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# **Learning to Transgress: Queer Young Adults, Emotional Resilience, and Intellectual Resistance as Impetus for Lifelong Learning for Social Justice**

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Keywords: Queer, social justice, emotions, lifelong learning, activism

**Abstract:** This paper employs critical social learning perspectives to investigate the themes of emotional resilience, intellectual resistance, and lifelong learning evident in the experiences of three gay male young adults whom I situate as activist-educators. I discuss how these young adults integrate emotional labour and social learning into resistance work to create counterpublics, which lay challenge to exclusionary heteronormative educational spaces.

## **Emotions as Impetus for Lifelong Learning for Social Justice**

This paper employs critical social learning perspectives to argue the need to investigate the role of emotions in individual and collective learning for lifelong learning focused on social justice. For example, Goodwin and Pfaff (2001) posit the need to develop an emotional sociology, which they suggest “recognizes the ubiquity of emotions, moods, and affect in social life and which treats emotions as potential causal mechanisms” (p. 283). In adult education there is a paucity of research that explores the role that emotions and emotional management play in providing impetus for consciousness-raising, individual learning, and collective social action. To address this absence I examine the themes of emotional resilience and intellectual resistance evident in the experiences of three gay male young adults. I situate these young adults as activist-educators that immerse themselves in critical praxis informed by a resistance to heteronormative learning for social justice.

## ***Emotional Work: A Pedagogy of Indignation***

For many individuals, emotions often come rushing to the surface long before cognitive processes can be articulated, examined, and developed into guidelines for individual or collective strategic action. Gamson (1992) situates emotions as not only pivotal in the fight for justice, but also as vital in the rage over injustice, which he describes as “the righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul” (as cited in Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2001, p. 32). Freire, in his last published work, echoes the important role that emotions can play in social learning and consciousness raising. In his book *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004), Freire sees “anger [as] a tool that will enable all those who yearn for social justice to recapture our human dignity and avoid falling into cynicism, even when confronted with inescapable injustice and cruelty...” (p. xi). Indeed anger and many other “outlaw” emotions have served as a historical base for launching powerful political challenges as evidenced in African-American civil rights, feminist, and queer social movements. Upon close inspection, emotions permeate all aspects of social action and social relationships that range from the intensely personal to the outright and in your face political. As Freire (2004) puts it:

[We] have the right to be angry and to express that anger, to hold it as [our] motivation to fight, just as [we] have the right to love and to express [our] love

for the world, to hold it as [our] motivation to fight, because while historical being[s], [we] live history as a time of possibility, not predetermination. (p. xi)

### **Research Design**

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of the lived and learned experiences of three male young adults who were selected to participate in this study in light of the unique ways in which they have used their emotional experiences as catalysts for them to become critical agents for inclusion, social justice, and cultural change. Through the use of open-ended interviews and narrative inquiry techniques, I focus on how these young adults draw upon their emotions as impetus for lifelong learning to help them develop counternormative queer-inclusive pedagogical spaces in Edmonton, Alberta, Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. These three cities represent fairly comparative social, cultural, and educational environments found across Canada. All participants signed ethics consent forms agreeing to use their own names and experiences in this research. Life history data was collected from each participant through a series of telephone interviews that I transcribed and analyzed for key themes.

### **Findings**

Today's queer young adults have a greater sense of self-awareness and knowledge about their sex, sexual, and gender differences than previous generations. This knowledge and understanding has enabled many sexual minorities to lead more fully integrated lives as they learn to successfully come to terms with their marginalized identities. However, prior to making demands or articulating discourses or strategies for inclusive social change, queer persons must first develop an intrinsic belief that they deserve more than a legacy of discrimination, emotional violence, and physical abuse. Below Jeremy recounts a pivotal consciousness-raising experience and the emotional labour and learning involved, which became a catalyst that helped him to develop an inclusive cultural pedagogy that undergirds his social justice activism.

Just when I came out and came to terms with my sexuality, then along came homophobia. In a sense homophobia was easier for me to deal with, because I had already experienced racial discrimination based on misconceptions and ill education.... When I entered high school there was very little cultural diversity. I stood out like a sore thumb. You could tell I was brown. Everybody saw it. I'd get called "Nigger," or they'd say "Hey, Nigger fuck off and go back to your own country." It was a huge shock. I had never ever in my life been called a Nigger. I was Canadian!

Like Jeremy, Ryan and Bruce also experienced very real physical and emotional costs associated with their increased visibility in their schools and communities.

Ryan: My boyfriend and I like to hold hands, but at the same time we are always looking around and over our shoulders, especially because he is deaf and he won't see them coming. People do and say things. It's not pleasant. For example, last weekend we had just come off the bus and we were holding hands. Some guy came up to us and said, "What the fuck are you two guys doing?" I just stood there. It was the first time that anyone had ever said anything like to me. I was more shocked than angry.

Bruce: Not only was there verbal abuse in my school, there was also physical violence. The violence was there before and after I came out. It just seems like a constant. One time this group of boys surrounded me outside my school and they grabbed me by my hair and smacked my head on the curb. I guess you kind of expect these things to happen to you when you're gay. Of course I was afraid of being physically hurt, but I guess I just decided that I wouldn't let it bother me emotionally. I prepared myself. I decided I wouldn't let it affect me in terms of making me feel bad about myself or who I was.

*Activists as Educators: Learning to Resist/Resistance Learning*

Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce have drawn upon and learned from their emotionally laden experiences to position themselves as cultural workers (Freire, 1998) who actively strive to contest public space through resistance strategies designed to counteract oppressive regimes of the normal. It is within these fugitive spaces that the next generation of political work often emerges. Below Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce elaborate on the safe space work and counterhegemonic pedagogies they developed. Notably, these pedagogical strategies were not a part of the official curriculum of the school. Rather, it was a lived curriculum based upon their emotional resilience and a politics of exclusion that became critical sites for these activist-educators to challenge heteronormativity. Here Ryan recounts how he took the opportunity to "re-do" his grade twelve graduation prom.

This year I decided to do my prom over again and I went to my friend's prom as his date. Neither of us asked for permission. We just went. To be honest I don't think any of the teachers cared. I even knew one of the teachers there and he asked me who I was there with and I just said Mark. He just kind of gave me this "ohhh" and then changed the subject.... It was really nice to go with Mark, it felt like I did it right the second time. It was like a second chance.

Jeremy's resistance took a different approach as he engaged in the "possibilities for interruption" (Weis & Fine, 2001, p. 521) and the politics of visibility to assess the potential ramifications of his contestation of the status quo.

I realized that [in starting a positive/safe space campaign] I had an opportunity to do something with my life. Being in my last year of school, I knew that if something [negative] did happen to me, I was better able to defend myself in both the emotional and physical sense. Also, by this time my family had become very gay positive.... I wouldn't have started any of it had my family and I all not sat down and talked about it. We were never quite sure where the campaign would take us, especially with bringing gay issues into my high school. We all talked about it. We felt that this could go in a million and one directions. In a worst case scenario our house could be lit on fire, or maybe nothing would happen, or it could affect me and my brother, or it could also affect my parent's jobs living in such a small community. Taking all the risks into consideration, our family's commitment to activism, and our personal beliefs, we all decided that it was important to do it.

Like Jeremy, Bruce also challenged the structures of disavowal. Bruce's reflective comments highlight the emotional catalyst that propelled him to attempt to make change within his school.

There were homophobic experiences in school. Negative comments were made everyday. The word “fag” was tossed around all the time. One time when I walked into the school someone shouted a name at me and chucked a water bottle at me. That incident was a catalyst for me. I felt that homophobia was on the rise in our school. I wanted to tell the principal that this was unacceptable.... Our school is extremely multicultural. It’s a big thing that we are proud of. If anything racist happens there is absolutely zero tolerance for it. I told the principal that I expected the same zero tolerance for homophobic comments and actions.

Bruce also highlights the importance of creating a gay–straight alliance (GSA) at his school as not only a space for personal, political, and pedagogical resistance, but also as an important space for emotional recuperation where sexual minority students can build community, develop solidarity, and find support.

In the first year or two the GSA was mostly a small discussion group. We met in this little room across the hall from the main office. It had tinted windows with a pride sticker. We would just sit there and eat our lunches while we talked about homework. Sometimes we’d just listen to music. Over time the GSA became more focused on bringing anti-homophobia education into the school. We started moving beyond being just a discussion group and out into the school. We made posters and put them up around the school. They were ripped down continuously, but we’d just have poster parties and put up more. We also painted pride rainbows on the walls with sayings like “Love knows no gender!” Then we started talking to the administration and staff about their roles in stopping homophobia. We talked about going into staff meetings and doing staff education. We formulating lesson plans for doing anti-homophobia workshops in classes and this past year we focused on having a gay pride day in our school. We talked about how exciting and ground breaking it would be to hold one.

Bruce, Ryan, and Jeremy’s narratives illustrate how a sustained set of commitments to counter heteronormativity takes emotional work, time, localized effort, and consciousness-raising strategies. Greene (2000) emphasizes the importance of creating these lived and shared public spaces as critical sites that:

may release [a student’s] imagination enough to project changes for themselves [and invite others] to share available space in such a way that the obstacles or injustices they face are viewed as common concerns, not only to be resisted and escaped from but also to be transformed and somehow overcome. (p. 295)

### **Concluding Perspective: Lived Spaces, Counterpublics, and Public Schools**

In this paper Bruce, Ryan, and Jeremy have articulated how their personal and evocative emotional experiences with oppression provided them with the emotional impetus to develop a variety of creative and innovative ways to enable themselves and others to become critical change agents in their schools.

The institution of schooling is not an open and accessible place for all students. Students of colour, different socio-economic classes, abilities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities are often excluded from full, equitable, and meaningful participation within this public sphere. As much as public schools might like to believe that these differences can be “bracketed out” of official educational discourse, the daily discursive practices and interactions that govern a student’s abilities to live in the everyday are never neutral. A series of formal (institutional) and

informal (peer-to-peer) pressures govern which identities are publicly valued, who has the right to speak, and at what risks to the speaker.

Fraser (1993) describes sites of resistance within these public spaces as “subaltern counterpublics,” (p. 14) which are created in dialectical tension to the “very exclusionary practices of the public sphere” (Fine & Bertram, 1999). These counterpublics contest the exclusionary norms and Othered subject positions that deny queer young adults full and equitable participation and inclusion in their public schools. In this environment of negation, Bruce, Jeremy, and Ryan demonstrate how they developed the capacity to become activist-educators who struggle to find a valued and recognized space for their fugitive identities. This contestation of public space becomes a vital resistance strategy that brings with it the call to put the “public” back into public schools. This “public” is one built on the premise of a substantive social equality as guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This understanding of “public” space and the rights and responsibility of full citizenship calls for the establishment of sites of true deliberation that are invested with a genuine need for and understanding of the Other. This is an Other that can not be bracketed out of discourse or treated with notions of a power-laden tolerance (Freire, 1998). Truly public spaces cannot be a monolithic ideologue dominated by a prevailing discourse. As Gaskell (2001) posits, “public educational space is fractured, and the fracturing is constitutionally guaranteed” (p. 33).

GSAs and the establishment of queer-affirming spaces provide a way for this “fracturing” space to occur in public educational environments. These fractured spaces become critical areas for a deliberative communicative dialogue to emerge. These fractured spaces or counterpublics are not necessarily designed to be oppositional or combative. In many cases they become key sites for emotional recuperation and intellectual resist-stance that afford the necessary time and space for reflection, storytelling, and consciousness-raising to occur outside of the totalizing gaze of the hegemonic public sphere. Fraser (1993) postulates that these counterpublics “signal that they are parallel discursive areas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 14). In these subaltern spaces students learn to become cultural workers who name, reflect, and take action based upon their everyday readings of the word and the world around them (Freire, 1998).

On their own, GSAs, positive spaces, improved access to queer-affirming educational resources, and increased visibility will not and cannot be the solution to “inclusivity” or “diversity” in schools. There is no one counterpublic that can represent the diverse needs and experiences of all students in today’s schools and society. Instead, we should encourage a multiplicity of counterpublics that recognize the need for deliberation and dialogue across differences as essential to creating an inclusive participatory democracy. These young adults engage in an ethics of capacity that seeks to create even the most transient spaces that if only, even just for a small moment, might allow for their individual and collective voices to be heard.

Ryan: The world doesn’t change on its own. You kind of have to give it a kick. What other choice do you have? You’re either going to go crazy or do something that’s not so good.

Jeremy: It all has taken its toll on me, but I also think that it has shaped me as an individual. It’s an experience to walk the halls of your own school and have people look at you and point their fingers and say, “You’re a queer! You’re a Nigger! You and your gay friends are going to die in hell!” It’s a very gut wrenching experience, but I think I’m lucky because I’m educated on queer

issues, but there's more to it than just me. There's an entire world around me. If it wasn't for my family and friends, or my community, I wouldn't be who I am today. I'm just one piece of the puzzle. Everyone has a social responsibility. I'm an educated activist. I think there's a little bit of hero in all of us. Just make an effort in any direction. Just pick a cause to believe in and fight for it.

Bruce: I view what I do as a professional obligation to ensure that I am not a second-class citizen in my own country. I'm doing what's necessary for me and the others who don't fit in. I think that the most powerful thing that we can do in facing homophobia is for gay and straight people to hold hands and say that homophobia is wrong.

As Grace and Hill (2001) suggest "a postfoundational practice of adult education... interrogates the politics and meanings of identity and difference as part of a larger project to build cultural democracy and realize social justice" (p. 145). Transgressive adult educators ought to create open and free spaces whereby learners are encouraged to take up a socio-cultural critique that explores important critical questions such as: Whose knowledge is of most worth? Whose voices are included or excluded in our teaching and research? How should adult education take up and challenge exclusionary practices? The experiences of the three young adult activist-educators help to challenge and expand the parameters and possibilities of adult education to investigate the role of emotions as impetus for lifelong learning for social justice. By drawing on their emotions, these young adults have taken up the call to engage in the "possibilities for interruption" (Weis & Fine, 2001, p. 521). In the words of Phyllis Cunningham (1998), they "challenge adult educators [and themselves to] find ways to stimulate the development of critical consciousness and thought ... [in an effort to develop] a more equitable, peaceful, and just society" (p. 144). Author's note: This paper draws upon a larger research project focused on young adults and educational activism (Wells, 2005).

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