



THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO Radicalizing Processes

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Giving fellow students information on problems or suggestions on what to do is useful, but it can only go so far in helping get someone to deeply commit to an issue. Most people get motivated less by stories of suffering – which abound – and more from *personal experience* with certain problems. For people with lots of privilege, it may involve seeing oppression up close for the first time; for people with less privilege, it may involve seeing that they have the capability to affect their environment.

When people see oppression first-hand they generally get angry and frustrated; if given theory to understand the issue and resources to affect the source of their frustration, they can become more powerful and deeply involved in the problem. A concept that may be useful to think about is “pacing-leading.”

Imagine, two people walking. One person meets the other person’s speed and paces with them. After they have been walking together for a while that person increases their speed (leading). Very often, the other person will speed up to match the person’s new speed.

We cannot just talk people into being radical. We need to meet people where they are at. Once there, we can slightly speed up, giving people new experiences for radicalizing through our leading. As we, too, continue to get deeper into radical politics, we need to help find ways to set-up experiences that help facilitate *radicalizing processes*. We cannot force anybody into social action – not through education, processes or pressure. We can, however, offer opportunities that encourage people to social change work

What follows is one example of a series of radicalizing processes that has happened at Earlham College. As in any history, there are many sub-stories. These are only parts of the story I am aware of.

Pushing an Issue

During Fall 2000, there was growing frustration in the college governance’s consensus decision-making process¹ at Earlham. One factor that was especially strong was President Doug Bennett’s recent decision to ignore a committee’s recommendation and, instead, continue for another year the contract with Sodexo-Marriott (which has been accused of supporting private prisons). Student frustration was high and Earlham Student Government was one of the epicenters of this frustration.

While Earlham Student Government was feeling extremely stymied and tired, they kept pushing the Earlham administration. They had tried suggesting a better way to operate the college governance but were immediately dismissed. Particularly from Jenny O’Neil in the role of Nominating came a desire to either really make the confusing system of governance work or to just forget it.

Meanwhile, I had written an opinion piece and created cartoons in each Word for the first three weeks on the college governance. Along with Jenny O’Neil, we had been talking to students and trying to raise awareness of the issue and interest in it. We also strategized ways to engage students and gain attention.

¹ Technically it should be called a consensus *building* process.

Emergence of an issue

Before the September 20, 2000 All-Student meeting was held, Student Government did massive outreach to bring many people to the meeting. Saga posters were put up, flyers with pencils were distributed, e-mails were sent out, calls were made, and Student Government talked to a lot of people. The Word opinion pieces and cartoons continued.

When the meeting finally came, a massive turn out of nearly two hundred students showed up to the meeting. Information was shared about Student Government's frustrating experiences, along with relating other's experiences (such as EPU's frustration with the Sodexo-Marriott decision).² One dramatic moment was when the most current document explaining the college governance from the clerks of faculty was displayed. The document: a nonsense of lines and arrows and overlapping circles – in other ways, the clerks of faculty had no clue about the college governance structure either.

After this information, Student Government offered two options that had been crafted. The first option: flooding committees, in some cases putting more than the desired number of students on committees. The second option: conscientious withdrawal from the majority of committees until the structure becomes clear and students feel they have a voice. After much conversation and debate, the energy of the students was to flood committees.

The event received front-page publicity. In addition, it showed that a lot of people were concerned about college governance. For people who thought they were the only ones frustrated, it gave a space for mass support to be displayed. But the energy for that meeting would not last on its own. People can only be in a responsive position for so long before they figure that the issue will not really go anywhere (and nobody wants to be part of a losing battle).

Student Government, along with Dory Weiss and I, decided the next major steps were to indeed flood committees and do training, so students would know how to operate on committees.

Get them on, get them frustrated, get them talking...

The next series of steps were crucial in radicalizing students. While Student Government had already been radicalized by its experiences, it could not transmit the energy to get other students invested in change except by a radicalizing process.

The first thing that ESG did was recruit to get a core of students on committees. It did this through sustained publicity, advertising on its bulletin board, and, most effectively, mouth-to-mouth. Especially because of the student community's commitment to flooding committees as expressed in the All-Student

² ESG's "Student Frustrations and Questions from the All-Student Meeting":

1. The structure is undefined in any Earlham document. Except for its guidelines and major highlights, no document has a detailed explanation of the process of governance, which makes it inaccessible to a great number of students.
2. Proposals and concerns, submitted by students, faculty, or administration have to be reviewed, discussed and approved by a number of college committees. However, it is unclear which committees have to approve which decisions. Which committees are decision-making committees? Which are recommending or advisory committees, and who do they recommend to?
3. The ambiguity of the structure causes a long delay in the decision-making process, which sometimes is longer than the average student's Earlham career.
4. Why does the President have to give the final approval on some of the committees' decisions? Why is the President, though part of the process itself, still have the unilateral power to overturn a decision after the consensus process?
5. In some committees, student voices are overshadowed by the faculty and administration in the decision-making process. Moreover, some important committees do not have student participation and are not listed in and [sic] document (e.g. the Financial Aid Task Force).

Meeting, it was easier to recruit students. In the next couple of weeks, ESG got over forty students to be involved in committees at Earlham.

The students who became involved quickly got a taste of the frustration student government had voiced. Students had trouble contacting their committee's convenors, a lack of information about the types of decisions made, convenors not calling meeting times, or convenors calling meetings times that students could not make. Individually many of them got frustrated. Jenny O'Neil and I coached a number of students to stay involved in their committees while suggesting some ways they could assert their role as a full committee member.

Opinion pieces and cartoons continued to Word. Some of the letters were stronger than Earlham Student Government was willing to speak given its position. My role as outside of ESG, however, made writing the opinion pieces easy because I had few consequences.³

A non-opinion Word article written on October 6, written by contributing editor Stephanie Gowler who carefully followed the events, wrote, "The 'flood waters' of student committee members are rising.... Student Government is now working to set up bimonthly meeting [sic] for all students on committees."

The first of these meetings was well-attended, especially as a result of Jenny O'Neil's continued service. She personally e-mailed and called all student members of committees. The meeting provided an important opportunity for students to share their experiences with their committees. Here a few dozen students, most of whom did not have the label "activists," shared the different ways that they were out of the loop with regards to their committees. For some, this was extremely important as they got to see the *structural* aspect of the confusion with the governance structure.⁴

Just when they think they're powerless, give it to them!

In early November, Student Government brought George Lakey to do empowerment workshops. While billed mainly as ways to use consensus, the trainings were aimed at helping students find their voice and assert themselves. Because it was in a specific context, students who would never have attended an "empowerment" workshop went. Also, because it was directly applicable, the learning in the trainings was high and focussed on specific skill-building (instead of general, heady notions of "empowerment").⁵

³ If you read the past Word opinion pieces, you will notice that I make an apology to President Doug and Jeff Rickey. At one point I made a major mistake and quoted President Doug. While I sustain that President Doug did say what I wrote, he contended that it was not true. So one Saturday morning during a soccer game he stopped me and told me he was very unhappy with the Word article. He refused all attempts at patching our relationship (would not co-write a Word article, no additional meetings, etc.). He was very stern, very paternalistic and very angry. Don't quote people unless you have taken notes or have it tape recorded. And recognize that there are levels of consequences.

⁴ Around this time Student Government also wrote newsbriefs on what committees were doing to increase information flow.

⁵ A list of 10 ways to make committees work was created afterwards:

1. Talk to other students in your committee.
2. Ask questions.
3. Remember that the process works best when students are informed and engaged.
4. Get the agenda and pertinent information before the meeting.
5. Set a tone of listening.
6. Support fellow students.
7. Acknowledge vulnerability.
8. Network with fellow committee members.
9. Food helps.
10. Be aware of and point out rank differences.

And watch what happens...

For many, this was a space for fusing their frustration with specific skills to create change. This in turn led to many of these individuals stepping up in other areas. Some began working with issues of diversity. Many people involved in these trainings became part of Earlham Student Government, elected at the end of that semester. Others went on to help organize other trainings or protests.

This is just one extended example of facilitating radicalizing processes. The progression is important. First people generally saw a problem (most of them from afar), then many attended an All-Student Meeting wherein a *decision* was made (read: pro-active). Afterwards some of them became part of the process of college governance where they got to personally experience the frustration and hopelessness of the structure. Meetings with others in their position made concrete the structural aspect of Earlham's governance problem. Trainings then offered skills for dealing with the problem.

These processes bring more people into the movement – and more people who are dedicated to the issues underlying it. Other examples of ways to radicalize people can be to invite them to come with you to meetings with Men in Ties. Or, at a different level, it may simply be to have them go out and create some posters for a Day of Silence. Whatever steps bring people closer to involvement in the movement.

A psychological way of looking at this is through eyes of *cognitive dissonance*. As I understand it, cognitive dissonance suggests that people are not *rational* people but *rationalizing*. As an example, imagine a person placed under hypnosis and asked to do something weird (say, lick a wall). Imagine they do it. Then, when taken out of the hypnotic trance (with full memory of the event), they are asked why they licked the wall. People cannot live with the idea they are non-sensical, so they make up (rationalize) a plausible answer (such as, because that wall tastes like candy). Experiments that did just this found just this.

Similarly, when people do some *small* thing for a movement, such as make a poster, they rationalize that the movement must be worth the time and energy. As one continues to engage them deeper in the issue, they begin to become more and more committed, especially as they gain personal experience in it.

Of course, radicalizing processes should go beyond cognitive dissonance to the point where people truly become committed. The story presented of college governance is an example of walking people from joining because their friend asked them to join a committee to a deep appreciation for the issue of structural injustice in the college governance.

Though the college governance has not overall shifted⁶, many of the people involved in this particular process have gone on to be radically changed (I among them).⁷ For some, this was their first desire for implementing social change on a scale of speaking up in their committees. Others saw structural injustice for the first time. For others still, they became more committed to structural change. Not all were radicalized. All we can do is set-up events to facilitate a radicalizing process.

⁶ It is true committees have not been radically transformed. However, a number of things have happened. For one, a committee, including students, is researching the way the current governance structure is running. Conversations within faculty have also been sparked to life. A radical new student government was subsequently put in place which has helped with issues of transparency through its research and sharing its research via the web (<http://www.earlham.edu/~esg>). Management professor Monteze Snyder has, with help from Sue Kern (who was a secretary in the President's office), put information about committees on the web.

What defines "success" may not be as clear as immediately affecting a change in the governance structure – a long process given consensus' bias towards the status quo. Strategic thinking urges us to ask: "What will we need to get to our vision." The information being found out is part of a larger process to get to a clearer, more just, system of college governance.

⁷ An example of this at a slightly larger level can be found in the affects of Freedom Summer on its participants. See *Freedom Summer* by Doug McAdam.