

# Are academics irrelevant?<sup>1</sup>

## Case studies of university collaboration with community-based environmental advocates.

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### Abstract

*Academics are irrelevant*, concluded American union organiser Saul Alinsky (1969). The higher education sector has been urged to demonstrate community relevance by engaging with community problem-solving and action for social justice (Boyer, 1990) and by acting as 'significant allies' of the community advocacy sector (Stone, 1997). Despite these urgings, most academics remain strangely silent on social and environmental issues. Although universities may not overtly discourage speaking out, the pressures to publish, teach and keep pace with administrative trivia inevitably mitigate against many academics' active engagement in civil society. More significant obstacles include conservatism, careerism, ignorance and the threat of political consequence.

A variety of factors isolate civil society groups and social scientists from each other. Academics encounter research-funding arrangements that increasingly reflect industry priorities. University reward structures offer little if any recognition for civil engagement. Activists seeking short-term support from universities often experience frustration and disappointment. The cultures of the tertiary and community sectors entail different values, timeframes and hierarchies.

Griffith University's Australian School of Environmental Studies has recently established several partnership initiatives with the region's environment movement. In 2003, the School sponsored a series of workshops for engaged and experienced environmental and social justice advocates. These workshops offer personal and professional development in a sector predisposed primarily toward action rather than reflection. Newcomers to the environment movement rarely receive education or training to equip them for the demands of effective advocacy.

In conjunction with this workshop series, the School has introduced a new Environmental Advocacy elective for postgraduate students. The course emerged from a three-year collaborative action research project (Whelan 2002). Its six-month curriculum entails a significant service-learning element during which students undertake an internship with an environmental advocacy organisation in their region. This first-hand experience helps

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper and my commitment to participatory action research were inspired by Randy Stoecker's brilliant 1999 paper which is available on-line.

students develop a critical appraisal of particular environmental campaigns and foster action learning within the activist community.

This paper discusses the challenges of establishing these initiatives within the university environment and presents feedback from postgraduate and activist participants in both the course and workshops.

## **Early career experiences of an activist-academic**

My university, like others, encourages teaching staff to see their position as comprising three elements: research, teaching and community. These three legs of the academic tripod are enshrined in the university's annual reporting arrangements and frame the new 'academic profiles' which will inform university hierarchy decisions about staff and element specialisation and career advancement.

As an early career academic with a history of full-time community activism, I am instinctively drawn to the 'community' leg of this tripod. It offers hope that I can successfully integrate my professional life and my values. In particular, I am interested in community service and the notion of *activist research*. Francesca Cancian (1993, p.92) considers that activist research aims to expose and challenge inequality, empower the powerless and promote social justice. At the same time though, I am cognisant of the potential for my values orientation and commitment to service to impede my academic career. Cancian's analysis, based on observations in the United States, suggests that activist academics encounter difficulties in addressing the (sometimes) competing interests and standards of academia, the community and policy makers.

There is nothing new about activist research: it can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle. Along with *episteme* (scientific knowledge) and *techne* (technical knowledge), Aristotle advocated *phronesis*, which is roughly translated as "true state, reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p.2). Flyvbjerg (2001, p.2) considers *phronesis* involves "judgements and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor"

Clearly this research approach addresses the action- and values-orientation of activist academics. *Phronesis* implies an interest in resolving community dilemmas. Conferences like *Inside Out* testify to the higher education sector's interest in becoming more community-oriented. Of course, community engagement is perceived and practiced in a variety of ways. One of the most obvious expressions of community engagement is the ascendant industry-orientation of many universities. As government funding for universities has become a less significant revenue source, industry funding has bridged the gap, thereby irrevocably influencing research agendas. At the same time, the changing identity of tertiary institutions also provides opportunities for universities to demonstrate relevance as 'significant allies' (Stone 1997) of the community advocacy sector by engaging with regional communities to contribute to problem solving and social justice (Boyer 1990).

## Opportunities for activist – academic collaboration

*You can be active with the activists or sleep in with the sleepers while you're waiting for the great leap forward.*

Billy Bragg, Waiting for the great leap forward

During my first few years as a university employee I sought out role models: academics actively engaged in community advocacy. Professor Ian Lowe is an inspiring if formidable example. Ian chaired the first Australian State of the Environment Report in 1996 and has been an outspoken and effective critic of the Commonwealth's environmental protection measures. Sociologists working in my faculty are assisting Brisbane's traditional owners; other staff are helping local conservation groups assess and protect conservation areas. The university's interest in community action was reflected in the choice of Peter Garrett as keynote speaker at a recent graduation ceremony. Garrett, who is President of the Australian Conservation Foundation and lead singer of the politically-charged band *Midnight Oil*, threw the gauntlet down to graduands: "Now you have the skills, knowledge and status, the question is, 'Will you be radical? Will you leave the world a better place than you find it?'"

Despite these encouraging indicators, community groups are often disappointed by the lack of courage and responsiveness displayed by universities. During a protracted campaign to address community contamination in the suburbs of Lake Macquarie, resident action groups worked hard to solicit support from expert toxicologists at regional universities (McPhillips 2002). I recently discussed this aspect of academic activism with a Greenpeace genetic engineering (GE) campaigner. He spoke of his recent campaign breakthroughs that had secured commitments from food companies to minimise the undetected distribution of GE foodstuffs but observed that it is very difficult for groups like Greenpeace to identify food scientists willing to publicly critique the global GE food industry. Conversely, the food industry seems to have no difficulty engaging scientists to speak in defence of genetically modified foods. Scientists who might advance public interests significantly by engaging in public dialogue seem more protective of their status and careers than the more outspoken industry-sponsored scientists. The Lavoissier group (<http://www.lavoissier.com.au/>) for instance, has taken an activist role in their critique of climate change science, effectively obstructing Australia's commitment to the Kyoto convention. Australia appears to have few scientists like Professor Ian Lowe willing to use their standing and knowledge in the public interest when this involves political consequences.

Notable exceptions to this pattern include the Australia Institute and the Wentworth Group. The Australia Institute (<http://www.tai.org.au>), a progressive think-tank directed by activist researcher Clive Hamilton, has proactively shaped policy responses to a range of social and environmental concerns including climate change (Hamilton 2001). The Wentworth group of water scientists has recently drawn attention to unsustainable water allocation and use practices in the Murray-Darling Basin (Wahlquist 2003). These prominent scientists' critique of government interventions caused a media scrum. The media coverage of the Wentworth group's 'scientific opinion' attended to details such as the personal friendship one member has with the Prime Minister while neglecting to mention that the group was convened by the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the Wilderness Society to advance their campaign for sustainable water management. The media's partial blindness appears to have safe-guarded the independent and expert status of the group.

Most activists know of academics who have been ‘hung out to dry’ for making public statements critical of power-holders. Some academics are considered to have wittingly or unwittingly exchanged career opportunities for their autonomy to participate in public discourse. There are genuine obstacles to academic-activist partnerships: research funding considerations, careerism, excessive workloads and the limitations of personal networks (Cancian 1993). Effective collaboration between activists and researchers need not expose academics to political risks. My observation of constructive relationships between these two ‘tribes’ suggests a few simple strategies as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Strategies for community-university research collaboration

Strategies for academics	Strategies for activists
Partition a proportion of your research (individual or collective) as <i>public good</i> - to be made available (pro bono) to community sector organisations whose goals you support and who cannot afford to engage researchers.	Assume that researchers share your social and environmental concerns.
Invite community groups to nominate research topics. Circulate their suggested topics to students and researchers.	Don't wait to hear from researchers. Take active measures to identify relevant researchers and build relationships with them.
Invite activists to speak with your classes. Include activist literature in course readings. Advertise the websites and list-serves (electronic discussions and bulletins) of progressive organisations working around the issues your courses address.	Always consider the value of seeking researchers' advice for your issues. Recognise that your technical understanding is often incomplete.
Advise relevant non-government organisations (NGOs) of your field of expertise. Offer to provide advice specific to your research area. Make contact with activists speaking on issues you research. Recognise the authority you might add to the debate.	Identify universities and research organisations, faculties and departments where researchers are working on your group's issues.
Develop protocols to ensure that students undertaking research of or with community groups negotiate research relationships that are mutual – and that this mutuality is upheld.	Add relevant researchers and research organisations to the mailing list for your newsletter
Communicate realistic expectations. Don't let community groups believe your research will help them if this is unlikely.	Subscribe to the publications of relevant scientific organisations.
Invite community sector representatives including activists to join or visit relevant university committees.	Invite researchers to contribute to your newsletters and meet with your campaigners and committee. Generate an informal dialogue.
Ensure relevant NGOs are on your mailing list to receive notification of publications and events.	Invite relevant researchers to speak at your conferences and other events. Brief them on the political context so they speak to the specifics of your campaigns.
Offer material assistance such as access to meeting rooms, photocopying, postage.	Take up researchers' offers to provide advice. If it's not what you wanted, decline politely, keeping doors open.
Ensure NGO perspectives are incorporated in conferences and other events you are involved with. Include NGO representatives on the speakers list and offer significantly reduced registration for unwaged participants. Circulate promotional material to NGOs.	Identify researchers and their field of expertise in your mailing list. Log their interactions with your organisation.
Promote activist events: conferences, seminars, meetings, fundraising events.	Enter into relationships with clear and shared expectations.

## Education for advocacy

In opening, I noted that academic life might be considered a ‘tripod’ or three-part profession comprising teaching, research and community. The discussion so far has focussed on the ‘community’ leg of this tripod. How, where, when and why might academics choose to work with community advocates? Why do non-government organisations (NGOs) complain that the relatively privileged members of the ‘ivory tower’ neglect their responsibility to help resolve the critical issues related to sustainability? The other legs of this tripod warrant attention. Through teaching and research, academics can contribute to community life, social capital and sustainability.

My PhD explored options to enhance environmental advocacy through education and training. The topic emerged from my observation that community advocacy organisations attend poorly to the personal and professional development of activists. This three-year study comprised participant observation, ethnography and participatory action research. The study recommended several strategies for activist education including activist internships, informal approaches such as workshops and seminars, and formal, accredited courses. During this study I acted on the first two ideas by proposing a national internship scheme to state and national environmental NGOs and organising a series of informal workshops and seminars. Having submitted this thesis, I turned my attention to the daunting task of establishing an accredited postgraduate course in environmental advocacy. The course can be seen to represent all three legs of the tripod: *teaching* for and about advocacy, providing *community* benefit by developing curriculum that addresses a pressing social need and *researching* the outcomes.

Setting up this new course was made somewhat less daunting by virtue of the history of my faculty. The pioneers who established the Faculty of Environmental Sciences and its School of Australian Environmental Studies in the early 1970s prevailed despite the strongly anti-environmental politics of the time. Many of these ‘ecological pioneers’ participated actively in the Franklin campaign ten years later and have been stalwart members of community environment groups. Despite this context, however, the faculty curriculum had not to date devoted the kind of attention to environmental advocacy that I was now proposing. Steve Chase (2002) makes a similar observation in North America. While environmental studies programs in the U.S. were championed by the environment movement, few attend to the “programmatically sphere of social action skill and knowledge” (Chase 2002). Virtually all these programs cater to environmental professionals who seek employment in government, industry and consulting firms (Davies, Clarence and Rodes, 1984, p.73). The same pattern is true in Australia. Chase (2002, p.6) notes that although the disciplines that might help activists develop a mature political perspective, including policy, political science, economics, history, sociology, education, public health, and geography, are “often dominated by people unsympathetic to transformative social movements and populist challenges to the status quo, there are some bright spots in academia.”

In proposing a new and ‘left field’ course, I was also encouraged by several recent precedents. Foremost among these was Steve Chase’s new two-year Environmental Advocacy and Organising program offered through Antioch New England. During visit to Boston, I met with Steve and fellow activist educators. Most were early career academics. Those who had, like Steve, secured their faculty’s endorsement for activist curriculum reported various obstacles including lack of peer support and economic pressure for

universities to target curriculum development in employment growth areas. Other international precedents include the one-year program in environmental justice offered by the Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh in partnership with Friends of the Earth. In Australia, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology offers undergraduate 'Advocacy and social action' and postgraduate 'Advanced Advocacy and Social Action' elective units within the School of Social Science, and the University of Technology Sydney offers a program in community leadership.

Having examined these models, I set out to secure School support by preparing a tentative curriculum and lobbying key members of the School Committee whose endorsement was essential. My peers generally agreed the proposed course would address a neglected and important dimension of environmental management and decision-making. The most significant impediment was funding. In the context of diminishing enrolments, how would the new course pay for itself? I responded to this challenge by arguing that by marketing the course in the community environment sector I would attract at least one new postgraduate student. The course was endorsed informally during a School retreat in January 2002 and formally by the School Committee in July. I received funds to develop and teach the course for a trial semester.

The Environmental Advocacy course aims to help students: (1) explore the contribution advocates and advocacy organisations make to social change for sustainability; (2) develop a critical understanding of the strategies, structures and history of the environment movement; and (3) learn skills and strategies which contribute to effective advocacy through participatory and experiential learning processes. The course curriculum and pedagogy were developed in consultation with environmental NGOs. Their input and my research suggested that activist curriculum should connect in a real sense with contemporary social action, balance theory with practice, provide community sector benefit and opportunities for action learning and foster reflection-in-action. An environmental campaign does not offer much space for reflection or theorising. Learning theorist Donald Schön (1983, 1987) speaks of *reflective practitioners* who are informed by theory emerging from action. This level of awareness requires discipline and space. This disposition is difficult for activists as campaigns are often dominated by a state of crisis and reaction.

The first cohort was an eclectic group of seven: a high school teacher, a public servant, two permaculture educators (based in Byron Bay and Brazil respectively), a Washington D.C. lobbyist and two full-time students who were both active with regional NGOs. In addition, five spaces were reserved for environmental advocates to 'audit' the course: to participate fully in classes and complete assessment items without being enrolled. The inclusion of auditors was partly intended as a community service. These activists would access a structured and sequential educational program of direct relevance to their occupations. This benefit was reciprocated generously. The auditors brought *real politic* into our classes, connecting us intimately to the latest campaign events, to environmental lobbying and direct action. The course evaluation identified the auditing arrangements as a highlight: "The auditors were the most active advocates and therefore provided us with a more hands-on component."

The course comprises three main elements. Firstly, the semester is organised around a series of twelve topics with corresponding readings and suggested activities. Secondly, opportunities are created for dialogue around these topics including weekly lectures and workshops, a weekend retreat to the Border Ranges and an unmoderated electronic

discussion group. Thirdly, the course requires students to spend at least fifty hours with a community-based campaign group. This aspect of the course is inspired by the service learning movement in the United States. Service learning provides students with opportunities to apply their learning in real-life activities, fosters civic responsibility and addresses community needs (Peace Corps 2002). The internship element also reflects the influence of popular educators such as the Highlander Centre in Tennessee. Miles Horton who founded Highlander adopted a similar pedagogy in activist education and reflected that, "We have found that a very effective way to help students to understand the present social order is to throw them into conflict situations where the real nature of our society is projected in all its ugliness."

In the months preceding the course's commencement, I briefed regional environmental advocacy groups and identified opportunities for students to undertake supervised internship with experienced activists. As it turned out, the course intake fell short of the identified demand for interns. Two class members, Nancy Entwistle and Lyn Comisky, seized the opportunity to examine community campaigns to reduce greenhouse emissions and global warming. Nancy, a government social planner, completed her internship with Friends of the Earth (Brisbane) while Lyn, a secondary teacher, participated in the Queensland Conservation Council's climate change campaign. They recently reflected on the experience: "My immersion in these community groups' greenhouse campaigns helped me appreciate the complexity of environmental advocacy," Nancy reflected. "There is much more to the environment movement than rallies, letter-writing and tree planting, and groups choose their strategies very carefully." These comments concur affirmed my intention that the course would help students see beyond the heroics and stereotypes to see the pragmatic and strategic nature of advocacy.

Course evaluation from this first cohort affirms the merits of the internship scheme. One student noted that she "felt I was learning alongside them ... the experience in a small grassroots group has been invaluable." Host organisations have been equally enthusiastic about the scheme: "We would not have had the resources ... without Evan's strong support and initiative... his internship provided an invaluable service to our organisation." Students also commented very favourably on the weekend retreat, saying it was "tremendous" and "we really built a learning circle in a way that classes never would have established." A major part of the weekend workshop was an experiential role-play to simulate an environmental dispute and campaign. This received very positive appraisal. The main course weakness identified by students was the on-line dialogue. Although the egroup served to connect on-campus and external students, it was not considered especially effective. In general, internet discussion failed to delve into theoretical content to an adequate degree.

The main strength of the course, from students' perspective, was its practical nature. In one student's words, "It relies on real life stories to connect with theories of change and ideas about campaigning (and) encourages analysis which is lacking in the (environment) movement." The students' evaluations also drew attention to the question of activist-academia, with one participant noting that the course "provides politics in a university which frequently forgets its political role."



## Peer support for innovation

The previous discussion of my strategy to secure university endorsement to develop and convene the course referred to Steve Chase's experience at Antioch New England Graduate School. Steve went to the extraordinary length of interviewing every member of his faculty to understand and address their concerns about his proposed community advocacy program. As my colleagues had been mostly silent when I established the GU course, I subsequently surveyed a sample of faculty staff to glean their impressions. In general, I received positive comments: the course will "show we are committed to community involvement in environmental decision making", "demonstrate the relevance of universities to 'the real world'" and allow students to "explore practical aspects of environmental campaigns". This feedback was offset by the discouraging assessment by a biophysical environmental scientist who considered that the students most likely to be attracted to the course are "greenies who are in the minority and don't get jobs."

## Informal advocacy education

In conjunction with this postgraduate course, the Australian School of Environmental Studies has sponsored a series of workshops to enhance the advocacy skills and networks of regional NGOs. The School's decision to contribute to capacity building is consistent with the university role championed by University of Technology Sydney activist-academic Mike Newman. Newman (1999: 138) advocates that educators should instigate teaching and learning events to bring the members of different social movements together in order to identify and analyse their particular interests and to develop strategies for working together to achieve those interests they hold in common.

The series commenced with a workshop devoted to identifying and managing stress and 'burnout' in social change organisations. A second workshop provided an introduction to the environment movement. Representatives of five prominent environmental NGOs with offices in the region outlined the objectives, philosophies of their organisations and encouraged workshop participants to volunteer. The third and fourth workshops highlighted the social action and organisational development skills involved in effective advocacy. Accomplished environmental lawyers and non-violent action practitioners led these workshops. The fifth workshop, to be held in September, is titled *Respect, Reflect React: Social Solutions to Environmental Futures*. This symposium, which is in its second year, presents an opportunity for activists, researchers, community development and community arts practitioners and others to appreciate and evaluate the relative merits of their diverse strategies for social change. The sixth workshop focuses on environmental dispute resolution and the final workshop, a Council of All Beings, offers an insight into deep ecology and environmental philosophy.

To date, representatives of twenty-three environmental and social action NGOs have participated in the workshops, all of which have been held at the Griffith University EcoCentre. Participants have been invited to evaluate workshops immediately afterwards and through confidential interviews by telephone or email in the following weeks, once they have had an opportunity to reflect on their learning and trial new skills and strategies. The overall feedback has been extremely positive, with the average rating for indicators including facilitation, content, sequence and venue varying between "very good" and "excellent". Due

to the generous support of my School, we have been able to engage some of the country's best workshop leaders who are highly regarded for their experience and leadership. Most participants have found immediate opportunities to apply their learnings.

A website (<http://www.environmentaladvocacy.org>) has been established to promote and support the environmental advocacy course, internship scheme and workshops. Anecdotal feedback from community groups and environmental advocates indicates the site is considered a useful repository of resource material that addresses a genuine need.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to build a case for academics to be courageous and community-oriented. The argument was developed firstly through an abstract discussion of the obstacles and opportunities for activist academia, then fleshed out through several specific instances of university-community collaboration involving the Australian School of Environmental Studies. These examples served to illustrate that the expression 'academic' need not, as Alinsky (1969, p.ix) suggested, be synonymous with 'irrelevant'.

## **About the author**

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