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INTRODUCTION TO FINDING VOICE AND LISTENING: THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY- AND ARTS-BASED ADULT EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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Abstract

This special issue of the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education *includes nine articles that explore community- and arts-based research and/or pedagogy and the power of these practices to create opportunities for those living on the margins to find their voices, tell their stories, and be heard by others. While adult educators and researchers oriented to addressing social injustices and inequalities have long been concerned with the matter of voice, in this special issue we include accounts of community- and arts-based activities that created conditions for those voices to be heard. There is no possibility for change if there is no audience for these voices. Creative expression in various forms has much to offer practices that are concerned with enabling individuals and groups located on the margins of dominant society to speak and be heard.*

Résumé

Le présent numéro spécial de la Revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes *inclut neuf articles qui se penchent sur les recherches ou les pédagogies axées sur la communauté ou les arts ainsi que sur la capacité de ces pratiques de créer de nouvelles possibilités pour les personnes vivant aux marges de trouver leur voix, de raconter leurs histoires et de se faire entendre par les autres. Sachant que les spécialistes et les chercheuses et chercheurs en éducation des adultes qui s'intéressent aux inégalités et à l'injustice sociale abordent depuis longtemps la question de la voix, dans le présent numéro spécial nous présentons des activités communautaires et artistiques ayant créé des contextes qui laissent entendre ces voix. Le changement est impossible aussi longtemps que ces voix ne sont pas entendues. Les divers modes expression créative ont beaucoup à offrir aux pratiques qui cherchent à permettre aux individus et aux groupes situés aux marges de la société dominante de parler et d'être entendus.*

Speaking and Listening across Difference

We regard the fundamental practice of speaking and listening as political and central to a pluralistic democracy. Our approach is informed by Susan Bickford (1996), who challenged the notion of consensus as the goal of democratic engagement, noting that within pluralistic democratic societies, insisting on consensus can silence difference. Instead, forms of engagement that enable listening across, and to, these differences can enable some kind of mutual understanding without requiring agreement. The goal for each communicative event, for Bickford, is to engage in such a way that *one more conversation is possible*. Communication and understanding across differences are, however, challenging given the hierarchical structures that organize individuals and groups according to gender, race, class, age, language and culture, ability, and so on.

In academic and other settings, there also exists a hierarchy in relation to knowledge claims wherein academic researchers are regarded as having the capacity to make such claims, while other accounts of those who are positioned outside of these structures are suspect. Miranda Fricker (2007) regarded this situation as a form of epistemic injustice and called for engagement with and the inclusion of community perspectives in the creation and sharing of knowledge. However, she cautioned that such initiatives must go further to address what she called "identity prejudices"—that is, how hearers of these alternative accounts judge their value and veracity. These prejudices are difficult to address, as they are often subconscious. Can arts-based creative expression, because of its non-rational engagement, help in opening up these subconscious prejudices and the development of empathy for other perspectives and lived experiences? That is a question we continue to explore, and we invite others on this journey.

Finding voice, being heard, and developing empathy are political activities that can contribute to social justice. Feminist philosopher Helen Nussbaum (in Harmon, 2002) emphasized the importance of telling stories and listening in struggles for social justice; these processes help in "learn[ing] how to imagine what another creature might feel in response to various events. At the same time, we identify with the other creature and learn something about ourselves" (p. 176). Political empathy cannot, however, be based on assumptions about reciprocity between speaker and listener or a belief that we can fully understand or know "the Other." Instead of assuming this kind of symmetry, Iris Marion Young (1997) suggested that all we can achieve is asymmetrical reciprocity: "the trust to communicate cannot wait for the promise to reciprocate or the conversation will never happen" (p. 50). Young called for moral humility and framed these relations as a practice of gift giving.

This matter of asymmetry of relations was also taken up by anti-racist scholar Sherene Razack (1998), who pointed to how some practices of telling stories and listening can actually reproduce injustice. Building on the important work of Fanon (1963), Razack was concerned with the violent process of depersonalization that is often the result of interaction between dominant and subordinate groups. She brought attention to how "powerful narratives [can turn] oppressed peoples into objects" (p. 3) and how "the colonial encounter produces…both the colonizer…and the colonized" (p. 4). Given the possibility of objectification, it becomes important to examine the conditions in which listening can prevent colonial dynamics. Listening to a multiplicity of voices with a diverse audience in a public setting can provide some perspective. The presence of others can lead to some

critical self-reflection when people witness others' physical or verbal responses. Creating opportunities for people to speak directly can also prevent re-marginalization. A democratic society relies and depends on a range of experiences being voiced, especially from those who are directly affected by particular policies or decisions, or those whose experiences may significantly differ from our own. Listening is a profoundly democratic approach, and Andrew Dobson (2012) suggested it is in deficit. We are familiar with the words usually identified with activism—*speaking out or standing up*; very few, if any, expressions refer to listening as a form of activism. Dobson suggested that listening enhances inclusion and that democratic theory and practice could be stimulated if they paid attention to listening. In fact, he suggested that listening in situations of conflict has been underexplored. He also suggested that listening is linked to a sense of collective identity and is about empowerment of those whose voices have been silent for too long. The arts are an invitation to listen, with all our senses, to experiences and voices often ignored, giving an opportunity to deepen that true democratic spirit and enliven a dynamic and pluralistic public space with unheard voices.

We also want to reconsider the notion of safety. A common claim within the broader adult education discourse is that it is important for adult educators to create safety. Given the hierarchies of knowledge claims, the matter of subconscious judgment that maintains epistemic injustice, and the differences that can exist within any group or relationship, even when it appears that participants are somewhat homogeneous, we believe it is dangerous to assume safety, as it can deny and erase differences. Furthermore, adult learning involves taking risks—learners risk having their assumptions challenged, their worldviews interrupted. Even if learning is beneficial and contributes to positive change, there is still discomfort and sometimes pain within these learning processes. The question we would like to pose is, "Safe enough for whom?" In light of this caution about asymmetry, colonization, and safety, we are curious about the potential of creative expression and arts-based practices, particularly those employed within informal, non-formal, and community settings to create conditions of equality—that is, where the risks are more equally shared. A key premise of this special issue is that artistic or creative expression enables the development of insights into particular situations—our own and that of others (Eisner, 2008).

The Democratizing Power of Arts-Based Practices

We are curious about how artistic and creative expression, thoughtfully carried out, can enliven adult learning, promote risk taking and empathy for others, and move toward relations of solidarity. By solidarity, we align with the sentiment of Lilla Watson, an Indigenous Australian woman, when she said, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."[1] Artistic and creative expression can also help develop moral humility by tapping into the emotional dimension of telling stories and listening. This is central to building relations of solidarity, as Clare Hemmings (2012) suggested in her discussion of "affective dissonance"; that is, how shared rage and frustration can lead to "affective solidarity." Sandra Hayes and Lyle Yorks (2007) observed how "the arts can bridge boundaries separating people and keep those boundaries porous" (p. 2), and Pearl Hunt

1   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson

(2010), building on the idea of African scholar and artist Ogunshaye (as cited in Parrott, 1972), noted that "artistic production can promote unity and understanding among peoples" (p. 63). Similarly, Maxine Greene (1995) advocated for creative and arts-based forms of expression as a way to build community and engage our imaginations:

> Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called "other"…imagination…permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (p. 3)

Ursula Le Guin (as cited in Waldroupe, 2017) spoke about how the arts (and the sciences) are the heart of freedom. The notion of creative expression as part of our common wealth can also be found in Elizabeth Ellsworth's (2005) musing about creative expression that "tr[ies] to make shareable a knowledge that cannot be explained" (p. 157). The political contributions of creative expression are the concern of Jeff Adams and Allan Owens (2016), who spoke to how art enables "political subjectification" and disrupts normalizing societal roles and practices and the distribution of power (p. 12).

It is important to expand on what is meant by the term *artistic expression*. As Binkley (1977) elaborated, "One does not necessarily have to think of art in terms of aesthetic value," and there is "no a priori reason why art must confine itself to the creation of aesthetic objects" (p. 273). In this special issue, the matter of what counts as art or creative expression was a frequent question. Rather than impose some rigid boundaries, we suggest that in all of the articles and stories told in this special issue, creative expression involved both a process and a product; the latter is no more important than the former. It involves using our senses and emotions and "points us to new paths, new ways of seeing and solving, and…offers us inspiration from both the inside and the outside. Creative expression is rooted in the capacities for observation, discovery, imagination, and courage. It wakes us up, challenges us, and enriches all of life."[2]

Arts-Based Adult Education and Research

There is expanding literature that explores how art-making practices (poetry, visual art, film, theatre, music, and dance) have supported individuals and groups positioned at the edges of mainstream society to tell their stories and speak their truths. This literature describes how adult educators, community activists, and artists are working in a wide range of settings and promoting the use of the arts to communicate individual and collective perspectives and provide opportunities for exchanges in multicultural and pluralistic societies (e.g., Bagley & Cancienne, 2001; Barndt, 2006; Butterwick & Roy, 2016; Clover, Sanford, & Butterwick, 2013; Clover & Stalker, 2007; Hayes & Yorks, 2007; Lawrence, 2005; Mirochnik & Sherman, 2002; Powell & Speiser, 2005). The forms of creative expression deployed in arts-based pedagogy and research are continuing to expand. For example, in his research study "Refashioning Masculinity," Ben Barry (2016) explored how "men construct their identities through appearance and how fashion can be a vital tool to advance social change" (p. 1), and he shared his findings in a fashion show. Visual arts-based methods have long been a central activity within popular education processes (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin,

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2   https://gratefulness.org/area-of-interest/creative-expression/

& Thomas, 1995; Barndt, 2011; Gatt-Fly, 1983; Hope & Timmel, 1999; Nadeau, 1996). The visual and performative arts assist not only in describing and analyzing the problems, but also in envisioning what actions should be taken. For example, Mok Escueta and Shauna Butterwick (2012) reported on how using popular education methods, including visual art-making, to explore mental-health clients' understandings of trauma resulted in participants challenging mental-health service providers to provide more opportunities for collective engagement.

We hope this issue adds to the growing field of arts-based research and pedagogy within adult education. Included are accounts of how theatre, dance, storytelling, stitching and beading, and photography were core elements of community-based adult learning programs and research. These accounts speak to how various forms of creative expression aided in engaging with difference across political, economic, race, gender, and cultural divides.

Stories of Courage and Change

Jennifer Miller's article describes how Theatre of Witness has been used by community members in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, to explore experiences of "The Troubles" in Ireland. We learn how Theatre of Witness, like other social justice theatre programs, involved a witnessing process that enabled authentic and vulnerable storytelling, which resulted in the development of empathy by humanizing the "other." Similar concerns regarding how dominant political and economic agendas can lead to dehumanization are the focus in Dan Baron's story about a project (the Rivers of Meeting) in the Brazilian Amazon, specifically in the Afro-Indigenous fishing community of Cabelo Seco, Marabá. Using dance, the performance pedagogies created by local youth proved to be powerful processes for finding their African ancestral voices and depicting the harsh realities of struggling to live well when faced with the onslaught of massive and invasive industrial development.

Two articles in this issue focus on immigrant women's experiences. Susan Brigham, Catherine Baillie Abidi, and Sylvia Calatayud undertook two studies involving the use of participatory photography with women in Nova Scotia who recently immigrated to Canada. Informed by a feminist theoretical perspective, the study participants took photographs of their lives and shared the meaning of these images with other participants and in public displays. Participatory photography proved to be a powerful tool to deepen participants' and the audience's understanding of migration, specifically its gendered realities. Creating the conditions for vulnerable storytelling is the focus of Roula N. Kteily-Hawa's study in which immigrant women told their stories of living with HIV. Kteily-Hawa found that when she began to empathize with these women and shared her own narrative as an immigrant woman struggling with loss and searching for a new home, the conversation shifted from an "objective" approach to interviewing to one of shared storytelling.

Storytelling as a form of creative expression was also key to Natalia Balyasnikova and Spring Gillard's storytelling approach within an ESL program for older adult immigrants. They found that it greatly enhanced the seniors' language learning and created a strong sense of community where everyone was welcomed. Paige Zhang and Roula N. Kteily-Hawa describe how they set up storytelling workshops for a group of homeless men who attended a shelter and clinic. With careful attention to creating conditions that welcomed the participants and encouraged any kind of contribution (both oral and written), Zhang and

Kteily-Hawa supported workshop participants to find a way to speak about their lives. Opportunities for storytelling by homeless individuals can contribute to breaking down stigma and stereotypes.

Cindy Hanson engaged in an arts-based inquiry with Indigenous women located in Canada and Chile. A focus and the methodology of Hanson's exploration was these women's creative practices, specifically beading and textile artistry. The study revealed the centrality of these creative forms of expression within these Indigenous cultures and the intergenerational nature of learning. The impact of community arts-based programs on determinants of health is the focus of Ann Fox, Vanessa Currie, and Elizabeth Brennan's report of an evaluation project. To sustain these programs, research is needed to show how creative-expression programs can contribute to well-being. Their study examined how six programs that deployed poetry, visual arts, dance and music, drama, and digital storytelling resulted in increased social inclusion, meaningful relationships, and improvements in health care, living environments, and education outcomes.

We reached out to French-speaking colleagues in Quebec and were very pleased that Anne-Céline Genevois accepted to write about the exciting and innovative use of the arts by practitioners of the Elizabeth Fry Society (Société Elizabeth Fry du Québec) with incarcerated (or previously incarcerated) women. After briefly tracing the work with women in prison to the rise of feminism in the 1970s, she describes their effective use of community arts in the past decade. After a first successful project that included 49 women and 8 professional artists, the Elizabeth Fry Society decided to use the arts not only to create a social dialogue but to provide recognition of creativity and talents, which has been empowering for participants. It was so successful that, after their incarceration, some women formed a collective that uses art against violence, intolerance, and exclusion. The Elizabeth Fry Society states that the arts can play a role in social transformation, and in her article, Genevois gives a testimony of such transformation. We look forward to hearing more about their work in the future.

Conclusion

We are pleased to offer this collection of articles by academic and community-based practitioners engaged in research and/or pedagogy using the arts with a wide range of people in community settings. Pulling together this special issue involved a lot of exchanges and fruitful discussions with authors. Our own review process, as well as feedback from external examiners, raised many questions. We considered the utility and the problems of categories; for example, who decides what counts as "arts-based" pedagogy or research? We offer a special issue that includes voices from practitioners, and in some sense, expands the usual inclusion in an academic journal. We wondered how academic traditions sometimes silence voices to which we need to listen. For many of the submissions, storytelling was the main art form, and we found ourselves asking whose stories are being told, and by whom? We also encountered terms, language, and references used by authors from fields of study different from adult education. We hope their inclusion brings some interdisciplinarity to the conversation. We were reminded about the matter of evaluating arts-based practices and the importance and challenges of documenting their impact. As Giorgos Tsiris, Mercédès Pavlicevic, and Camilla Farrant (2014) indicated, we need "a stance that acknowledges the complex—and at times colliding—values within arts-based services" (p. 22).

As noted earlier in this introduction, we bring a critical feminist view, one that sees the matter of voice and listening as political. While we are strong advocates for the potential of arts-based adult learning and research practices to contribute to social justice, we are also cautious about how such engagements can be shaped by hierarchies of privilege and penalty. While we emphasize the important of listening as a politically essential activity to democratic engagements, we are also aware of how quickly the objectification of the "other" can occur, particularly within academic practices. We can be unaware of how implicated we are when using the dominant discourse and the colonizing words we take for granted. Young's (1997) notion of moral humility is as political and as important as listening.

As we pulled this issue together, we were reminded of our own arts-based activities. Shauna recently worked in a project in Vancouver[3] that involved residents in a low-income area of the city learning over five workshop sessions how to make a hand-stitched book. Into that book participants added images and stories using some additional art practices (e.g., collage, block-print making, calligraphy, quilting), which they learned during the workshops. Shauna found in the course of these gatherings that the creative process opened up a space for sharing stories and listening. Carole has been organizing documentary film festivals for more than a decade so that courageous and inspiring stories from all over the world can be heard. She has also organized documentary screenings at the federal prison for women in Truro and more recently at the provincial men's jail in New Glasgow as outreach projects to underserved groups. Discussions following the films are always engaging and insightful. One such discussion led to the realization that those in the prison had access to novels but no other "real" books (philosophy, psychology, anthropology, art, politics, and so on), so hundreds of books were collected. Carole also works with a local project to bring stories of rural life to greater attention given the erosion of rural communities in Nova Scotia.

We hope that sharing these projects will contribute to a recognition that a culture of listening is intrinsically linked to the quality of our democracy.

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3   The Sketchbook Project was initiated and run by WePress (https://wepress.ca/), a not-for-profit organization devoted to "offering historic and contemporary methods of print- and art-making… to those who are marginalized by class, sexuality, gender, race, culture, disability, mental health, and addiction."

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