such enable processes of collective intellectual reflections. Experience-making then refers to efforts to organise and facilitate collective actions as well as deliberations related to these actions and the sensuous-emotional experiences to which they give rise. However, this definition should not be regarded as fixed but rather as a preliminary draft, because the purpose of this paper is to explore whether it makes sense to approach collective learning and change agency formation as a matter of collective experience-making. A first step in this exploration would be to take a closer look at the concepts of collective and experience, as well as the idea of combining them.

### **The concept of collective**

What is a collective? In my mind, it is an umbrella term covering a range of quite different types of collectivity. We can make a distinction from what Sartre (1991) described as a *série*, which is a social form where people are gathered at a certain place with no shared, organised project or specific relations between them. Sartre contrasted 'the *série*' with 'the group', where everyone has a certain role in relation to a shared aim. This is reminiscent of a classical concept of collective, but in a networked, mediatised society, where consumers are agents in relation to environmental and other issues, new forms of sociality have emerged between the *série* and group categories. As mentioned by Carlsson in her paper in this volume, Micheletti has described political consumption as 'individualized collective actions' (2002: 1). Related to Anderson's (1983) term 'imagined communities', implying separated individuals with some kind of joint identity, such collectives are more than a *série*, but less than a group. As such, political consumerism can be seen as one kind of 'light' collective that is relevant to climate change. However, learning in relation to climate change issues can also take place in several types of collectives:

- Political protest groups challenging the existing social order through resistance. Learning is here strongly related to this opposition or resistance, and thus to a critical relation to the external world.
- Communities of practices in different settings: workplaces, residential areas, associations. Focus is here primarily on the collective learning and/or socialisation within the community.
- Alternative communities: Although they also are communities of practice, their collective identity resembles the political protest group in its opposition to established norms.

However, their political–analytical orientation is more or less replaced by an aesthetic–utopian searching and practical–technical orientation.

- **Governance:** Focus here is on the collective as a space for stakeholder interaction, problem-solving and conviviality (co-creation). Governance is often consensus-oriented, but can also be framed in agonistic ways, allowing conflicts to be explored or played out in dialogues between agents.

In my mind, these are all types of collectives, and all highly relevant for change agency formation and climate change, but at the same time, their social dynamics and the forms of learning they entail are quite different. I therefore suggest that we are explicit as to what kind of collective we are talking about when we discuss collective learning. Social dynamics is a huge topic in organisational and management theory, but remarkable in its absence from educational theory on sustainability education, despite the strong focus on participatory approaches to learning. Without an awareness of social dynamics, such approaches easily become idealised theoretical constructs.

In the case of Samsø, the type of collective does not fit well into one single category. It is certainly neither a political protest group nor an alternative community. Furthermore, it would be an oversimplification to describe it as a conventional governance type of collective as it is not just a mix of stakeholders meeting in some kind of workshop. Rather, it can be seen as a long-term governance process strongly embedded in the island's community of practice, but also with an opening towards becoming an alternative community in its search for new ways forward.

### The concept of collective experience

In educational theory, the concept of experience is, for good reason, strongly related to the works of John Dewey (1963 & 2007). However, in relation to collective experiences, I draw attention to a strand of critical theory developed by some of the prominent students of Theodor Adorno (Rudolf zur Lippe, Alexander Kluge and Regina Becker-Schmidt), as well as the philosopher and sociologist Oskar Negt. According to Zur Lippe (1979), experiences are generated through processes starting with observations, activating similar previous experiences to motivate and guide actions from which the perceived effects will confirm, add to or revise the existing experiences. He stresses that not only as children, but also as adults, we learn through such sensuous–bodily experiences which, as emotional meaning-making and knowledge creation, often contradict what we are taught intellectually. Although this point is well known in psychodynamic theories, Zur Lippe deviates from these by relating our social welfare and environmental sustainability problems to the ‘separation logic’ of Western civilisation, causing a divide between sensuous–emotional and scientific–intellectual knowledge. This critical point leads him to propose educational measures to reintegrate these two sources of knowledge and meaning-making in order to fuel sociological imagination and what he terms an ‘economy of life’ (Zur Lippe, 1979).

Although Zur Lippe emphasises that experiences are always social, in the sense that they are created with or against other humans, the sensuous–bodily basis of experience makes it

difficult to apply the concept directly to a collective. One way to relate such experiences to a collective can be found in *Public Sphere and Experience*, a book in which Negt and Kluge (1993: chapter 1) explore the potential of creating a 'proletarian public sphere' to enable collective experience-making. The collective should, in their approach, enable learning spaces for the 'acquisition of mediated experiences in the learning rhythm of the immediate experiences' (ibid), or, to put it another way, to share and collectively reflect on the relation between personal everyday life experiences and societal conditions. This collective reflection does not only transform individual experiences to collective experiences. In *Sociological Imagination and Exemplary Learning*, Negt (1968) draws on Wright Mills' concept of sociological imagination and combines it with the didactical concept of 'exemplary learning', originally proposed by Martin Wagenschein in relation to mathematics education. Exemplary learning becomes a matter of collective reflection exploring the connections and dynamic patterns between the many concrete and often contradictory individual experiences in order to identify general socio-cultural patterns in their concrete forms. Becker-Schmidt and Knapp (1987) later elaborated on this idea with a theory of social learning targeting both collective life issues and personal formation, opening both for a broader horizon of possibilities and individual ways of coping with conflicts and ambivalences. While this seems primarily related to the political protest group and its critical, emancipatory learning, two Danish scholars (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2007), drawing on this strand of critical theory, have developed an approach to collective experience-making as local 'democracy from below' processes, taking their point of departure in the participants' concrete joint life issues and targeting what Bloch (1995) has described as concrete-utopian drafts; that is, drafts for the possible but not yet done. According to them, hope depends on knowledge, not least about dynamic relations, but to prevent powerlessness it has to be combined with concrete experiences in processes where these often-disconnected experiences are connected and elaborated into 'social fantasies'; concrete imaginations of how life could be. Like Zur Lippe's concept of experiences, the aesthetic sensuous-emotional experiences are seen as a crucial medium for the creation of hope, not only as mental fantasies, but also in the concrete practical, and thus aesthetical, experience-making process of realising visions (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2007; Olsén, Nielsen & Nielsen, 2003).

Comparing the case of Samsø with the above approach to collective experience makes sense, although it also in an interesting way supplements it.

On the one hand, in his way of approaching the transformative work by emphasising both social and environmental perspectives, the key change agent did not apply a narrow focus on technical innovations but related to and thus activated previous collective experiences among the islanders, good as well as bad. A lot of meetings have been held, both in people's homes and in public spaces, connecting individual and joint orientations and interests as well as critical reflections and visions. These efforts have had results, concrete success experiences, which have not only provided feedback regarding the value of the projects, but also an experience of collectivity, creating collective trust, identity and hope for further progress.

On the other hand, what it adds to the emphasis on linking concrete sensuous-emotional experiences with collective spaces for reflection on joint life circumstances and utopian, hope-

creating work, is the importance of narrating collective experiences. As described by Papazu (2016), the importance of the narrative work of the key manager/change agent cannot be underestimated. It is a selective perspective, both describing and influencing a series of events. It is interactive in the sense that it is based on knowledge of how people on Samsø experience and think about their lives, returning this knowledge to them in a form where local knowledge and values are respected but also placed within a future-oriented story, pushing them forward. In contrast to the scientific language, the narrative is presented in a language that builds ‘bridges between people’ (Brønsted, 1955) by exposing and combining experiences in ways that create meaning, identity and hope. When Negt and Kluge write about mediated collective experiences, it can easily be interpreted as an intellectual analytical process related to people’s immediate experiences. Zur Lippe, as well as Nielsen and Nielsen, also emphasise the importance of scientific knowledge and intellectual reflection as part of the collective experience-making process. However, academic–scientific detached analytical language interferes with the ‘living words’ of the narrative and its potential to build meaningful bridges between people. At best, this interference can be coped with in mutually enriching ways; at worst, it risks impeding the collective experience-making process.

### *Climate Change, the Current Danish Context and Collective Learning*

I conclude this paper by broadening the scope from the case of Samsø in an attempt to grasp the state of affairs in Denmark regarding the potential and challenges for collective experience-making in relation to climate change and how change agents might cope with them.

The escalating and increasingly visible climate changes are not just a technical challenge to be dealt with by collective problem-solving. They are also a strongly emotional issue. Climate changes activate an ontological insecurity (cf. Giddens, 1991) because they threaten our basic living conditions and, as a consequence, risk causing social conflicts and wars. This basic fear is accentuated by signs that post-war social structures, political–ideological patterns and cultural norms are beginning to dissolve. People therefore do not have solid and trustworthy collectives to which they can turn in their search for solutions to climate changes.

Disagreements about climate change do not only reflect political–ideological differences, but also different strategies to cope with the cognitive and emotional dissonance stemming from ontological insecurity. One powerful trend, which is extensively utilised by populist politicians, is to defend the old order and simply deny the risk of climate change (Norgaard, 2011). As an opposite strategy, alarmism is often described as the reaction of emotional panic, as exemplified *in extremis* by ‘doomsday preppers’, who very concretely organise their lives in ways which would enable them to survive environmental and societal disasters. It is hard to find examples of such extreme alarmism in the Danish context. Rather, a third coping approach seems to be more widespread, characterised by an ambivalent mix of the two other positions – that is, both going about one’s business as usual *and* searching for alternative ways of living and for new political–societal visions. It is my contention that this ambivalent position needs further consideration within a change agency and collective learning perspective.

Among the forms of collectivity mentioned earlier, the ‘alternative community’ comes closest to this search for alternatives. Although alternative communities were described as not only manifest but also imagined communities, even this is perhaps too strong a concept for characterising the current state of affairs in Denmark. The ambivalent but searching orientation is neither practically nor symbolically represented by a distinct imagined community, but consists of a loose network of multiple small groups and individual initiatives somewhere between ‘individualised collective actions’ and attempts to establish manifest or imagined alternative communities. It is precisely this open, searching side of the ambivalent attitude and the fluid, pre-collective state of this search for alternatives that presents opportunities for change agents to create concrete and virtual public spaces for collective experience-making. There are already several, albeit still very small-scale, attempts to organise and facilitate such spaces and collective learning processes. What is remarkable is that criticism of the cosmological, political-ideological system plays a much more minor part than in the political protest groups of the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, the current collective spaces have the character of practical experimentation with alternative ways forward, and thus of sensuous experience-making, which is expressed and exchanged and potentially empowers hope and alternative identity, while at the same time also implying concrete, operational mutual learning. Although these collective spaces do not solely target climate change, but in a more comprehensive way integrate personal and social needs and ambitions, their concrete sensuous and operational character can be seen as an emotional response to the abstract, wicked and complex nature of climate changes. From a change agency and collective learning perspective, it makes good sense to support and unpack this concrete utopian drive. However, as I now demonstrate, doing so is easier said than done as there are a number of psychosocial dynamics at play.

People’s aforementioned ambivalence reflects what Sartre (1991) has described as the praxis-inertia field. One important aspect of this dynamic tension is that, by their nature, transgressive efforts (praxis in the Marxian sense) challenge existing social and psychological orientations and practices. As such, while we may want the changes they seek to effect, there is resistance because they go against our basic sensuous-emotional experiences and mental order. Another aspect stressed by Sartre is that the revolutionary group is unstable and will ‘stiffen’ as soon as it is managed and organised, and become alienated from its original aim, which will further impede transformation. As a change agent seeking to enable transformative collective experience-making, this emotional resistance and potential inertia are key challenges.

In relation to the utopian search, the annoyance with the current situation can easily result in ‘neg-topian’ visions (Thyssen, 1976); that is, dreams about the opposite. This happened in Denmark in the 1970s when young people established collectives to replace ordinary families but failed dramatically, leading to this radical social experiment imploding and resulting in negative experiences. This example also points to the critical tension between collective and individual in organising spaces for collective experience-making. The idea of such spaces as learning networks might be a viable way of establishing collective spaces, although loose structures may result in forms of collectivity which are vulnerable due to an insufficient level of commitment.

Last but not least, change agents also have to cope with the dynamic relation between the collective and its opponents. This is a key tension in political protest groups, which create their identity in opposition to those they disagree with. While this oppositional stance may empower their resistance, it also risks making them focus more on maintaining their identity than on finding ways to influence policies. They also run the risk of becoming pacified by their opponents' efforts to 'out-define' them as naïve, unrealistic, ridiculous (Mathiesen, 1982). The incompleteness of the current search for sustainable alternatives may prevent change agents from falling into this trap. As Mathiesen (1982) puts it, in order to prevent public exclusion of their alternative visions, collective change efforts should manage to both contradict the existing order and produce proposals which their intended participants perceive as attractive alternatives to this order.

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