The Learning Exchange: a Shared Space for the University of British Columbia and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Communities

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Abstract

The Learning Exchange was established by the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1999 in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). The challenge has been to create a shared space for learning exchanges between two very different communities: a research-intensive university and an inner city area most commonly depicted as a place of hopelessness. The Learning Exchange provides an interesting model for how shared spaces can work to bring benefits to both to individual community members, students and faculty, as well as to the university and community organizations. It provides a place in the community where UBC students and faculty, and DTES residents and organizations connect, pursue common interests and learn from each other with a long-term goal of bringing about social change. Examples are given of the ways in which attention is paid to the physical, emotional and intellectual environment and the synergies that occur in shared spaces. Based on our experience and lessons learned we identify important principles for creating successful university-community shared spaces.

Keywords

Physical environment, Emotional environment, Intellectual environment, Asset-based community development

Introduction

The mission of the Learning Exchange is to engage, inspire and lead two very different communities to work and learn together: the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). The DTES, often referred to as 'Canada's poorest postal code', is noted for its open drug trade, single room occupancy hotels and high HIV infection rates. These combined and seemingly intractable issues have contributed to the common discourse of the DTES as a 'place of hopelessness'. UBC is a research-intensive university located 13 kilometers away, making it physically and, some would argue, psychologically distant from the DTES. However, having a meaningful presence in the DTES is consistent with UBC's strategic plan, and grounded in the idea that universities can, and should, be more connected to the critical issues facing communities. Located in the heart of the DTES, the Learning Exchange has developed as a welcoming, informal and lively shared space where UBC students and faculty, and DTES residents and organizations connect, pursue common interests and learn from each other and, in so doing, increase community and university capacity to act for positive change. In this article, we describe the university and community context, trace the history of the Learning Exchange, and describe the diverse learning activities that occur. We

then describe the physical, emotional and intellectual shared spaces, and give examples of the benefits to the university and the community, and the synergies that occur. Finally, we discuss lessons learned and identify general principles based on our experiences, and outline future directions.

The University of British Columbia

UBC is a public research university with campuses and facilities in British Columbia, Canada. UBC's Vancouver campus is physically separated from the city by sea and a forested green-belt. Founded as an independent university in 1915, it is the oldest institution of higher learning in British Columbia and enrolls over 60,000 students each year, mostly in the faculties of Arts, Science, Medicine, Applied Science and the Sauder School of Business. The university consistently ranks among the top three research universities in Canada and among the 20 best public universities worldwide. The university manages the second-largest research budget of any university in Canada (over $550 million annually). In terms of research performance, High Impact Universities 2010 ranked the university 30th out of 500 universities, and second in Canada. UBC is a member of Universitas 21, an international association of research-led institutions, as well as being the only Canadian member of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities, a consortium of 42 leading research universities in the Pacific Rim.

The university's commitment to community engagement began under the leadership of President and Vice Chancellor Martha C. Piper who in 1998 launched TREK 2000, the university's blueprint for the millennium. The concept of getting students involved in community-based activities was central to TREK 2000, inspired by the writing of Peter Drucker who argued that universities should be preparing young people to take on social responsibilities as part of their roles as participants in the knowledge society (Drucker, 1994). Drucker's argument underpinned President Piper's vision of UBC's responsibility to prepare students to be 'global citizens' and was the motivation for the establishment of the Learning Exchange (see below). Subsequently, under President Stephen Toope the commitment of UBC to serve and engage society to enhance economic, social and cultural well-being was confirmed in the 2009 strategic plan, 'Place and Promise: the UBC Plan' (University of British Columbia, 2009) in which Community Engagement is stated as one of three core commitments alongside Student Learning and Research Excellence.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

The DTES is the historic heart of Vancouver and has a diverse, mixed and predominantly low-income population. As defined by the City of Vancouver, the DTES consists of seven adjoining neighbourhoods each with a distinct character, population, built form and land use (City of Vancouver, 2013). For example, Gastown, Vancouver's founding neighbourhood is a major tourist attraction. It borders the Oppenheimer District, the heart of the low-income community, which has the greatest concentration of community services for vulnerable people, including Insite, Canada's first supervised drug injection site. Strathcona, one of the oldest residential neighbourhoods in Vancouver, was for many years a working class district but is now undergoing gentrification with rising housing prices. Chinatown is one of the last remaining large historic Chinatowns in North America, though traditional connections have weakened as more recent

generations have improved their circumstances and moved into the suburbs. The DTES is situated and linked to the City's founding Indigenous communities, including the Musqueam, Tsleil-Wauthuth and Squamish First Nations; other major ethnic groups include Japanese-Canadians, Chinese-Canadians and African-Canadians. 64% of DTES residents speak English as their main home language; Chinese (including both Mandarin and Cantonese) is the next most frequent.

More than half of the residents of the DTES are dependent on income assistance support, pensions, or charitable and social services. Many groups are considered vulnerable because they experience greater risk to health and well-being than the population as a whole. These groups include the homeless, seniors, low-income singles and families, sex workers, drug users and people with disabilities or mental illness. In addition to poverty, the challenges they face include safety, adequate and affordable accommodation, unemployment, poor nutrition, poor health, low self-esteem, a lack of well-being and connectedness, and dependency on social services and charity.

Public perception of the DTES as a place of hopelessness and danger has been shaped by the prevailing negative discourse in the media. Newspaper reports highlighting injection drug-use and/or HIV /AIDS in the DTES have contributed to the stigmatization of the area, adding to repeated derogatory descriptions of the DTES such as "an enclave of filth and desolation" as well as metaphors of the DTES as a war zone (Woolford, 2001). Visitors to Vancouver and UBC students, especially international students, are often cautioned not to go to the DTES. However, the DTES is also often regarded as one of the more close-knit, caring communities in Vancouver, and has a rich architecture and culture, the highest concentration of artists in the city, and a history of political activism (Hasson & Ley, 1994). There are, unsurprisingly, conflicts between the different communities in the DTES due to its heterogeneity. For example, some people in Chinatown feel stigmatized by the homeless people and open drug trade on their door steps, and have lobbied for the revitalization of business and higher-end housing to attract customers in ways that the affordable housing advocates feel is exclusionary. These tensions make the DTES a complex and highly charged place, where working towards possible solutions is challenging, since people do not necessarily agree what the problems are.

Because of the multifaceted social and health-related problems, and a concentration of services in the area, a huge amount of research has been done in the DTES, especially by UBC researchers. However, the prevailing perception among local people is that little has changed as a consequence. The research appears to benefit researchers rather than the community, giving research a poor reputation.

History of the Learning Exchange

The Learning Exchange originated from the commitment to community engagement made as part of UBC's TREK 2000 visioning exercise. Initial consultations in the DTES in 1999 about how UBC could best develop a community presence revealed a range of opinions about the university's plans, including some skepticism and resistance. In Fall 1999, the UBC Learning Exchange TREK Program was initiated to introduce student volunteers to non-profit organizations and elementary schools in the DTES. A year later the Learning Exchange opened

its original storefront, offering free computer access as part of a federally funded network of DTES organizations to bridge 'the digital divide'. This occurred against the backdrop of the Vancouver Agreement (Anon., 2010) involving all three levels of government, initiated to address the serious social and economic situation in Vancouver's inner city at time when many in the community and the university were calling for a more integrated, holistic approach to concerns related to the DTES.

From 2001 to 2006 the Learning Exchange expanded its community-based programming and student experiential learning opportunities. Activities included the development of computer training workshops for residents and an innovative English-as-a-second-language (ESL) conversation program, designed by UBC graduate students in collaboration with local residents; a variety of free courses, talks and events were developed in collaboration with faculty and community partners. In parallel, the Learning Exchange championed the development and integration of community-service learning (CSL) into academic programs at the university, which eventually led to the creation of the UBC-Community Learning Initiative. In 2008 the Learning Exchange moved to a larger location, enabling significant expansion of the computer training and ESL programs, as well as providing an off-campus base for staff working with inner-city schools engaging with university students.

In 2011 the university moved the UBC-Community Learning Initiative out of the Learning Exchange in order to position the responsibility of engaging students in the community more broadly within the university. This severed a major link between the Learning Exchange and the university. The position of an Academic Director was created with the charge to re-establish and grow the direct link between the Learning Exchange and the university campus. Since 2012 there has been an increase in the profile and activity of the Learning Exchange in both university and DTES communities. In 2015-16 campus and community groups' space usage quadrupled, including a six-fold growth in community-based researchers' usage.

Summary of Activities, Participants and Outcomes

Current Activities

The Learning Exchange provides year-round, core programming for community members (patrons) and students, in addition to providing an open-drop in environment for unstructured individual or group activities. The core programs are designed to respond to community needs for digital literacy and English language skills, and improve the daily lives of people in the DTES through personal development and building social networks. The core programs also provide hands on, experiential learning opportunities for UBC students.

Learning Activities. To respond to digital literacy needs, the Computer Drop-In program provides computer access and support four afternoons per week. Structured computer workshops and tutorials on basic computer skills and programs provide instruction on a weekly basis. The Contributing Through Computers (CTC) initiative trains members of the community to lead workshops with their peers, on site and at community partner locations throughout the DTES and beyond. The ESL Conversation Program trains and supports local residents as peer facilitators to lead conversation sessions that help people learn English and about Canadian culture and the

local community. A new initiative, Seniors Thrive, helps seniors learn English and also promotes health and well-being by facilitating social connectedness and participation in learning. The Learning Lab offers a range of social, arts, and cultural activities and special projects and events that are appropriately scaled to support people in moving past their comfort zones, without too much pressure, while inspiring them to pursue learning in a safe environment. It responds to the growing needs of DTES residents who access the drop-in space and who are eager for more engagement and learning, but reluctant to join groups due to previous negative experiences with structured learning.

Although the core programming is coordinated by members of staff (university employees), students support and participate in these activities as paid student-staff program assistants (co-op and internships) of 6 or 12 months duration or as part of in-depth course-based activities such as practicums, assignments or projects. For example, economic students run an 'Econ Café' on hot topics in the DTES, and medical students design and deliver workshops on health-related topics to seniors. Students also participate in one-off learning experiences, including orientations to the DTES and asset-based development theory and practice. Learning objectives for students doing course-based activities are varied but most often related to translating theory into practice (the realities of the 'real world'), asset-based approaches, social justice, cultural safety and the social determinants of health, and specific skills such as relationship building, communication, and group facilitation. Many students also volunteer at the Learning Exchange, sharing particular skills such as facilitating a language class, or co-facilitating ESL classes with peer facilitators, or working with staff and patrons to gather information and create learning resources.

Community-Based Research. Support for community-based participatory research and knowledge exchange is a recent and growing part of our work. The 'Making Research Accessible' initiative addresses the problem that organizations and individuals in the DTES are often unable to access the primary literature. Licensing agreements for electronic journals limit access to UBC faculty and students, and as a consequence people in the community are often dependent on government reports or other secondary sources. We have created a database that contains over 600 peer-reviewed journal articles and PhD dissertations published since 2010 and a list of 40 primary investigators with active projects in the DTES. In partnership with the UBC library we are exploring ways to make this information available to the community through a searchable open access repository. We also collaborate on knowledge exchange events, bringing researchers together with members of the community.

Participants

Community members. Each of the core programs has a group of patrons who have attended regularly and consistently over a number of years. In addition, there are patrons who come for a short time, get what they need (information or a skill) and then move on. Newcomers hear about the Learning Exchange through word of mouth 'on the street'. As the Learning Exchange has become more established as part of the community we have become recognized by local people and agencies as a 'safe place'. Increasingly, patrons come to us through referrals from the many different service agencies in the DTES (over 100 in a 20-block radius), either because they need specific skills such as computer skills or English, or because there is an expectation that the Learning Exchange staff can help them find their way or take time to work with them.

The patrons who participate in the core activities reflect the diversity in the neighbourhood. 30% of drop-in programs are frequented by Indigenous people, many from across the country who are urbanized or who recently left their reserve. A high portion of men frequent the drop-in. Many of them at one time worked in the resource industries as loggers or tradesmen but with the changes in the work economy are unable to find work. Many older Chinese women come to the ESL program having worked for most of their lives in the garment industry, often doing two jobs and therefore putting off learning English; now as seniors they have more time to learn and want to connect socially. There are fewer women at the Learning Exchange and overall in public spaces in the DTES, likely due to the threat of violence that many women experience, and the real or perceived lack of safe places for their children. The discomfort that women feel at the Learning Exchange has decreased in recent times, but we are not currently set up to provide child care, which continues to be a barrier.

Students and faculty. Most students come to the Learning Exchange by applying for advertised student-staff or graduate research assistant positions, or as part of university courses. Student participation as part of a course requires involvement of their instructors and this has grown over the past few years as a result of targeted faculty engagement, especially in disciplines related to health, education, social sciences and arts. Students who come as volunteers often do so as a result of experiencing a class or tour of the DTES, or may find us through the website. As with the DTES community, word of mouth and referrals are important ways of widening participation among the university community.

Outcomes. Learning Exchange staff keep records of the numbers of patrons attending the various activities in order to demonstrate that we continue to meet needs and for the purpose of reporting to donors. For example, the Computer Drop-In program supports 45 individuals each afternoon, while the computer workshops provide instruction to over 350 individuals per year. In its first three years CTC has trained 150 facilitators, engaging more than 30 community partner organizations, and directly impacting almost 700 basic computer skills learners. The ESL Conversation Program runs 30 concurrent conversation sessions a week; each year 80-100 peer facilitators are trained and there are 500 ESL learners.

Beyond collecting numbers, there are challenges in evaluating the impact of participating in the activities on individual community members who may be wary of sharing the sort of personal information which would allow us to track their progress over time. In addition, program staff are often too busy implementing programs and supporting peer facilitators or students to also document participation systematically. Recently we have involved graduate students to assist with evaluation of the core programs. For example, a group of Masters of Public Health students taking a course on program evaluation developed practical and innovative ways to capture the impacts of the Learning Lab program. Their evaluation plan was then implemented over the course of a year by a graduate research assistant. Another group set up an evaluation framework for the Seniors Thrive initiative which has formed the basis for a three-year evaluation component that runs in parallel with, and informs, its implementation. Innovative and participatory program evaluation approaches, including arts-based methods and theatre, have been used successfully to gather, present and disseminate information about impact and lessons learned.

Similarly we track student numbers as an indicator that we are meeting a need for experiential learning experiences. In the 2015-16 academic year over 200 students participated in in-depth learning activities and another 250 students participated in one-off learning experiences or as volunteers. We have anecdotal evidence of the impact of these experiences and that students are meeting learning goals through informal and formal feedback sessions, exit interviews, and reflective writing done for course work. In collaboration with a research team from the Faculty of Education, we are about to embark on a more systematic, qualitative study of the student learning experience which will involve interviews, focus groups and a survey.

Organizational Structure

The Learning Exchange Director reports to the UBC Vice-President External who is responsible for a cross-functional, enterprise-wide, portfolio that engages with external stakeholders. The Director has a core team of 6 full-time staff and acts as a managing director, responsible for overall administration, program development, fundraising and community partnerships. An Operations Manager oversees the facility, infrastructure and day-to-day administration; an Operations Assistant plays a pivotal role supporting university and community groups in sharing the space. Each year 8 to 12 student-staff are hired to work alongside the four Coordinators responsible, respectively, for digital literacy, ESL, Learning Lab and student learning activities, with overlapping responsibilities for the drop-in, special events and unit-wide activities.

The Academic Director reports to the UBC Provost and Vice-President, Academic, linking with the academic leadership and individual faculty and their departments. The position also provides supervision to a part-time evaluation specialist and graduate student assistants who support evaluation and community-based research activities at the Learning Exchange.

In 2009, the university provided ongoing core funding to the Learning Exchange in recognition of its contributions to UBC's vision. 80% of the Learning Exchange budget comes from university General Operating Funds, the remainder from donor support for specific initiatives.

Shared Spaces for Learning

Literature Summary

Several bodies of literature underpin our work at the Learning Exchange and contribute to the creation of effective shared spaces for learning. For the purpose of this article, we define shared space as having three components: a physical place, an emotional place and a conceptual arena or intellectual space (Torjman, 2006).

Our philosophy is based on a capacity-building, asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, modelled after John McKnight's work at the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University's Centre for Civic Engagement (www.abcdinstitute.org/).The ABCD approach intentionally focuses on individual and collective strengths, as opposed to deficiencies, in order to build individual capacity and group capacity, including the capacity of students, faculty and researchers at the university. Typically, service

organizations have not drawn on the strengths of communities and are more likely to see their role as intervenors, conducting needs assessments and developing programs to bring what is missing. These well-meaning organizations often create unintended outcomes that miss or diminish the things that are going well, and undermine the sense of community competence (McKnight, 1995).

Given its geographic location the Learning Exchange, by definition and through its collaborations with local partners, is a place-based initiative with locally-based programs and activities. Place-based approaches have emerged as a means of addressing seemingly intractable, complex issues like poverty, with its interacting causes, within a local context of unique conditions (Bellefontaine & Wisener, 2011). Placed-based work engages participants and groups from a wide range of sectors and organizations, in an attempt to develop a more coordinated response from multiple actors, in order to affect the roots and effects of the particular issue within its geographic space. The Learning Exchange is an example of what Hart and Wolff (2006) refer to as a university-community partnership rooted in a sense of place and a commitment to engage with issues of locality.

Community engagement presents particular challenges for research-intensive universities. If it is not to be a marginalized activity it needs to be defined not just in ethical or educational terms but must speak to the most fundamental roles of the university in society: discovery and creation of new knowledge (Ostrander, 2004). It also requires new frameworks to help university leaders conceptualize linkages to community in ways that account for institutional complexity, recognize traditional forms of scholarship and foster reciprocal relationships with community partners for mutual benefit (Weerts & Sandman, 2010). In this context the Learning Exchange is a specific model of engagement that, through its staff, fulfils the multiple boundary spanning roles conceptualized by Weerts and Sandman (2010), namely community-based problem solver, technical expert, internal engagement advocate and engagement champion. Its activities not only facilitate shared learning between university and community, but discovery of new knowledge.

The creation of shared spaces for university-community learning is a therefore a form of boundary work in which staff act as brokers between the university and community cultures, and the stereotypes which university and community hold about the other break down as they cross boundaries (Hart & Wolff, 2006). In the context of service learning in higher education, McMillan identifies boundary workers as agents who assist participants make new connections across communities of practice (in this case the university and community), enable coordination and, if experienced, open new possibilities for meaning and therefore learning (McMillan, 2011). Both Hart and Wolff (2006) and McMillan (2011) recommend the use of Wenger's (1998) elaboration of boundary work and 'communities of practice' as a particularly useful conceptual framework for community-university engagement.

The Physical Learning Environment

The Learning Exchange has several distinct types of space, each with its own character, which can be summarized as: welcoming spaces for informal drop-in activities (individual or group); classroom spaces for structured group learning; quiet spaces for reflection (individual or group).

The main open space, accessible from the street, provides two valuable amenities for patrons: computers and coffee. Patrons, students and faculty can drop in and just sit on the side lines if they choose. The space has a flexible layout for multi-tasking usage and fosters both active participation (learning by doing) and watching (learning by observation). Computer stations can be moved out to create a large space for performance, knowledge exchange events and community forums. Artefacts that have been produced at the Learning Exchange are displayed on the wall, as well as indigenous art (house-post). A maker space for art and craft work and cultural programming has been created from a converted carport. This serves as a transition space between the alleyway and building interior, which can feel more comfortable for people who live on the streets: the door to the back lane can be kept open to blur the boundary between inside and out. The drop-in area operates as a self-serve space: patrons can sign themselves in and make their own coffee, there is a phone available for anyone to use without asking permission, and patrons can print up to 5 pages a day (though this is not strictly enforced). There is a private washroom instead of the open public washrooms usual in the DTES. People are encouraged to do things for themselves and everyone (staff, students, patrons) uses the same amenities (coffee, washrooms, cleaning materials, etc.) creating a sense of neighbourliness and helping to keep the space clean in high traffic areas.

Classroom spaces for structured learning are accessed by a wide staircase from the drop-in area. There are closed rooms of different sizes, fitted with tables and chairs, intended as spaces for doing things together as a group: intentional learning and co-tasking. Doors to the rooms mean that people cannot move in and out of the spaces so easily as in the drop-in area. The rooms are used for regular programming, including all ESL classes and arts activities. There is an open area in the middle of the floor which is a flexible space, similar to the drop-in.

On the top floor there are two large meeting rooms, offices, work stations, and a kitchen which are open access for staff, but otherwise by invitation. The controlled use of the space and usage protocols allow for more sensitive, quiet, focused or reflective work and bestows more trust on the users. The meeting rooms are used by outside community groups for planning, retreats or research. For example, a research study, The Aboriginal Women's Initiative healing circle, found it to be a safe space, reassuring and conducive to emotional work, away from the hubbub of the street level and drop-in. Office space is also provided to community groups on a time-limited basis. One of the meeting rooms functions as a staff lounge for team-building and staff development activities.

The Emotional Learning Environment

Physical spaces alone are not enough. Equally important are the relationships, cultures and practices that occur within the space. These arise from our capacity-building, asset-based philosophy, and are articulated in the key values and principles that inform our work and form a foundation for shared understanding (see Table 1).

Table 1. Learning Exchange Key Values

Inclusion: We welcome all individuals and groups in everything we do. We engage and empower members of the local community and the UBC community to exchange ideas and knowledge.

Collaboration: We develop productive relationships and partnerships that are mutually beneficial. We inspire innovation and change by bringing together people with different perspectives.

Celebration: We recognize it takes courage to overcome the risks of learning. We celebrate and support every step, large or small, that leads to greater awareness, understanding, and action.

Learning: We honour all kinds of knowledge and expertise including lived experience. We foster lifelong learning through reciprocal and experiential opportunities.

Pragmatism: We are flexible in creating an environment for people to make concrete, useful differences in their learning and lives.

Sustainability: We take a long-term approach to relationships and operations—building capacity for the future while meeting the needs of the present.

Learning Exchange staff are skilled at making everyone welcome and encouraging increasing levels of participation. The terminology used by Learning Exchange staff, students, faculty and volunteers seeks to build more equitable relationships. For example, we use the term 'patron' or 'community member' rather than 'client' which implies a one-way relationship of receiving only. Staff know patrons and students as individuals, and encourage them to take the next step, take a risk, and celebrate successes. They know when a seemingly small step, like just having a conversation, is actually a huge step for a particular individual. Patrons get many chances; if they need to take a break for a few days or weeks they are still welcomed back. In contrast, typical public access programs (e.g. for housing or employment) expect regular attendance, there are penalties for non-compliance and no second chances.

The Intellectual Learning Environment

The shared physical and emotional spaces promote reciprocal learning between patrons and students. Despite the distrust of formal education and the real barriers some patrons face due to low levels of literacy in all its forms, many are very knowledgeable about the community, are well read, and interested in passing on their knowledge. Activities are organized in ways that ensure contributions come from all directions; the university is not positioned as the provider of answers or handouts. Some examples of how patrons and students learn from and with each other include: patrons who are digital literacy facilitators show other community members how to use Word or a useful App; patrons help economics students learn about institutional poverty by sharing their stories and experiences; a graduate student in arts learns from patrons about the use of theatre as an intervention for self-expression, enriching his thesis on theatre as a therapeutic intervention; an undergraduate student assists a new peer facilitator to deliver an ESL session at the start of the program. Multidirectional learning can provide a more thorough picture of the complex issues and possible solutions facing communities. For example, at a legal access forum,

university faculty and patrons all increased their understanding of the ways in which the legal system creates barriers, by providing both a studied perspective and a lived one.

Shared Space as a Community Asset

Beyond the core programming and learning opportunities provided through the university, the Learning Exchange has become a highly valued and trusted part of the DTES community, evident in the number and diversity of groups who collaborate with or work independently in the Learning Exchange space. Use of space includes hosting special events on hot topics such as social justice or collaborations with the DTES Literacy Roundtable. Many arts and cultural groups hold volunteer recognition events, cultural celebrations and board meetings. The City of Vancouver holds community planning meetings on topics ranging from bicycle lane development to community economic development. Orientation materials and mechanisms allow independent usage, after-hours access, and increased ownership of the Learning Exchange space by community organizations such as the Vancouver Asian Heritage Month Society, an arts and culture organization that builds community by sharing and celebrating Asian arts, cultures, and contributions. The Vancouver Native Health Society (VNHS) has used the space to conduct research interviews and has collaborated on knowledge exchange activities to present and dialogue with people in the DTES about the findings of research projects. There are practical reasons they approached us: we are neutral space away from their 'service' environment; we provide free space so they can use their funds to work with the vulnerable community they serve; we can help promote the event and invite our patrons who might not be connected to VNHS.

Synergies that Happen in Shared Spaces: Two Examples

The Learning Exchange has provided backbone support to the Binner's Project, a local, grass-roots movement that works to promote and destigmatize informal recycling done by binners (street-level waste recyclers who collect cans and bottles) and improve their economic opportunities. In 2014, Binners participated in the Coffee Cup Revolution, one of the events to mark the Learning Exchange's 15th Anniversary, recycling thousands of discarded coffee cups in return for a deposit to draw attention to paper cup waste. The event led to a more engaged partnership with the Binners Project. Binners initially used the carport and over time moved into other spaces within the Learning Exchange facility. Graduate students in Population Health, and undergraduate students in Social Work, Urban Ethnography and Economics have contributed as part of their course work and as volunteers with support from the Learning Exchange.

Urban Core is a longstanding association made up of over 40 active agencies and over 100 member organizations dedicated to improving life for some of the most vulnerable citizens in the DTES. The Learning Exchange is an active member of Urban Core and has facilitated community-based research, participated on committee projects and events, co-chaired meetings, and helped to connect to and facilitate student projects on critical issues, on behalf of both Urban Core and its member organizations. For example, the Learning Exchange engaged and supervised a graduate student research project to map the income-generating activities of local organizations (Pilarinos, 2015), paving the way for more interest in students being active participants in Urban Core's work.

Discussion – Lessons Learned

The Physical Space

A variety of shared spaces, formal and informal, individual and group, allow for different levels of commitment or readiness for engaging in a heterogeneous community. Unlike the usual places in the area frequented by patrons, the physical space affords privacy (e.g. washrooms). The self-serve model, based on an expectation that people can manage themselves, is in contrast to many other agencies in the DTES where service users have to wait in line. The result has been to promote a sense of respect for and shared ownership of the space, which in turn leads to greater communal responsibility for what happens in the space.

We have found that the way space is configured is important: small changes can make a big difference to behaviour. As an example, the computers in the drop-in area were originally arranged in one long line on each wall with space in between. People had their backs to the room so no-one could see their faces. Staff were not able to see what the patrons were feeling, but they could see what was on the screen, which left people exposed. When the computer space was re-configured into islands of three computer stations, people were in proximity in a shared space, but not so close that they felt unsafe. People (patrons, students and staff) can now choose to connect or not. In another example, relocating a course, the Urban Ethnographic Field School, from the university campus to the Learning Exchange resulted in increased interactions among students, and between students and patrons, which in turn led to a greater quality in their reflective essays.

Divisions in the DTES community are deep and there need to be ongoing efforts to bring people together. For example, there are two distinct populations of patrons who participate in activities in the drop-in at street level and in the more structured classes on the second floor. We have needed to develop strategies to overcome the divide and create deliberate linkages between the spaces. These include rotating staff meetings through the different spaces, integrated training of facilitators who lead the different learning activities, and putting on events that appeal to both groups, including field trips which take people out of the space and their usual routines. Students also create important links between the spaces.

Emotional Environment

Personal relationships are fundamental to the successful use of shared spaces for learning but require careful attention to managing boundaries. Students who work or volunteer are provided with orientations that include boundary training. We have found this to be especially important to ensure female students can develop and maintain healthy relationships with the mainly male drop-in population. Staff expertise in supporting different learners in the space is key, but the work can be challenging and demanding. Attention is paid to staff well-being and the creation of a supportive staff environment, including frequent check-ins and debriefs. Team building activities include deliberate meetings, such as weekly huddles, program-specific retreats, 'Lunch and Learn' sharing of work in progress or the results of projects, and mental health and wellbeing workshops led by staff. These latter led to the identification of the need for planned social occasions outside of work as well as more spontaneous celebrations of work-related

achievements or birthdays. The success of these activities in providing a supportive work environment is demonstrated by low staff turnover and the desire of many student-staff to apply for new positions after their initial appointment ends.

Working from values and principles has proved to be more successful than having rules. At one stage in the Learning Exchange history rules were posted on the wall, which gave the wrong impression of the place as an old-fashioned school environment. They have been replaced by staff talking to people about problems, referring to values and norms rather than rules. Staff are able to unobtrusively monitor what is happening in the space at all times and can intervene in a low-key manner if needed.

Intellectual Environment

Education is the common goal that brings people together, and the Learning Exchange promotes both learning of the head and of the heart, in itself a form of shared space. People in the community want to be critical thinkers and intellectually stimulated; students and academics want to be touched by the heart. The heart brings people together, highlighting the importance of creative approaches to shared learning.

Probably one of the most important results of shared spaces for learning exchanges has been the demystifying of others which occurs through working and learning alongside strangers. We find that patrons, students and faculty are surprised by the unusual mix of people at the Learning Exchange, disrupting expectations, including the assumptions they have about a university space in the community. Students comment that they start to think more critically about commonly-held assumptions about the DTES and issues such as poverty, housing and health.

Shared learning leads to transformative learning. As patrons make the transition from being learners to being facilitators of other's learning, they gain transferable skills, confidence and a sense of self-worth. We also have numerous examples from students of the profound impact of their experiences at the Learning Exchange. One of the consistent themes is how the concepts they hear about at the university become real when they see them enacted. For example, social work students taught in the classroom about 'meeting people where they're at' have discovered what that looks like in practice, the meaning and the complexities. A graduate student in Education discovered insights into her position as a participant researcher and about the difference between 'promising practices' and 'best practices'. Other students speak to the impact on their personal lives or career aspirations. We see many students dispirited by their university experience who re-discover their passions and motivations to learn through their learning exchanges.

Implications of a University-Community Shared Space

We have discovered several consequences of the fact that the Learning Exchange is a university space in the community, some of them unexpected. Our location in the heart of the community not only provides a different learning environment to the campus, but breaks down traditional university silos. Students from different disciplines who would not normally interact (including medicine, social work, economics, sociology, counseling psychology and education) are able to

share learning, for example, through the 'Lunch and Learn' sessions, work together on projects such as the development of an ethnodrama, and are encouraged to support each other by assisting with orientations and boundary training. Graduate and undergraduate students move out of their usual hierarchical (teaching assistant – learner) relationships. Because the Learning Exchange staff are university employees, they have the needs of students in mind and can provide a supportive environment for students who might feel uncomfortable in the neighbourhood. They are able to match students with activities or groups that provide a learning experience yet ensure that the scales do not tip too far away from the goals and interests of patrons. They are also able to support community-based experiential learning in agencies in the DTES which are stretched to provide their basic services and would not otherwise have the capacity to accommodate students.

We are also able to provide support for faculty through providing space and equipment for classes and research, and connections to organizations in the DTES, for student placements and projects. We provide tours and workshops on the DTES for international programs at UBC trying to educate students about Vancouver beyond the tourist perspective, for example students in a Teaching English as a Second Language exchange program between the Faculty of Education and Ritsumeikan University in Japan. As a non-traditional learning environment we provide faculty with a place to expand their range of teaching skills with learners other than university students. Similarly students from the Faculty of Education Teacher Education program are placed at the Learning Exchange for their Community Field Experience course that provides beginning teachers with an enriched awareness and expanded understanding of the diverse settings in which education occurs. As a university we are seen to lend some 'positive distance' that government agencies, health authorities, or social service providers cannot. Being part of a university means we tolerate varying points of view in the pursuit of knowledge, important in the context of an environment that has many divisions. We are able to bring people together who might not otherwise connect.

Boundary Spanning - Making Shared Spaces Work

The Learning Exchange is both part of the DTES community and part of the University community, and aims to be a change maker in both places. Learning Exchange staff act as brokers between the university and community cultures. For example, the need to change the discourse at the university about the DTES, and the need to change the discourse about the university in the DTES, positions the Learning Exchange in the role of cultural broker, translating the interests, ways of working and cultures. Our processes and policies need to be democratic, nimble, flexible, pragmatic and adaptive, in contrast to the university culture which is hierarchical and bureaucratic. The language we use in our communication needs to speak to both academic and community audiences.

Creating effective shared spaces requires a lot of balancing to manage the many tensions of working at the boundary between university and community. We have found a need to monitor the ratio of patrons and students so that we do not overwhelm community members and upset the delicate balance we are trying to maintain. We need to relate both to those who talk about social justice and advocacy (often in the university) and the activists (the doers in the community). We need to manage the power dynamics, and the balance between academic activity and community relationships. We need to create spaces for different ways of knowing and thinking about

knowledge and learning in academia and the community. We need to balance control versus messiness to create a learning environment rather than a free-for-all. We need to juggle the ongoing tension between the community rhythm and academic rhythm, between being available and open to the public while finding time for the reflection that adds the scholarly depth to our work.

The Future

Property development and gentrification, the need to increase income-generating activities, food security and environmental concerns, and other local, national and international concerns, mean that we need to continue to be responsive to the changing landscape of the DTES. In addition to adapting and sustaining our current shared spaces for learning, an increasingly important aspect of our work is to create shared spaces for research and scholarship. We believe that it is important for the Learning Exchange to connect community engagement to knowledge creation to normalize, institutionalize and thus sustain UBC's commitment to the DTES.

The City of Vancouver recently embarked on a community-driven process to develop an area plan that has resulted in the identification of a number of priorities including improvements to well-being, places, community economic development, and arts and culture (City of Vancouver, 2015). The plan also articulates a need for more shared spaces where residents are connected and engaged, including areas where neighbours can access green spaces, maker spaces and public realm spaces that include the area's most vulnerable populations. We expect this recognition of the importance of shared spaces to lead to further opportunities for collaboration between the Learning Exchange, the DTES and the City of Vancouver.

Conclusion

The Learning Exchange offers three types of shared spaces: physical, emotional and intellectual. It provides a clean, accessible building in the heart of the inner city with a variety of spaces for the university and the community. It provides a safe and welcoming space that promotes a sense of belonging to a diverse set of users. It provides an intellectual space based on a common vision, shared values and goals that focuses on learning not service provision, encouraging the sharing of different forms knowledge, and the co-creation of new knowledge.

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