

university of the streets.

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The prevalence of technology and transnational migration enable people to connect and thrive on social media networks. Although our society embraces high-tech marvels, nowadays we lament that, through them, we have lost the art of conversation. Thus, many face social isolation and feel disaffected in their surroundings through a lack of engaged dialogue, a diminished sense of belonging, and as a result, feel disinclination towards community building. Indeed, the factors that mitigate the prevailing urban experience interest me profusely and have guided my burgeoning research interests. Several years ago, my disaffection with living in the urban landscape led me to seek communities that promote civic dialogue and that are agents of change through public conversations.

Accordingly, I am interested in exploring the role of public conversations in the fast paced, harried, and constantly connected society that we inhabit. Researchers argue that belonging and participating in social networks does not enhance support systems nor strengthen friendships, but instead leads people to experience further alienation and social isolation. (Goleman 9) Thus, my objective was to conduct fieldwork at one of the last public spaces that engaged citizens of various backgrounds – age levels, socioeconomic status, cultures, and diverging interests – to connect and weave meaningful dialogue.

Since early 2009, I have been intermittently involved with the University of the Streets Café, a Concordia University initiative housed at the Institute in Community Development that claims to “take

learning out of the university and into community spaces and cafes”. The Institute in Community Development was founded in 1993. The Café’s program coordinator, Elizabeth Hunt¹, shares the *raison d’être* of the Institute:

The Institute invites citizens within the university’s walls and develops programming that stretches beyond the fabled ivory tower, creating a learning space—a bridge between the university and the larger community that contains it—where activists, community workers, funders, decision-makers, volunteers and other everyday folks learn alongside students, professors, and administrators. All this learning takes place under the assumption that each participant has something to contribute, each person is a citizen (in the sense of community member, not in terms of nationality) and that each citizen plays a crucial role in responding to the social and economic challenges of our communities.

The University of the Streets Café has been a focal connection for socially inclined “citizens to pursue lifelong learning and engagement through public conversations”². As a regular participant, I have been witness to what Elizabeth calls “conversations for a learning society” that foster liminality, mutual reflections and exchanges among participants and that have led to civic engagement. In pursuing my fieldwork on the Café, my primary objective was to explore the role of public conversations as transformative agents of change. More particularly, I sought to obtain insight on the emergence of collaborative learning, how citizens engage collectively, and the manner in which participants negotiate the resolutely complex life and times they inhabit.

Based on my research, academia has not embraced the role that public conversations play in community settings nor has it held the gaze of scientific inquiry. Therefore, it is my hope to join sundry researchers and community educators in a discussion on the informal learning that occurs in conversation circles. Consequently, the field research that I have undertaken will endeavour to contribute to an eclectic, budding group of voices that are steadily rising in converging fields of inquiry.

conversation cafés

The University of the Streets Café, broadly based on SFU’s Philosopher’s Café model, promotes conversations that have a fluid purpose through a defined structure. It caters to informal learning and developing a “more informed and connected community”³ through an active citizenry that does not seek public policy initiatives. In fact, participants range from university students to professors and an assorted array of community members who represent various socioeconomic status, cultural, academic, and working class backgrounds with the sole desire to exchange ideas and knowledge.

There are several initiatives in North America that espouse the café culture (Davetian) and popular education model (Carr), but whose focus and approach may differ from the University of the Streets Café considerably. The World Café is a prominent example that is cited by café culture enthusiasts, but whose mission and structure is worlds apart from our ethnographic focus. Thus, at the World Café, “intimate conversations at small café-style tables or in small conversation clusters link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and make new connections around questions that really matter to their life, work, or community” (Tan & Brown). In Seattle, Conversation Cafés are reminiscent of our model. Their mission is to stimulate community, endorse democracy and learning through public conversations. (Conversation Cafés website Hunt)

conversations for a learning society

Founded in May 2003, the University of the Streets Café has organized more than 350 public conversations on a variety of topics of ardent, public interest and societal concern in a multitude of community spaces – cafés, community centres, museums, parks, art galleries, and yoga studios. During a typical conversation, the number of participants equals 30 to 45 on average, but this season’s second conversation, an immensely popular conversation entitled “Beyond Business as Usual: Has Occupy changed us?” gathered 75 concerned students, community organizers, and anarchists – young and old.

The structure of the University of the Streets Café is straightforward. Public conversations are scheduled at 7pm on most weeknights and last two hours. During my conversations with the coordinators, their intention became clear: conversations are purported to be free, held in public and community spaces that are easily accessible by public transportation and open to the public. Although the conversation model is fluid, each conversation is nonetheless structured, and thematic conversations are organized ahead of time. There is a moderator whose role is to ensure the conversation runs smoothly, that there are no lulls during the evening, and that each participant has the opportunity to converse and take their space – should they wish to do so. Furthermore, the role of the guest(s) is to provide their expertise, knowledge, perspective, or take on the discussion topic. After ruminating for 15 minutes, the floor is open to the participants and as Hunt writes in her notes, then the guest becomes another participant. Hunt reiterates the objective of the public conversation. She writes:

“Once a guest has presented and the conversation has been initiated by the moderator, the scope, content and various orbits and (trajectories of the discussion

are) largely directed by the interests and intelligence of the group. In fact, the bulk of the two hours (usually 90 minutes) is devoted to the larger conversation that is influenced by all present.” (Hunt 3)

As one of the last vestiges of community, the role of public conversations is to fulfill a communal void and social alienation that our increasingly micromanaged and corporatist lives continue to experience. Indeed, people seek out the public conversation model for ceaseless reasons, but through my fieldwork, I was able to observe several possibilities for the resurgence of such community-based models of communication.

In an age of technological prowess and access, our society has demonstrated a diminished capacity to connect authentically and profoundly with one another. Despite the prevalence of social media networks, the art of friendship has become muddled. In a recent conversation, “Best friends forever: what does authentic friendship look like?”, many participants illustrated the deficiencies of modern relationships. Indeed, one modern 20 something said it best: “friends are those with whom you hangout when you’re not involved”⁴.

conclusion and reflections

This study offers a cursory insight into the role of social learning and the public conversation model as alternative pedagogies. My research demonstrates that community-based initiatives provide a salient learning model in innovative and social justice oriented settings while reigniting the art of the conversation.

endnotes

1. Elizabeth Hunt, program coordinator, is doing an MA about public conversations and informal learning University of the Streets Café website: <http://instdev.concordia.ca/our-programs/university-of-the-streets-cafe/about-the-program/>
2. University of the Streets Café website: <http://instdev.concordia.ca/our-programs/university-of-the-streets-cafe/about-the-program/>
3. Craig Paterson, Deliberative IDEAS: Conversations with a Purpose. http://delibcaideas.org/?page_id=3
4. Field Notes, Feb. 27: <http://fieldnotes.sarinemakdessian.com/2012/02/best-friends-forever-what-does-authentic-friendship-look-like/>

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