

Voices of Love: Reaching Across Outreach Report

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Introduction

In April, the Vancouver School Board began a routine process of updating their policies, including the policies around homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation. Through a consultation with an LGBTQ working group, The Vancouver School Board proposed a new policy that would include a focus on discrimination based on gender: the idea behind this being that “homophobic” discrimination is sometimes (if not mostly) elicited on the basis of gender performance, as opposed to someone’s “actual” sexual orientation. Alongside several items on the policy that they reviewed, one of the items involved the creation of at least one gender neutral, single stall bathroom in each school.

The proposition caught the wind of some right wing conservatives, which caused a huge controversy – with the 2 day consultation process increasing to 5, with the police at one point barricading the entrance of the consultation process and checking ID to prevent chaos, and medical emergencies happening during the strenuous 8 hour consultation process. A process that was clearly not healthy for all communities involved.

One of the main communities that was involved in organizing against the policy happened to be the Chinese Evangelical Christian community. The media placed much emphasis on the ethnicities of the Christians, and from my own experiences as someone who is gay, there was a noticeable racist backlash within the queer community around Chinese conservatism.

Jen Sung, a close friend of mine, and the coordinator of Out in Schools at the time (of which I am also a facilitator), and I, were deeply affected by what was transpiring during the consultations. Torn between the queer community that we are deeply involved with, and the racism that was being directed indirectly towards us by our allies, this motivated us to start a blog and writing about what was happening.

I was also invested in this issue in several different ways. I still identify as a Christian, and I was raised in an evangelical Chinese Christian community. As someone who also identifies as a queer feminist activist, this contentious situation was something that I was very bothered by, and was deeply invested in on many different levels.

How the Conversation Began at Theatre for Living

Because of what was happening at the school board and my involvement in the issues, we spent a lot of time at the Theatre for Living offices talking about what was going on. We also realized that there were some interesting crossovers from each “side”¹ – that both “sides” of the controversy

¹ Although I reject the notion of binaries in this situation (i.e. there aren’t “sides” in this controversy – there much more diversity in opinion), for the brevity of this report, I will use this notion of “sides” to distinguish between the majority of folks who supported the policy, versus those who opposed the policy

(conservative, mostly Christian parents, and the LGBT community) had some similarities. Particularly that they all wanted their children to be safe, and that they all loved their children. From this potential moment of “solidarity” between these opposing “sides”, we thought this might be a good exercise for a Rainbow of Desire.

Outreach Process and Learnings

In doing my research for outreach, I knew that the queer community would mostly be on board. Because of my long history working in the community, and my involvement in numerous feminist and queer social justice campaigns (since I was 14 years old), particularly my involvement with Out in Schools (and organization that goes to high schools to talk about homophobia and bullying), I have many friends and allies in the community that I knew would be supportive of this dialogue.

I began by getting in touch with the BC Coalition for Safer Schools – which was the coalition that was formed initially to support the VSB policy. Some interested members of the Coalition, including several youth, several of my friends, a school board trustee, and members of the trans* and queer community, came to the TfL offices for an initial meeting to discuss the project. They were all supportive of the project, and brought it back to other members of the coalition to reach out through their networks.

After about a week, some concerns were raised from within the Coalition about the project. The concerns were mainly about how this dialogue was going to look. There was a misconception or miscommunication about how the Rainbow of Desire happens. Some of the trans* community were concerned that we were going to bring trans* people (particularly youth) in a room with angry evangelicals and engage them in a heated debate – which would be very unsafe for some folks. I met with some members of the Coalition on a few occasions to discuss the project, which dispelled a few of these misconceptions, and eventually, many more trans* activists came on board.

There were also concerns that were raised about trans* sensitive language – or as is known in the community “trans* competency”. At Theatre for Living, we went through an internal process to engage around this request from the community. David D. raised the important point that the nature of the dialogue cannot serve one side or the other. Trans* sensitive language could be triggering to the Christian community, and on the flip side, language that is “the norm” (i.e. not trans* sensitive) could be triggering to the trans* community. We also discussed the nature of the dialogue, and the importance of working with discomforts and triggers.

We invited the trans* outreach folks from the Vancouver Health Authority to come and do a trans* competency training at Theatre for Living (it turned out that it was only David D and David N. that were available for the training that day. We couldn’t reschedule, and we wanted to have the training before the Voices of Love dialogue). While there were disagreements within TfL about the nature of how the trans* training was “top down”, we were still able to make some decisions about the dialogue process that took into account how some people might want to self identify. Specifically, David D suggested that when people come on the stage, he would ask for their preferred pronouns without the mic, so that people could self identify.

I think it’s important to note that there were a few people from the queer community who said they were not willing to participate because they were already deeply involved in the VSB consultation process, and were not willing to go through that emotional work again.

Outreach Focuses

Since I had such a positive response from the queer community, I decided to focus about 90% of my energy on the conservative voices.

My strategy was to connect with anyone who would speak to me. Having come from an Evangelical Christian community, I knew that this was going to be a challenge to get the more conservative churches on board, as anything from “the outside” is generally not condoned, let alone promoted within the church. I emailed about 150 churches, and met with about two dozen pastors over the summer, in hopes of reaching as many churches as possible.

I started by connecting with my own Christian connections, which was very challenging. I knew this was going to be the case, as I have become a bit of a pariah in that community because of some of the past activism work that I was involved with as a teenager.

Some interesting notes on communicating the project to Christians:

- Describing the “Rainbow of Desire” was confusing on a few levels:
 - o “Rainbow” and “Desire” are triggering words for Christians, as desire is generally bad and sinful, and “rainbow” places the conversation within a queer context
 - o The theatrical technique is confusing because it is hard to picture...and explaining the technique more and more can make it more confusing. Sometimes less wording is better.
 - o The “random” nature of the dialogue...i.e. no script, everything coming from the audience can come across as chaotic. Reiterating that the theatrical dialogue is heavily “facilitated” (i.e. joked), is important
- There is a lot of “Christianphobia” in the community in general. In my experience in doing outreach for this project, Christians are very aware that society frowns upon religious fundamentalism, and Christians are very wary of coming across as bigots...and very defensive and reserved about their faith.

One of the biggest lessons I learned from doing the outreach for this project, is that going through the church leadership was not a good idea – I should have spent my energy connecting with Christians on the ground who were willing to dialogue with me. While almost all the pastors I spoke to were very supportive of the project, church decisions are collective agreements, so while the pastor may be supportive, going through the elders board, or through the bureaucratic process necessary to promote and outreach through the church organization was nearly impossible.

A pastor that I spoke to, who was supportive of true dialogue about queer issues in the church, shared with me how he actually lost his job teaching at a Christian College, because he was open to honest dialogue – let alone if he was queer affirming, or not. Another church leader I spoke to shared with me how one pastor he knew was fired for opening up a “liberal” dialogue – because of pressure from one of the bigger tithers in the church. The church was essentially strong armed by someone in the community who gave a large monthly offering, into following a more conservative, homophobic theology. In retrospect, I should have connected with people within church communities, gain momentum, and then have supporters approach their church leaders.

Intersecting Stories

My own journey as a “new” Theatre for Living team member also deeply influenced the outreach process. I dove into the outreach process with the “goal” of reaching the most conservative, homophobic Christians who were organizing against the policy. However, I also went through my own process, in truly “seeing” the Theatre for Living model of humanizing all sides of the story, and an authentic recognition that we are all members of a community.

In the middle of the outreach process, I also went through the Theatre for Living training, which also further shifted my lens in terms of doing outreach for Voices of Love. One of my beliefs that I really wanted to follow was the idea that the process of “doing” the work, should not include an already determined outcome. In other words, to avoid pre deciding what I wanted the outcome to be. Having a diverse group of people in the room for the dialogue, also meant that those who came would take the conversations back into their own communities, and the dialogue would continue. The outreach process for me then became much more intimate and relational, as opposed to deliberately trying to reach specific people because I had decided that they were the ones that were “supposed” to be in the room. It became much more organic.

I was very encouraged to see how far the outreach had gone. Trinity Western University – a Christian university that has a reputation of being homophobic – actually posted an advertisement for Voices of Love in their bulletin, as did Regent College, another Christian university in the lower mainland.

I was invited by a few churches in Vancouver to speak about the project in front of the congregation, including a church that belonged to the Anglican Network.

After Voices of Love, there were also several Christians who reached out to me wanting to continue the dialogue.

One woman spoke to me over the phone, starting by voicing concern about what had transpired over the event. She was very excited about what had happened, but she also felt like the “Christian story” was marginalized. She felt that because of the story that was offered, the “bad person” was obviously the Christian who had the argument with the trans* person who was a supporter of the policy – and that no one would want to step up to be the Christian or voice the “Christian side” because that was the “bad” side. I went through a long conversation with her about the nature of the dialogue as working the energy in the room, and facilitating what was offered on stage. If none of the stories (that she wanted to voice) from the Christian “Side” were offered, we can not elicit a story that is more Christian friendly, nor can we force people to share stories to “balance” what is happening on stage. The dialogue cannot serve one side or the other. I pointed out that a central part of Tfl’s approach to the Rainbow of Desire is to animate both “sides” of the story in an honourable way. It appeared to me that had been the case at the event and that the audience had been very generous about embracing both “sides”. I also offered to her that her feelings of discomfort, or her feelings that emerged after the dialogue (she mentioned that she feels even more motivated to dialogue because she wants to be heard) – these feelings are a good thing. Discomfort, and feeling that she wanted to dialogue more to be heard could be a transformative thing for the community.

Almost two months later, another Christian woman contacted me after the dialogue, because the dialogue stirred up a lot for her as well. I was very nervous about this meeting, because she identified

as someone who was conservative, and not queer affirming, but feeling the need to dialogue. She mentioned how some of her friends were calling her homophobic, and it was not sitting well with her. She had read my blog, and was interested in my story, as someone who is a queer feminist activist, yet still identifies as a Christian.

We had a long, and slightly tense conversation. Tense, because (I perceived that) neither of us wanted to say the wrong thing to alienate the other person.

I spent a lot of time prior the meeting doing some self-reflection, and really thinking about the approach I should be taking with this meeting. I also met with a gay pastor a few days prior (who asked to meet with me about what had transpired with Voices of Love), and I realized that perhaps, this Christian who wanted to talk to me just wanted to be heard. This is one of the things that emerged from Voices of Love - was that the "Christian side" also wanted to be heard. That they wanted to truly be humanized. The pastor I spoke to also made me reflect that, perhaps, this conversation was not about "convincing" this Christian about anything, rather, maybe she just wanted her story to be heard by someone from the "other" side. I took this approach, and the conversation went very well (almost 3 hours). We had a very honest and open dialogue about both of our stories, and I left the meeting feeling compelled to engage more.

Final Thoughts

Although *Voices of Love: Reaching Across* was, for many reasons, very personal for me; the nature of the work that Theatre for Living embarks on implores us to reflect upon the ways in which our lives, as Theatre for Living team members is intricately woven into not only the outreach process, but into all processes we find ourselves in.

The journey of the outreach process is built into our own stories, and our own stories also influence the outreach process.

One of the biggest learnings that I had as an outreach coordinator for Voices of Love, was how impacted I was by the entire project. I'm beginning to see how we are not just an organization that "does this work" with "This community" – but we are also deeply affected by the work. As I've described in this report, not only did the actual event have an impact on me, the entire outreach process also impacted me on many levels.

Lastly, I am also learning that "the work" in a project is not "finite", in that there is not just a determined beginning or an end. The foundation for this dialogue existed well before TfL got involved, and after Voices of Love, the dialogues continue, and continue.