

Learning activity

Ecology of Strategies

TIME: 90 mins

LEARNING AIMS:

- Exploring the range of transformative strategies within a healthy Movement ecology
- Supporting shift from unhelpful antagonistic attitudes to different approaches, towards appreciation of potential complementarity and synergy
- Reflecting on tendencies to polarise and attach unhelpfully to certain political identities and to loosen this, towards a pragmatic approach to building power
- Breaking out of tendencies that can fragment and undermine our movement building work

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 10-50

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS: Write text

You will need to have prepared three large sheets of paper with the following written on them:

- Creating alternatives within the system (on one sheet)
- Building alternatives outside the system (on one sheet)
- Ruptural strategies (on one sheet)

This activity brings together some dense political science theory with psycho-emotional work and (hopefully) playfulness. It can be a challenging activity to hold.

FRAMING:

It is very common to hear people within our social movements identify fragmentation and an inability to cooperate as significant challenges that undermine movement building. This activity can help us to reflect on some of the attitudes we bring to our movement work that contribute to this. It can help us to go beyond polarising tendencies and to transform energy depleting antagonism into more appreciative relationships. Similarly, it can shed light on some of the tendencies we need to bring awareness to, if we want to transform dysfunctional conflicts within our Movements into forms of creative tension of complementarity.

The content included in Module One: Mapping Ecologies of Social Movements along with the introductory text for Module 4: Working with Diverse Transformative Strategies can provide useful framing material. The material on Eric Olin Wright's typology of three types of Transformative Strategies is a necessary framework. Unpack that material in some detail.

Related material to support framing: Module One: Mapping Ecologies of Social Movements
Module 4: Working with Diverse Transformative Strategies

FACILITATION:

Step 1. Setting up the activity

Write text Give some good time to framing the activity and offering some theory about fragmentation and transversality in Movements. The way we often do this is to:

- Use the material from Module One and Four to do a short presentation on the necessity of diversity in effective and resilient social movements
- End with the typology from Eric Olin Wright as a way into the activity, describing this in some detail.
- Emphasise the dangers of falling into unhelpful and energy depleting conflicts within our movements and the need to shift towards recognising the importance of diverse contributions and the creative tensions or complementarities we can find between them.
- Name that most activists and organisers who have substantial movement experience will be very familiar with the challenges and have a sense of the importance of transforming them for the sake of Movement building.

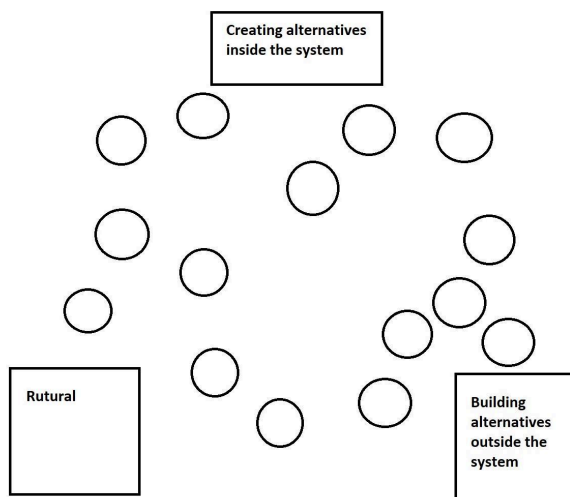
Having described Erik Olin Wright's typology of Transformative Strategies, place your 3 large sheets of paper on the floor of the room to make a big triangle (you'll need about 5-6 metres between each point).

Give a few examples of the 3 transformative strategies to ensure people have a sense of what they represent, but bear in mind that they are broad categories and there is often overlap. Then give the instructions:

- Imagining that each of these 3 points exert a 'gravitational pull' upon you, place yourself in the room according to which of the 3 strategies represents your own approach or sense of affinity ('own approach' and 'sense of affinity' are not interchangeable, but the vagueness can help people to make some sense of the activity).
- Stand closer to the transformative strategy you feel most aligned with.
- You can also stand so as to represent taking a blended approach (social Movement work is often complex and rarely fits into simple typological categories!).

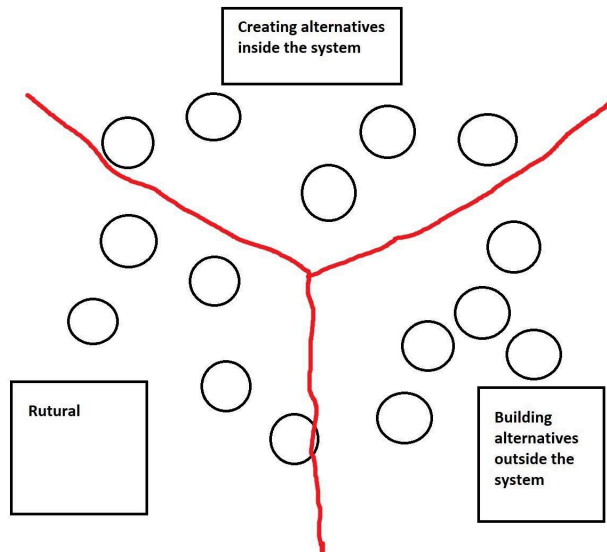
Step 2. Facilitating the activity: Arranging the bodies in the space

Allow people a few minutes to find a position they feel relatively happy with. Reassure them that this is bound to only be approximate. People might distribute themselves something like this:



Now you will need to draw three imaginary lines to divide the participants into three groups of roughly the same size, so that each group is associated with one of the three strategic approaches. This will mean asking some participants to accept being more closely associated with a specific approach than they have indicated, but try to be light and playful about it. Explain that, even if this doesn't fully do justice to their own attitude, it is necessary for the dynamic of the exercise.

These imaginary lines might look something like this, to form three equally sized groups (it isn't necessary for the groups to be exactly equal, but roughly similar in size is best!):



Step 3. Facilitating the activity: Exploring the antagonisms

Once the smaller groups are clarified, give the next instructions:

- You will need to make two lists (written) - one for each of the other two types of transformative strategies.
- The list will include the ways that these other strategies are unhelpful, the ways they fail, the ways they are mistaken and don't actually work!
- For example, the group associated with 'Ruptural strategies' will write one list for the 'Building alternatives inside' group and one list for the 'Creating alternatives outside' group. In the first list you might have 'colluding with power' and in the second you might have 'marginalising yourselves into irrelevance!'
- You'll have around 10 minutes.

You will need to make this playful in order to ensure the activity isn't going to deteriorate into actual antagonism and unhelpful criticism. Bringing humour should be relatively easy, given that some background discomfort about this idea will already add some emotional charge that looks for release somewhere.

Once the task is completed (and you may need to hurry them along!) then give the next instructions:

- Each of the groups in turn will read out the list of 'failings' or 'ways your approach doesn't work' to the other groups

- One group at a time will address both (e.g. The 'ruptural group' will read their list to the 'alternatives inside group' and then the 'alternatives outside group', and then swap over).
- You don't need to read the entire list, just the highlights.
- You will probably want to share out the speaking in your group (so it's not just one 'spokesperson')

As you move through the groups, support them to keep it playful. Be a little theatrical, maybe using some pantomime like 'Ooohs' and 'take that!' etc, to keep it funny where you can. Maintain momentum and push the process along so that each group gets to address each of the others. If the groups have sat down to write the lists, encourage them to stand up and face each other for this phase. This entire phase should only take around 20 minutes.

At this point it is valuable to pause the process and make some comments, such as:

- It can be good to get some of this stuff out in a humorous way, but many of us encounter these kinds of criticism in our Movement work in ways that are deeply painful.
- It can be important to acknowledge the actual pain these kinds of polarising attitudes can give rise to.
- We have been being humorous, and that is a way of releasing some of the tensions around this stuff, but it's important we don't downplay or deny the real challenges and intensities of what can arise here, in our work and relationships.

Step 4. Facilitating the activity: Exploring the complementarities

Now each group is asked to write two more lists (one for each of the other two strategic approaches, as before). These lists name the ways in which the other approaches can be complementary to the approach of the group writing the list, or beneficial as part of a wider Movement ecology - things we could appreciate as valuable contributions. Encourage sincerity and warn people against sarcasm! Allow around 10 minutes for this.

Then, as before, each group is invited to read out the highlights of their lists to the other groups. Again, emphasis sincerity and avoiding 'back-handed compliments' or sarcasm. Encourage expressions of genuine appreciation. Allow around 20 minutes.

Step 5. Debriefing

If time allows, give people a few minutes to discuss how they found the activity in pairs and then open up a whole group discussion. Otherwise go straight to a whole group discussion. Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- How did you find that activity?
- What were some of the feelings that came up?
- What could be valuable to take from it?
- What are some of the questions you are left with?

Conclusion and takeaways

It is important to acknowledge that the shift in attitude and thinking that this exercise can support does not mean that the antagonisms and conflicts across our movements can be easily resolved. The activity can support motivation to work to resolve them, but strategies and the long work of relationship building take time and effort. This activity can support that process. Nevertheless, there

are also ways in which differences of approach are not resolvable and where imbalances of power and influence within our movements make coming into mutually empowering relationships difficult. The 'realpolitik' of this should not be downplayed, and yet a sense of the positive potential for building healthier relationships of reciprocity and mutual support is valuable in our work.

Bear in mind that some participants might feel a need for some post-session processing, so do have someone in the team available.

SOURCE: Ulex project based on Eric Olin Wright's typology of three types of Transformative Strategies.

IMAGES:

