Prefiguration as Learning

Joe Curnow and Suraj Uttamchandani

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Prefiguration as Learning

Prefiguration is a way of "living our politics." It is a political theory of mobilizing movement philosophies into everyday action—and a learning accomplishment and target.

Authors

Joe Curnow, University of Manitoba, joe.curnow@umanitoba.ca

Suraj Uttamchandani, Indiana University, suttamch@indiana.edu

Abstract

Prefiguration refers to a political theory of mobilizing philosophies into action, understood as the ways that people live their politics through their tactics. This theory comes from political organizing spaces, and over the last years, has come to the attention of learning scientists as a significant space of learning which allows for the political dimensions of learning and ideology to come into focus alongside practice. In this primer, we describe the theory of prefiguration, briefly review its use in movements and in recent learning sciences research, and argue that prefiguration is fundamentally a learning process and target, that ought to be engaged with from learning sciences perspectives.

Keywords

Learning, politics, ideology, prefiguration

In social movement and political organizing spaces people have goals, and they engage in activity towards meeting those goals. Prefiguration describes circumstances where the day-to-day activity of a social movement space embodies its long-term goals and principles. Prefiguration is a way of "living our politics." It is a political theory and value of mobilizing movement philosophies into everyday action.

Over the last few years, prefiguration has increasingly come to the attention of learning scientists as a significant context for learning, since the political dimensions of learning and ideology come into focus alongside collective, collaborative, and community practice, in turn allowing for the formation of more equitable learning environments and societies. Importantly, prefiguration comes from and is rooted in the work of social justice organizing spaces.

In this Rapid Community Report, we provide definitions and examples of prefiguration from activist and academic spaces, contextualizing the concept of prefigurative politics within the long history of social movement learning from which it emerges. We then briefly describe the ways prefiguration has been treated from sociocultural theorizations of learning and point to potential directions for future learning sciences theory and practice.

Overview

Picture this scenario. LocalLunch is an activist group. They realized their city's Farmers' Market has policies for vendors that result in the presence of only large corporate farms who sell goods under the guise of being "local," at the expense of small nearby family farms who cannot seem to get a permit due to the city's gatekeeping policies. LocalLunch decides to have a town hall event to help involve community members. Most town halls in this building cater from a large chain restaurant, given their low prices, so that they can offer free food to attendees as they watch presentations. But LocalLunch realizes such catering would not be in line with their values. So they instead make food with ingredients from local farmers to share with attendees. In this way, they organize the meeting to reflect their goals and values.

As in the above example, we see prefiguration all the time in social movement spaces. In another hypothetical example of prefiguration, a youth activist group uses consensus-based, rather than hierarchical, decision-making to disrupt patterns of youths' opinions being talked over. They use turn-taking and "go-arounds" to prioritize the voices of minoritized participants, rather than simply calling on the first person to raise their hand. Thus, they enact their vision of other ways of being together where the voices of non-binary people and women, Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color are centered in a space, just as they work toward having these perspectives be increasingly valued in other settings.

These are all examples where long-term ideological visions get enacted in how work is done. Prefiguration is:

> *a political action, practice, movement, moment, or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the 'here and now,' rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future. In prefigurative practices, the means applied are deemed to embody or "mirror" the ends one strives to realise. (van de Sande, 2013, p. 230).*
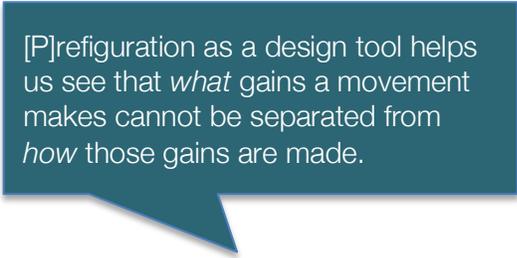
> [P]refiguration as a design tool helps us see that *what* gains a movement makes cannot be separated from *how* those gains are made.

Put another way, prefiguration takes place when the macro-scale political and ideological goals of a group are invoked to deliberately make design decisions about how the group does its day-to-day business on a micro-scale.

Maeckelbergh (2011) argues that we cannot separate prefiguration from strategic action, because they are inherently related and co-produce each other. Prefiguration is an active strategy of re-forming social relations. It is not just about "practicing what we preach"—rather, prefiguration as a design tool helps us see that *what* gains a movement makes cannot be separated from *how* those gains are made.

Most scholars who study prefiguration are rooted in activist and political theory spaces, and thus do not talk often about learning and education. However, prefiguration is implicitly about praxis, a productive dialectical relationship between reflection and action (Freire, 1972). This body of scholarship enables us to make sense of learning in movement spaces: how through the doing of actions, people learn the logic of practices, and how through reflection and planning on that logic, people learn to do actions differently. Prefiguration, then, is a political commitment that theories of justice must be lived fully, embodied, and practiced.

Prefiguration can be both a theoretical tool to understand why movement collectives organize activity the way they do, and also a design tool to help movements make choices aligned with their values around participation structures in meetings, ideas for actions, and so on. The examples we explore throughout this primer are of prefiguration as a design tool when social movement groups specifically design their practices to reflect their values and future goals. In these two ways, prefiguration can be a powerful idea for learning scientists and educators given their commitments to understanding learning in communities of practice and to designing for more generative learning environments.

We stress that prefiguration is fundamentally a concept from activist movements, especially social justice movements. It is inherently a political concept. Thus, while we argue that prefiguration can be a meaningful tool in the learning sciences, it is only appropriate to use it in contexts that have explicit and articulated activist ends which all participants know and with which they feel alignment. We concur with the position that all learning environments have a political dimension (e.g., Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). However, we recognize that many learning environments do not understand themselves as pursuing explicitly political and justice-oriented ends. Thus, although we believe it can still be a useful idea to think with, we caution against the use of prefiguration as an analytic or design tool in spaces where learners don't understand themselves to be pursuing activist aims (e.g., many classroom settings).

Examples Outside the Learning Sciences

Here, we outline the activist roots of prefiguration to highlight some of what we know about prefiguration as a concept. Some key lessons for learning scientists come out of the social movement lineages of the philosophy and practice of prefiguration, which we outline briefly. While a summary of each of these communities' goals and values is beyond the scope of this report, by describing various approaches to prefiguration we seek to offer a strong anchor for the heterogeneous activist roots of prefiguration before turning our attention to its implications for learning scientists.

Anarchist Approaches to Prefiguration

Many collectives of people organized around anarchist philosophies and practices (like non-hierarchical organization, autonomy, anti-capitalism, and non-state organization) globally organize around the idea of prefiguration and pay attention to how they interact on a daily basis in order to envision and create alternatives to a centralized state. The Anarchist ideal of prefiguration is largely constructed in opposition to Old Left communism or structuralist Marxism; Anarchist philosopher Bakunin is quoted as saying, "how could one want an egalitarian and free society to issue from an authoritarian organization? It is impossible" (Bakunin in Franks, 2003, p. 19). Anarchist social movement approaches argue that what we do in activist groups and social movements matters, that it literally brings other worlds into being, allows individuals and collectives to practice alternative relations, and that it underpins counter-hegemonic transformations in both thinking and action. An example of this is Food Not Bombs, which organizes as a non-hierarchical collective,

recovering food from dumpsters and volunteering to cook healthy food for community spaces. They enact their anti-capitalist politics in myriad ways and practice anarchist philosophy in real-time.

New Left Movement Approaches

New Left approaches to prefigurative politics became highly visible in activist spaces in New Left movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Boggs was among the first to develop the idea of prefigurative action formally; in his 1977 essay he described it as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (p.100). Movements like the Free Speech movement, anti-war movement, and others have centrally organized around a politics of prefiguration, for example by designing their governance around decentralized decision-making through direct democracy and deliberation. These practices significantly shaped what is currently understood as activism and how participants perform radical politics (Breines, 1989; Epstein, 2002).

Civil Rights Approaches to Prefigure Integration

While he did not use the term prefiguration, civil rights leader Myles Horton advanced the concept in his work toward racial justice in the United States. Horton and collaborators clarified prefiguration as a design tool in opposition to less successful pedagogical tactics for helping newcomers understand movement values. He described how Highlander activists learned and changed their behavior—essentially how through changing their actions they shifted their worldview and what they imagined was possible (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998; Horton & Freire, 1990). In a classic example of prefiguration, Horton hosted a dinner during the civil rights movement with white people and Black people where, rather than talking about desegregation and taking a gradual approach, he illegally integrated the dinner. The lived experience of doing integration built relationships between people across race and challenged some of the preconceived notions with which participants entered. Their experience of doing integration showed these activists that desegregation was indeed possible and that desegregating could be a learning process. The process Horton facilitated was embedded in antiracist politics and made antiracist consciousness possible for participants as they enacted that politics in an embodied way.

Queer Approaches to Prefiguring

LGBTQ2S+ organizing spaces have also advanced the concept of prefiguration.[1] In her history of the group ACT-UP, an organization seeking LGBTQ2S+ justice at the height of the AIDS crisis, Sarah Shulman (2021) outlines the myriad spaces in which queer activists innovated new activist tactics. With the government largely ignoring the issue, activists made the AIDS crisis and gay community visible as a political intervention by doing the most visible, visual, and confrontational direct actions and artistic actions. They built queer mutual aid networks that intentionally created alternative communities of care as a political act and as a way of rearticulating family and community in the face of homophobia in families, communities, and the state. The tactics reflected and reproduced the politics that rejected homophobia and allowed participants to build structures where their voices and lives were seen and valued. A current example would be an LGBTQ2S+ justice organization that has everyone introduce themselves with names and pronouns at the start of each meeting. They demonstrate their commitment to understanding gender, sexual, and relationship identities as fluid and dynamic and worth articulating every time so that identities are respected and embraced. It is an enactment of a queer politic in the day-to-day.

Indigenous Resurgence as Prefiguration

While social movement formations have long centered prefiguration, similar ideas have guided some Indigenous communities since time immemorial. Indigenous scholars have argued for an approach to Indigenous sovereignty that is not marked by bids for recognition by the settler state, but which instead affirmatively realizes language reclamation, cultural practice, and nation-specific governance in the doing of them (Simpson, 2017). Like prefigurative approaches, the politics of sovereignty and resurgence are embodied through the practices of doing them, rather than thinking about them, debating them, or politely requesting them. This approach stresses that Indigenous people learn to do sovereignty through its practice, and in that practice, work from and reinscribe Indigenous worldviews. While Indigenous nations vary in their worldviews and governance based on relationships to land and waters, histories, and culture, this affirmation of relationality of philosophies and actions has formed an important part of Indigenous sovereignty efforts. Some examples are land back actions where Indigenous nations protect their lands from oil and gas exploitation by setting up camps where they practice their language, culture, governance, and relationality to the land and waters while blocking the colonial intrusion.

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[1] "LGBTQ2S+" stands for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Two-Spirit and other people minoritized by virtue of their sexual orientation or gender identity." For more information on this umbrella term and relevant communities, visit https://www.coursera.org/learn/queeringidentities and https://www.coursera.org/learn/queeringtheschoolhouse.

Applications Within the Learning Sciences

While we stress that prefiguration should only be used as an explicit analytic or design tool in contexts where all participants share an ideological and political goal, it is a useful tool to think with for many learning contexts. Over the last decade, we have seen references to prefiguration peppered throughout work highlighting the politics of learning in the learning sciences with increasing frequency. This work stresses the ways that practice is embedded in and reproductive of political philosophies and frames prefiguration as a speculative, transformative learning process.

Sociocultural theories of learning and prefiguration

A number of learning sciences scholars have pointed to the resonance between prefiguration and sociocultural theories of learning theoretically. Curnow (2016) argues that legitimate peripheral participation and sociocultural theories of learning provide closely aligned tools for theorizing radical education, as they help to explain how increasingly radical politics can become accessible to activists through prefigurative praxis. The article helps educators think through how prefigurative action makes it possible for activists to practice new political ideologies and tactics, and how that, concurrently, makes new political ideologies and tactics possible, blurring the lines between cognition and practice, and embedding them all in an integrated theory of politicized learning. Vossoughi and Booker (2017) noted how ethnographic methods could help us make sense of how prefigurative activity is done by participants in learning spaces and how such prefiguration could be supported and sustained. They also highlight how attuning to play and love may illuminate new possibilities for making sense of prefiguration. Smirnov and Wiedler-Lewis (2020) extend this call by elaborating on the lenses and methodologies that might illuminate prefiguration in learning environments, using the term *prefigurative analysis*. They compellingly highlight how a prefigurative analysis can offer a way to understand what is happening when learners or designers create spaces in which dominant oppressive social norms (e.g., extreme capitalism) are challenged rather than reinscribed. They write:

> *An understanding of prefiguration can also invite LS [learning sciences] researchers to stay honest and be wary of studies that signal at certain political ends (e.g., "equity") while implicitly centering, corresponding to, and reproducing dominant social and economic relations and oppressions as the means of "getting there." (p. 2486)*

They close by offering brief examples of prefigurative analysis of a technology-mediated civic engagement context and a youth climate activist context.

Empirical analysis of prefiguration in the learning sciences

In our own analytical work, we have found these lenses compelling and deployed them in the context of empirical analyses of learning. In work theorizing politicization, Curnow (2016), Curnow, Davis, and Asher (2019), and Curnow, Fernandes, Dunphy, and Asher (2020) attended to activists' prefigurative politics as a pathway toward politicization. Tracing how political conceptual development, identity, and epistemological shifts were woven throughout the practices of radical-identified activists, they argued that these processes cannot be disarticulated. For example, activists intentionally deployed go-arounds where everyone in the group was given the opportunity to speak as a way of disrupting normalized white and masculine turn-taking where only a few voices were heard, and in the process, they expanded the range of political analysis voiced and made space for more ways of knowing and being, which in turn reinscribed, and in some cases shifted, participants' identities as climate justice activists, rather than as mainstream environmentalists.

In his work on educational intimacy, Uttamchandani (2021) mobilized ideas of prefiguration as central to future organizing. He argued that as queer youth educational activists organized themselves, they deployed humor, sarcasm, teasing, and self-deprecation in service to building a community of belonging that prefigured the kinds of relations they sought to create in schools. The youths' goal of creating safer spaces in K–12 educational spaces was enacted in the here and now through their moves toward educational intimacy.

This work relies on and orients to the ongoing conversation in learning sciences research which stresses power, politics, ethics, and collective engagement (Esmonde & Booker, 2016; Politics of Learning Collective, 2017) and which orients to learning as organizing possible futures (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016) where justice is centered philosophically as well as tactically, thus while few articles explicitly take up prefiguration analytically, the field has been opened and there is an opportunity to explore the consequentiality of prefiguration for learning in social movements and beyond.

Summary

Theories of prefiguration can and should matter for the learning sciences. They are helpful for understanding the relationship between ideology and learning, and for designing effective learning activities in explicitly political environments. As the concept of prefiguration becomes more present in learning sciences theorizations of learning for transformation, it is important that it be anchored in the fullest definitions of the term, and anchored in the politicized traditions from which it emerges. There is a very real risk of the concept being hollowed out, reduced to a means-ends skeleton of what is a very robust and historically rich concept. As scholars and scholar-activists, we caution against uses of prefiguration that are decontextualized, dehistoricized, and depoliticized. Maintaining a central focus on the activist roots of the concept and the deeply integrated view of

thinking, action, and worldview allows prefiguration to shine as an analytic and design tool for creating more equitable and just learning environments.

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Resources

Humans of Learning Sciences: https://anchor.fm/humanslspod - Episodes with Joe Curnow and Suraj Uttamchandani.

For more information on Learning in Social Movements, visit the comics here https://www.sequentialsjournal.net/index.html.

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