

WHO GETS TO BE IN THE “GANG”?- a beginner’s guide to legitimate peripheral participation

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If people are expected to regularly come to endless flipping meetings (EFMs) to find out what they can contribute to a group they won't - either attend or contribute. And their skills, time, ideas are then lost, often before they were even found. And everyone is demoralised. Therefore, figuring out ways people can legitimately (with both approval and recognition) participate in a group's work, without EFMs, is crucial.

An imagined dialogue with a “traditional activist”

Traditional Activist: What fresh nonsense is this? If folks aren’t going to come to meetings, they CLEARLY don’t care about the issue enough.

Climate Emergency Manchester (CEM): Uh, yeah. So, we’ve been doing it that way for (checks notes) decades... how’s that working out?

TA: One more push, comrade! The next march will be bigger, and after that, the revolution!



CEM: Uh, yeah. Can we pretend - I mean just for a moment - that it’s not only capitalism, states and corporations that need to change, but “activists” might also need some social innovation?

TA: Go on then... Entertain me

CEM: Thanks! What if - and bear with me - we assumed that people who didn’t come to meetings were valuable. That the reasons they never came were down to childcare issues, difficulties with expensive or inaccessible public transport, not feeling safe, not being inspiring, and maybe - certainly not at one of YOUR group’s meetings, but in that OTHER group - the [Judean People’s Front](#), those awful splitters - the one time they **did** go it was both boring, confusing and they got patronised.

TA: That OTHER group sucks!

CEM: Let’s not derail ourselves. Let’s imagine that it is possible to devise social movement organisations’ work so that others who can’t attend meetings could be actively involved, in meaningful ways, that gained you status (if you crave it), while also making you feel good about yourself and connected to other people... WITHOUT having to come to meetings. Even if they were online ones!

TA: Mind.... blown. I mean, that sounds revolutionary...

CEM: Well thank you!

TA: I wasn’t done! Like all revolutions, it sounds uncomfortable and messy and will probably end in tears...

CEM: Well, it’s certainly out of the comfort zone of most groups, for sure, and yes, it sometimes will fail - there are part-time supporters who only want a part-time love (and sure, you, me, everybody needs a part-time love). But there are others who may want to do more, but can’t drop everything when you say to them “come with me if you want to [insert salvation message here]”.

TA: Well, it all sounds way more complicated than how we do it now

CEM: Absolutely it is. But since we now both agree that the status quo isn’t working, isn’t it our responsibility to make serious efforts to make legitimate peripheral participation into a thing?

TA: You keep using that phrase, I do not think it means what you think it means

CEM: Yeah, you’re right - but so what? We “borrowed” it from some academics, and slightly repurposed it. They can see us in court - it describes what we want it to and it rolls off the tongue, so we’re sticking with it unless you’ve got something better.

TA: <speechless>

CEM: I’ll take that as a no.

TA: Okay, you got me - what are your top tips for encouraging this “legitimate peripheral participation”(LPP)?

CEM: So glad you asked! And without any hassling at all!

TA: Your sarcasm irritates me and demeans you. Sorry. Couldn’t help myself So, drumroll please:

1. Know, in detail, what it is you want to achieve and - as far as possible - what the skills, knowledge, relationships, jobs and roles are required to make it all happen (this will always change, of course, but without some sort of list, you’re not going to be able to convince other folks that you are serious about them being able to participate, “peripherally” and legitimately.
2. Have a way of publicising all the above with a time scale that they need doing in - a website is fine in a consistent language, where you

define the job, the skills needed, the level they are needed at, the length of time likely to be required, the deadline to get it done.

3. Match volunteers with roles. Delegate either tasks or problems (the two are distinct). Get better at delegating and volunteer management.
4. Find out what support, feedback, etc people want "on the way."
5. Explain "lunchoutism" (read on for more).
6. Do NOT give anything mission critical to someone you've not worked with before and trust they can meet deadlines, because if it goes wrong, it's not just your time and morale damaged, but also that of others involved in the task.
7. Make sure you thank people in private (and in public if that is what they wanted).
8. Do a post-mortem, learn how to get better.

TA: I'll bite. What do you mean by "lunchoutism"?

CEM: Huzzah! You noticed I've made up a word! Lunching something out means specifically committing to a task and NOT TELLING ANYONE BEFORE THE DEADLINE THAT YOU'RE NOT ABLE TO DO IT. So, if you take something on, life intervenes and you get back to the person you said yes to and explain, they have a chance to reassign the task or reorganise the overall project differently, then you haven't "lunched out". It's only when you DON'T do that that you have "lunched it out."

TA: Yeah, but everyone's human. Are you some kind of control freak?

CEM: Yes and no.

TA: You admit you're a control freak?

CEM: I know everyone's human and can't always do what they committed to, but also I'm just someone trying to co-ordinate lots of people doing 'little bits'. And if I'm leading a project and don't know who is and is not able to do what and by when... "then it fell apart, like it always does."

TA: Is that another of your sly song lyric drops?

CEM: [Moby](#). Look, I've seen lunchoutism create guilt, shame, resentment, demoralisation and all the bad things. When that happens, the really bad things - by which I mean business as usual, they keep rolling on. As they have been doing. As they WILL keep doing the same unless we make a change - a big change - in how we're trying to affect change.

TA: So, say I wanted to be in a group that did this LPP thing. What skills would we need?

CEM: The ability to strategise, to come up with plausible plans, to project manage (including Gantt charts), to volunteer manage, to run websites, to co-run spreadsheets, to keep yourself GDPR compliant, to mentor, to give feedback, emotional literacy, compassion, more project management skills, more volunteer managing...

TA: Surely it's easier to do it yourself?

CEM: Oh absolutely.

TA: Wait, what? You're agreeing with me?

CEM: It's absolutely easier to do it all yourself. You get heroic martyr points up the wazoo, the sense of being in charge. Right up to the point that you flame out, and set a very bad example to other activists, and discourage anyone else from giving a damn.

TA: Sold.

CEM: <speechless>

TA: So, if this LPP is as good as you say, why doesn't it happen more?

CEM: It's not easy to do. There's the problem of people not being (able to be) honest with themselves about how much time a job will take or how much time they are willing to actually put in - Folks like the idea of being involved more than the reality. And then there is the planning fallacy - everyone underestimates how long a job will take - ever had any building work done to your house? And then you've got the problem of people feeling nagged, or feeling guilty that they are nagging etc etc. Delegating is really difficult too - are you delegating a task or a problem or both?

How can I move from novice level to practitioner level at this?

Stay tuned for the next (longer) practitioner's guide, which will come at you soon. Ask us questions (we may not know the answer). Check out our [website](#)

Disclaimer: Doing LPP is going to be very hard. It goes against the grain of most "activism", which generally allows for no-strings moral tourism. It requires not just honesty and ability-to-take-feedback from supporters, but also seriously high-level skills within CEM, around project management, volunteer management, delegation, giving feedback "etc". And we do not yet have those skills, so it's going to be bumpy AF. But nowt compared to the climate impacts coming if we continue business as....

*Novice and practitioner level is a reference to the Active Citizenship Toolkit, which CEM and allies are developing. See [here](#)

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