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Recommended Citation

Grace, André P. and Wells, Kristopher (2005). "Social Learning for Fugitive Learners: The Out Is In Arts-Informed Queer Community Education Project in Alberta," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/36>

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Social Learning for Fugitive Learners: The *Out Is In* Arts-Informed Queer Community Education Project in Alberta

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Abstract: *In this paper we explore Alberta's Out Is In project, which is an arts-informed community education project that we developed to focus on the individual development, social learning, socialization, and inclusion of queer young adults. We discuss activities including a summer 2004 leadership and learning camp that used informal and nonformal learning approaches to achieve the project's goals.*

Introduction: Countering Social Exclusion, Accepting Social Responsibility

In theorizing a coalition-engendered education, Birden (2004) asserts that social learning should be generative (from the bottom up) to engage citizen learners in enhancing social justice through the possibilities involved in collective social action and critique. In doing so, she draws on the counterhegemonic vision of Phyllis Cunningham who has long supported the importance of social learning through informal and nonformal educational initiatives for those historically disenfranchised by mainstream education and culture. In speaking to adult educators, Cunningham (1988) embeds our social responsibility in the possibility for social change.

To the extent that adult educators can assist individuals in creating, disseminating, legitimating, and celebrating their own knowledge (including cultural knowledge), social change can occur—for two reasons. First, the participant-produced knowledge competes with, confronts, and forces change onto the official knowledge; second, the participants, in recognizing that they have produced and celebrated their own view of the world, empower themselves” (p. 137). ... [Moreover,] [t]o the extent that adult educators find ways to stimulate the development of critical consciousness and thought, the practice of adult education can contribute to a more equitable, peaceful, and just society” (p. 144).

The *Out Is In* Arts-informed Queer Community Education Project, based in Edmonton, Alberta, works to model these perspectives on social learning and responsibility. As it moves into its second year, the project has been filling a void for disaffected and marginalized queer young adults (mid-teens to 25 years old) who often see limited possibilities in life, learning, and employment. Many of these individuals feel stigmatized and ashamed due to the broad and pervasive cultural negativity toward their sex, sexual, and gender differences. As a result, some act out of a sense of frustration, often exhibiting a range of negative behaviours that can include drug-and-alcohol abuse, social withdrawal, physical and verbal aggression, and suicide ideation and attempts (Friend, 1998; McCreary Society, 1998; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). *Out Is In* aims to counter this social exclusion and fallout. Our project employs an educational model with informal and nonformal arts-informed pedagogical elements. We have also built a network of community supports to create safe spaces for queer and allied young adults to participate in socially inclusive and responsive learning activities. In utilizing this model, project participants have opportunities to counter their traditional status as fugitive learners as they explore personal and social issues that impact their everyday lives.

Coming Out and Coming to Terms: Filling a Void in Social Learning

For queer persons, coming out appears to be a matter of both degree and approach that is tied to a complexity of contexts and relationships including community setting (urban versus rural, for example), religiosity (the influence of orthodoxy and association), and familial disposition toward queer differences. Despite frequent experiences of alienation, exclusion, and symbolic and physical violence, today's queer persons are coming out at younger ages (D'Augelli, 1998; Grace & Wells, 2001). They tend to be more self-aware and to have greater knowledge about their sex, sexual, and gender differences than previous generations. This has enabled many of them to be successful in coming to terms with their marginalized identities (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Still, coming out and coming to terms "at younger ages also means greater stress, more negative social pressure, and greater need for support" (Ryan and Futterman, 1998, p. 10). This support is vital and should take such forms as positive representations, family and community acceptance, and positive peer relationships. When these supports are weak or nonexistent, younger queers need community support networks and access to a variety of coping strategies (Fenaughty and Harré, 2003). Out Is In strives to be such a community support, engaging younger queers in arts-informed community education focused on resistance, resiliency, social acceptance, and social responsibility.

Helping younger queers feel supported and connected to their communities is vital in building their collective capacity and resiliency to address issues related to safety, health, and discrimination (Grace & Wells, 2004). Drawing upon our extensive community-informed initiatives and consultations with queer and allied young adults from Edmonton, Calgary, and Red Deer, we have identified three major trends.

- *Trend 1:* Homophobia is pervasive in the province of Alberta and very few organized institutional or community supports are available to sustain queer and allied young adults in addressing their pressing health, safety, and educational needs.
- *Trend 2:* With coordinated support and training, queer and allied young adults are overcoming violence and discrimination to become active leaders and advocates for social change in their formal educational settings, families, and communities.
- *Trend 3:* Homophobia and heterosexism are inextricably linked to a host of other complex power relationships such as racism, classism, sexism, and ableism. Many queer young adults are acutely aware of these intersections. For example, those who are Aboriginal and Two-Spirit often share stories of the double oppression of racism and homophobia. What young adults often lack are the institutional supports and education necessary to address these intricate issues effectively as they attempt to navigate their sexual minority identities within ethnic, cultural, and religious families and communities that are not always accepting or supportive of queer issues.

In this regard, the Out Is In project fills a void since very few structured social-learning opportunities exist to help queer individuals take advantage of mentoring focused on their personal and social development. Our model involves queer and allied young adults in social learning through active engagements in drama (such as Boal's Forum Theatre of the Oppressed Workshops), music (song writing as exploration of the queer self and community), photography (creating photo collages in the Freirean context of exploring the word and the world), and art installations (using art to engage citizens in expressive learning for social justice). Participants have been using these arts-informed initiatives to raise community consciousness about what they see as impediments to their social learning, development, and inclusion. Whatever medium they use, they make it clear that heterosexism and homophobia are pervasive in the socially

conservative province of Alberta, and younger queers need organized educational and community supports to help them in their struggle against it.

The Out Is In Project's Social Learning, Development, and Inclusion Activities

The Out Is In project is partially funded by the Department of Justice Canada's Community Mobilization Program. A key purpose of the project is to use arts-informed education to assist queer and allied young adults to become proactive leaders and advocates for social justice in their communities. This model acknowledges that there is a spectral community of queer others (Grace, 2001), and it accounts not only for its tremendous diversity, but also for its depth of resilience. To date, our social learning, development, and inclusion project has focused on three major activities.

Activity 1 – Outreach and Community Partnership and Dialogue: During the past year, queer and allied young adults in the Out Is In project established a unique relationship with another community queer and allied peer group, *Youth Understanding Youth*. Working together, the groups developed and delivered workshops to help peers hone interpersonal skills, pro-social behaviours, and healthy relationships and dating skills. They also engaged in outreach activities with diverse ethno/cultural communities, social-service agencies, religious groups, and low-income community leagues.

Activity 2 – Peer Mentoring: During summer 2004, young adults engaged in a *Summer Arts Studio Supporting Youth (SASSY)* program to help them build peer-mentoring skills. Assisted by adult mentors who shared their artistic, athletic, and creative skills, participants used arts-informed approaches to develop their capacities to address issues related to violence, discrimination, and prejudice. For example, in one phase of the SASSY program participants learned to use digital photography, computers, and photo editing programs to develop self-portraits and artistic expressions that reflected their diverse identities and experiences.

Activity 3 – Young-Adult Leadership Initiatives: During summer 2004, we also hosted *Camp fYrefly*, a three-day leadership retreat for queer and allied young adults. In workshops, focus groups, and other activities, participants engaged in arts-informed projects (as communicative learning) and anti-oppression work. They developed a plan for two regional site-based leadership programs in Edmonton and Calgary. Under the auspices of *Out Is In*, young-adult leaders have been conducting needs assessments to help them develop and deliver peer-led youth programs and services in both communities.

Through these activities, queer and allied young adults have been building skills and capacities so they can engage in peer-led learning and leadership training that focuses on aspects of individual development and group socialization. The Out Is In project seeks to create a resilient peer-led leadership network that can help sustain queer community youth groups. This is a key goal as we expand our outreach activities in the second year of our project to assist homeless and street-involved persons as well as Aboriginal Two-Spirit young adults who deal with the double oppression of racism and homophobia.

Camp fYrefly: Leading and Learning in Queer Community

On Labour Day Weekend 2004, the Out Is In project hosted Camp fYrefly, which was a three-day inter-provincial queer and allied youth leadership retreat weekend. This activity attracted over forty participants from Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, and Saskatoon. Ten

volunteers, including teachers, social workers, and other professionals, donated their time, knowledge, and skills to support this groundbreaking event. Camp fYrefly was the first specifically queer and allied youth leadership retreat to be held in the Prairie Provinces, and it may well be the largest one so far to be held in Canada. Interest in the camp indicated to us that there is a clear and present need to continue to develop and foster leadership and social learning.

Camp fYrefly was designed to help participants develop their capacities to address violence in their homes, educational institutions, and communities. Through workshops, arts-informed learning activities, and opportunities for individual and group mentoring, they focused on individual development, healthy socialization, and building peer-mentoring and leadership skills. Camp fYrefly and follow-up activities via the Out Is In project have helped queer and allied youth to

- build self-respect and good healthy behaviours;
- socialize as queer and allied persons in safe and supportive environments;
- develop peer-mentoring, leadership, and conflict resolution skills;
- confront the tendencies to use drugs and alcohol, ideate about or attempt suicide, and be truant as students or employees;
- address double oppressions such as being Aboriginal and queer (Two-Spirit);
- deal with homelessness or life in youth-in-care settings; and
- handle difficult family situations, especially those that are violent.

Overall, Camp fYrefly focused on building and nurturing the leadership potential of participants in an effort to help them learn how to be social change agents. At the end of the camp, we asked participants to respond to a survey based on their experiences. Thirty-six participants responded. Here we highlight some of their comments and reflections in response to the statement “I couldn’t believe it when ...”.

- There were so many of us. Right off the bat we weren’t strangers – just a community that was gathering for the first time.
- Everyone was so happy, friendly, and energetic.
- Everyone was treated with so much respect.
- We talked openly about never having felt so supported and safe and we realized that some youth do not have family and/or a support network.
- The whole experience was so emotional. In fact the abundance of emotion that was displayed was really unexpected and quite touching.
- I came and no one judged me or formed opinions without getting to know me.
- I was so content and comfortable. I guess it was because I was surrounded by those who just *knew*.
- The emotional drama exercise taught me about my own insecurities.
- I didn’t have to be afraid. I could say “my girlfriend” and nobody blinked an eye.
- Our stories triggered compassion and support from others regardless of age.
- We had a hug fest.
- Everyone was here to enjoy the camp, including the people planning.
- I’m so glad something helpful like this is finally arriving in western Canada.

The camp respondents “couldn’t believe” that, for once, they were in the majority. Many respondents commented on how quickly a respectful community formed in which they felt genuinely safe and supported. They enjoyed the freedom to express both positive and negative emotions openly without having to feel guarded or misunderstood. Many commented about how

much they enjoyed meeting “people like me.” They liked the bonding that came from singing and dancing together. Most mentioned the camp mascot—a stuffed toy animal named “Gay Swimmer Bear”—as something that would be a fond memory. Overall, participants liked the way that those present felt an immediate sense of understanding one another. Simply feeling safe was also something that participants enjoyed. Of note, participants expressed surprise over how willing many peers were to take emotional risks in the drama exercise that involved putting their bodies into positions that represented emotions they had been feeling throughout the camp. The fallout from this exercise also surprised many participants since some other events and activities had to be delayed to accommodate those who needed to have an emotional break. Participants liked that they could take time out, as they needed it.

Concluding Perspective: Expanding the Realm of Possibility

Merriam, Courtenay, and Baumgartner (2003) have stressed the need for adult educators to conduct research into the social-learning practices of nonnormative communities, including those marginalized by sex, sexual, and gender differences. Our analysis of the Out Is In project contributes to this requisite social research. It indicates that diverse and inclusive approaches to social learning are necessary. It also indicates that social learning for historically disenfranchised fugitive learners can be holistic and driven when it provides an affirming counterhegemonic site to interrogate what queer and allied young-adult learners perceive as enablers or impediments to their social learning, development, and inclusion. Moreover, in keeping with Nancy Fraser’s (1993) critical feminist perspective, social-learning sites like the Out Is In project become important counterpublic sites of recuperation and resistance for queer and allied persons to engage in learning and work for social justice.

As a social learning, development, and inclusion project, Out Is In contributes to the development of theory and practice in adult education and culture in other ways. Emerging during the 1990s, queer theory and queer studies lack a significant history of research and practice traditions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Our project helps build knowledge by examining social learning for queer and allied young adults as a locally situated and constructed model and practice. It also provides another opportunity for adult education as a field of study and practice to investigate its own social and cultural learning boundaries and the extent to which they may be exclusionary and oppressive. This is important because the modern practice of adult education, especially in its mainstream form, has been distant from the struggle of queer persons to secure human and civil rights accorded to the majority of persons whose sexual orientation and gender identity are unquestioned (Grace, 2001; Hill, 1995 & 1996). Indeed an engagement with queer knowledge and social-learning practices can enhance the possibilities of adult education as a field of study and practice. As Grace and Hill (2004) relate:

Queer knowledge and interventions inform the practical and political questions that adult educators need to ask as they engage in strategic deconstruction of exclusionary forms of adult education and the construction of inclusionary, transformative pedagogies. How does adult education function? How are its various forms produced? Who regulates them? ... Queer knowledge provides information and insights to those who take up these questions. It suggests ways to query truth claims, generate unruly perspectives, impeach what appears to be innocent, and probe hidden normative assumptions as actions for social and cultural change. It opens paths to educational pedagogies that are democratic, unsettling and unsettled, dynamic, inclusive, transgressive, and perhaps most importantly, transformative. (p. 185)

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