RE/NARRATING YOUTH: A CRITICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LEARNING IN AN ACTIVIST ORGANIZATION

by

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Abstract

This critical qualitative research investigated the meaning making practices of a group of 10 youth activists in a youth-driven social justice organization, called Think Again, located in Vancouver, BC. An overarching goal of this study was to contribute to scholarship concerned with how young people, as cultural producers, re/narrate what it means to be a young person in a neoliberal society. To this end, I explored the ways in which contemporary youth narratives, such as the “millennial youth” narrative, afford and constrain learning opportunities for specific groups of young people.

My research questions were as follows: (1) In what ways can Think Again be described as a community of practice?; (2) What forms of participation are encouraged at Think Again?; (3) How does youths’ participation at Think Again support and/or challenge the broader social narratives of youth? and; (4) How do participants narrate their lived experiences and participation at Think Again?

These questions allowed me to explore the potential disconnect between contemporary youth narratives and youths’ activist narratives to better understand how youths perceive of themselves and their lives within an evolving community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Analysis of the qualitative data was conducted at three levels in order to identify and examine: (1) narratives across the data, (2) traces of participation across youths’ constructions of knowing, being, and valuing, and (3) participation as future-making.

This study resulted in four key findings. The first is a set of more nuanced counternarratives of what it means to be a “youth” today. The second attends to how thinking about learning as participation, a holistic endeavor, also entails changes in knowing, being, and valuing. The third outlines local opportunities for youth participation that generate the conditions for a “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) as essential to personal and social transformation. The fourth
addresses the changing face of youth activism in the contemporary neoliberal context. This study advances the fields of youth engagement, learning as participation, and qualitative methodologies by deploying narrative accounts of young people’s lived experiences.
Preface

Ethics Approval

This study was approved by the Behavioral Research Ethics Board at The University of British Columbia on March 18, 2014. Approval number: H13-03527

Photographs

The photographs found throughout the chapters of this dissertation were taken by the researcher and are reprinted with permission.

Cultural artifacts found through this dissertation were gathered from public sources or the Internet and were gathered during data generation.
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Dedication

For all of you,
the rabble rousers, trouble makers, dissenters,
the creators, makers, changers,
the dreamers, visionaries, believers
who are loving, living and doing:

Thank you.

In solidarity.
Chapter 1: Re/Narrating Youth: A Critical Qualitative Study of Learning in an Activist Organization

“Youth” is generally understood to be a social construction or a sociological category, rather than a biological category (McLeod, 2010), yet psychological and developmental theorists often refer to youth or the more recent construct emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) as a normative developmental stage—connoting a transitional phase. Conceptualizing youth as a phase defined by what it is not—childhood or adulthood—denies the importance and value of youth as both a constructed and actual lived reality. Scholars have linked the evolution of the social and cultural construction of youth with the emergence of capitalism and widening social and economic disparities reflective of a market economy that relies on inequalities and clear divisions of labor and roles (Giroux, 2009; Jones, 2009). The current era of neoliberalism has contributed to drastically changing social conditions and life patterns that have significantly reshaped what it actually means to be a young person and/or an adult in contemporary society (Woodman & Wyn, 2013). This broad interdisciplinary scholarship reflects distinct theoretical and methodological perspectives that contribute to defining phase of life and/or a group of people, thus, socially constructing a category that both affords and constrains peoples’ lived experiences.

Drawing upon and critiquing the interdisciplinary conceptualizations of youth, adolescents, and emerging adults, the Canadian government (Department of Canadian Heritage) recently offered a broadened framework of youth that is not defined by a narrow age criterion and attends to the evolving sociocultural context (Government of Canada, 2013). The Canadian Heritage applied this framework to fund youth programs that target different populations, social concerns, for participants between 12-35 years of age (Smith, 2015). An aim of the framework was to provide
youth-oriented organizations, programs, and services with the resources necessary for them to better serve the needs of the increasingly diverse and expanding youth populations in Canada.

Young people born between 1982 and 2000 are considered by some to be part of the millennial, Gen Y, or “me, me, me” generation (Stein, 2013). This generation of youth are frequently portrayed in the media as apathetic, lazy, self-centered, narcissistic, and media-obsessed through selective narratives of entitlement, job struggles and failures, financial debt, and negative depictions of those remaining in or returning to the family home (Malone, 2011; Stein, 2013). The “millennial youth” narrative perpetuates an often pejorative categorical other that denies, through omission, the lack of economic opportunities and the dominance of adult centric institutions that shape their lives (Apollon, 2012). This pervasive deficit-based mis-construction of the current generation of youths has material and symbolic effects on the ways in which youths make meaning of themselves, their experiences, and the ways they imagine their futures (Vadeboncoeur, 2005) as well as the roles afforded to them in the public sphere.

A particular role that has gained increasing interest for researchers, educators, the media, and society at large in the last 20 years is that of youths as citizens or quasi-citizens in a democratic society (e.g., Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009; Kennelly, 2011; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silberseisen, 2002; Zeldin, 2004). At the core of many of these discussions are the detrimental effects that a civically and morally disengaged citizenry would have on civil society (McLaughlin, 2000). Thus, a common theme across the interdisciplinary scholarship is the desire for young people to be active and engaged members of society. This theme reflects an assumption that underlies the scholarship found in developmental and psychological discourses about young people: that they are passive, deficient, and in need of intervention. Tensions emerging from this scholarship reflect issues around youth agency, theories of social and personal transformation, the role of adults, and the purpose of particular types of engagement (see
Biesta et al., 2009; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Kirshner, 2008). These tensions provide a point of departure for this study.

My decision to use the term “youth” to describe the participants in this study is twofold. First, the participants in this study negotiated a “youth-identified” category in order to gain access to participation at “Think Again,” the site of this study. The participants volunteered to become peer educators and to facilitate workshops for students in schools and young people in community settings in BC, Canada. Second, my use of the term “youth” simultaneously draws upon and pushes against traditional notions of adolescence, youth, emerging adulthood, and adulthood as defined through definitive age ranges, developmental stages, living arrangements, or economic achievements, such as those that have been taken as markers of individual autonomy. In this dissertation, “youth” includes these conceptual tensions both resisting the problematic of categorical definitions while also acknowledging their significant influence on scholarship concerning young people and young people’s lived realities. This perspective is grounded in the understanding that humans and the social world are dialectally related, mutually constitutive, and involved in historical processes of being and becoming (Holland & Lave, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991). A goal of this inquiry is to unsettle taken for granted definitions that contribute to categorical and often binary explanations for complex, dynamic, socioculturally situated, subjective lived experiences. This critical aim attends to the ways in which scholarship, the media, and society at large regulates young people through various strategies of governance (Larner, 2000; Lemke, 2002), such as the “millennial youth” narrative.

The current study draws upon critical education and psychological research traditions (e.g., Burbles & Berk, 1999; Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Fine, 2007; Fine & Weis, 2012; Weis & Fine, 2004). Generally speaking, research within this tradition seeks to understand and challenge social inequity (Weis & Fine, 2004). Fine and Weis (2012) argued for critical research with:
a dedicated theoretical and methodological commitment to a bifocal design documenting at once the linkages and capillaries of structural arrangements and the discursive and lived-out practices by which privileged and marginalized youth and adults make sense of their circumstances. (p. 176)

Following their call for bifocality, this research focuses on the relationships between structure, local communities, and lived experience. The critical perspective employed in this study begins with the understanding that social inequity exists and is produced and maintained through social institutions and social relations (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Freire, 1970; New London Group, 1996).

The research took place in Vancouver, BC and focused on a particular group of young people engaged in social justice and critical education activities in a youth-driven organization, “Think Again” (TA). The organizational mission of TA was to catalyze youth to take action through praxis—critical reflection and action—(Freire, 1970) and was evidenced in the workshop curricula, as well as the overall structure of the participants’ volunteer commitments. In this way, Think Again actively organized participation with a social justice agenda with two groups of participants: the youth volunteers and the workshop participants who were either students in schools or young people in community settings. A key element for catalyzing liberatory social change, as outlined by Freire (1970), entails a focus on the subjective, or one’s own perception and experiences in and of the world. Burbules and Berk (1999) argued for a perspective of criticality as a practice in that it is “a way of being as well as a way of thinking, a relation to others as well as an intellectual capacity” (p. 62). The New London Group (1996) synthesized these interrelated personal and social aspects of criticality through their notion of “critical framing,” or participants’ interpretations of meaning in relation to their sociocultural contexts through critical reflection and analysis. This literature contributes to the conceptual and methodological foundation for the current research. Beginning from a position that assumes the “relational character of everything” (Holland & Lave, 2009), this
research explored the experiences and opportunities afforded by Think Again as a youth engagement program in Canada.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the research and the overall organization of the dissertation. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction to the subsequent text, and the body of the chapter. In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the research context. Second, I describe the conceptual framework of this study. Third, I outline the aims and specific research questions that frame this study. Fourth, I sketch the methodology of this critical qualitative research.
Callout for Youth Facilitators
Youth and Gender Media Project

Think Again (TA) is a youth-driven non-profit organization. We encourage young people to understand and take action for social and environmental justice. Since 1999, TA youth facilitators have delivered over 2100 workshops and worked with over 60 000 young people. Our work is motivated by the understanding that a healthy, democratic and sustainable future depends on a generation of informed, empowered and active young people.

Position title: Volunteer Youth Facilitator

Program summary:
TA is recruiting youth facilitators for the third year of the Youth and Gender Media Project. Selected youth will participate in a training and mentorship program and lead workshops in schools around the Lower Mainland and BC. The project is focused on engaging youth around issues of gender representation, the media, and violence prevention through peer-led popular education workshops. Nearly thirty volunteers completed the program in its first two years, acquiring facilitation skills, experience with workshop activity development, and lasting connections with peers, community mentors, and TA. Focus areas of past training have included arts-based dialogue, safer spaces, gender equality and the law, and anti-transphobia.

Program components:
- Facilitation, leadership, and anti-oppression training (Sept. 28-29)
- Networking and community building opportunities with young activists
- Supported opportunities to take action on social and environmental justice issues, including co-facilitating workshops with youth about gender, the media, and violence prevention
- Mentorship from woman-identified leaders in the community
- Monthly dialogue groups to meet with mentors and fellow facilitators

Responsibilities:
- Participate in a one-hour orientation night (Wednesday, Sept. 25) and one weekend of daytime facilitation and leadership training (Saturday, Sept. 28 – Sunday, Sept. 29)
- Attend monthly skills-building workshops
- Co-facilitate workshops in high school classrooms
- Communicate on an ongoing basis with TA staff and community mentors
- Contribute to the TA blog and social media, and create and share community actions

Upon completion of responsibilities, participants will receive certification of their training and participation, as well as a $100 honorarium.

The closing date for applications is: Monday, September 16th at noon. To apply, please e-mail a statement of interest (max. 500 words) and copy of your resume to veronica@thinkagain.org; Attn: Veronica; Subject heading: Media and Gender Youth Facilitator. People of all genders are encouraged to apply.

Figure 1.1 Cultural Artifact: TA Volunteer Recruitment Callout"
1.1 A Potential Site of Activism: “Think Again”

Think Again (TA) was a youth-driven non-profit organization in Vancouver, BC. I first approached TA in September of 2013 to schedule a workshop about economic inequity for a course I was teaching within a teacher education program at a large city university. I was drawn to TA because of their stated youth-driven format, their popular education framework, and their goal of engaging youth as active social change agents. TA was not simply the location of this research; this research was jointly constructed with TA. This section includes four parts: 1) the location, history, and mission of TA as an organization; 2) the conceptual and pedagogical structure of TA; 3) the focus of this study, the Youth and Gender Media project (YGM); and 4) an introduction to the participants.

Think Again was founded in 1998 by a group of 10 youths who wanted to raise awareness about issues regarding globalization, immigration, media, sweatshops, income inequality, housing and homelessness, and the environment. At the time of this study, Think Again was funded through provincial, federal and private grants and donations and was located in an historic building downtown adjacent to Victory Square, the symbolic border of the Downtown Eastside (DTES). The DTES is known as the poorest postal code in Canada and has a complicated reputation. The physical space and location of TA is important when considering how young people negotiate and appropriate space, as well as the role of space in excluding/including youth from particular learning opportunities.

\[
\text{\textsuperscript{2} The DTES is a neighborhood in downtown Vancouver that is widely known as Canada’s poorest postal code has a high incidence of homeless or vulnerably housed individuals, drug use, sex trade, illegal activity, and has a strong history of community activism.}
\]
The mission of TA was to educate and activate individuals that self-identify as youth—typically between the ages of 15-30—on a wide-range of social issues relevant to their lives. As an organization, TA had three foci: 1) youth developed and delivered facilitation and leadership training; 2) peer-led social and environmental justice workshops for young people; and 3) the provision of tools for young people to take action in their communities. The peer-led workshops were the core social practice of TA. They occurred in schools and community settings across the lower mainland and lasted about 75 minutes.

The educational work of Think Again was explicitly political and utilized a popular education framework, drawing largely on Freire (1970), to work with young people toward social change. Popular education is based on the idea that critical consciousness can be developed through group dialogue geared toward identifying root and systemic causes for problems and working together towards social transformation (Freire, 1970). This framework reflected TA’s desire to support youth in making the shift from thinking to doing something about social justice. Also key to their pedagogy was facilitating youths’ critical media literacy skills. Briefly, critical media literacy “focuses on how popular culture texts function to produce certain relations of power and gendered identities that students may learn to use or resist” (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 194). Monthly meetings, workshops, and individual and joint youth projects included critical literacy components that culminated with some form of action, such as the Youth and Gender Media project described next.

The Youth and Gender Media project was first implemented at TA in 2011 with the explicit goal of reducing violence against women and girls through education and social action (see Figure 1.1). TA recruited up to 15 youth volunteers per project cohort through word of mouth, social media, and various youth outreach networks and resources. The youth participants in this study were the third cohort for the YGM project and the cohort met from September 2013-September 2014. Youths were asked to sign a volunteer contract, agreeing to take part in: 1) facilitation,
leadership, and anti-oppression training, 2) workshop facilitation, 3) monthly meetings and activities, (4) intergenerational mentoring, and 5) to contribute to the TA blog and social media, as well as to create and share creative action projects. Upon fulfillment of their contracts, youth received certification of their training and participation, as well as a $100 honorarium.

The YGM commitment began with an orientation evening followed by a weekend of facilitation, anti-oppression, and leadership training. After completing the initial training, youths were to observe a workshop facilitation and then co-facilitate at least four workshops during the year. Youths were never expected to facilitate workshops on their own and they typically co-facilitated with the educational coordinator or another oldtimer. The YGM workshop curriculum focused on four themes: gender, media representations, violence and action. Each workshop began with the creation of a community agreement towards a safe and respectful environment that fostered participation. The second activity built upon participants’ prior knowledge about the topic by brainstorming, mapping, questioning, and making relevant connections. The third activity aimed to challenge and break down participants’ previously held stereotypes with a “mythbusting quiz” and/or deconstructing media clips. The YGM facilitators led these activities by dividing the groups into smaller discussion groups, providing guiding and probing questions and making real world connections to highlight the relevance of these issues to the participants’ lives. Workshops concluded with a shift in focus toward action with the intent of empowering participants to take steps toward creating social change in their lives and communities.

The monthly meetings were an essential social practice of the YGM project. Each volunteer cohort collectively identified the areas, topics, and skills that they wanted to focus on during these meetings. Topics for meetings were scheduled in an ongoing fashion with the attempt to meet everyone’s needs and interests. Examples of meeting topics included anti-transphobia training, an arts-based activity on safe spaces, and a workshop on gender equity and the law, all of which were
conducted by local community partner organizations. The monthly meetings also provided youths an opportunity to get to know each other, talk about relevant issues, and to build relationships and networks within and beyond TA.

Another component was mentorship from local community leaders that identified as women. The educational coordinator worked with the youths to identify potential mentors. The educational coordinator then made initial contact with mentors, matched up mentors and mentees, connected them via email, and then stepped back to let the dyad work together. Mentorship consisted of three elements: 1) an introductory meeting to get a sense of shared interests, goals, and backgrounds, 2) attending a community event together, and 3) a work visit in order for mentees to experience different ways that individuals and organizations worked to enrich media production, to deconstruct gender stereotypes, and/or to prevent violence.

Finally, this YGM cohort was expected to complete a youth-driven creative action project that took place towards the end of the youths’ commitment. The creative action project was framed in a grant proposal as a way for youth to take action in their own communities with the underlying premise that creative processes provide a safer space for youths to express their ideas and experiences with gender and violence. Veronica, the educational coordinator, explained Think Again’s view of the creative action projects as a way to extend the work they do beyond the classroom and into youths’ communities, thereby creating a broader network that might enable more long-term action and engagement (personal communication, April 11, 2014). She also saw the creative action projects as an opportunity for youth to refocus on their personal goals for joining TA, such as making friends, building an activist network, personal growth, and/or taking a particular type of action toward social change. Youths’ creative action projects varied in form and content, for example, one of the youth partnered with the local library and created a workshop for the teen advisory committee about diverse young adult (YA) literature. Another youth coordinated a film
screening and dialogue, while two others planned and implemented an interactive public art installation.

The pedagogy of the YGM project was designed with five learning objectives. The first was for youths to understand gender as a social construction and define/differentiate “gender” and “sex.” The second was for youths to identify ways that the media affects our understanding of gender identities and stereotypes. The third was for youths to connect a definition of “violence” with an understanding of “exerting power,” how power relations are constructed, how the media affects/contributes to these relationships and how they can be understood as violent. The fourth objective was for youths to gain the ability to critically analyze and deconstruct media. The final objective was for youths to build a repertoire or toolkit of ways to discuss these issues with friends and address problematic media representations when they encounter them, and to identify ways to challenge stereotypes, deconstruct media representations and subvert dominant power structures. Think Again’s mission to educate and empower young people to take action was the thread that tied all of the project components together towards the overarching goal of creating a more socially just society.

There were 10 young people who participated in this study: eight YGM youth volunteers and two educational coordinators of the YGM, Veronica and Hermione. Each of the participants selected their pseudonym and the demographic information they wanted to be included in this study. These descriptions draw on the participants’ own words as well as my own observations of them.

Aliza identified as a 19 year-old cisgender female who grew up in a suburb of Vancouver. She identified as a fat, fem-lesbian, queer, Filipina, Italian, youth of color. She loved hugs and rainbows and was a visual artist. Aliza worked and attended college classes part-time. She wanted to work with youths involved in the juvenile justice system someday. Aliza was extremely active in the queer activist community in Vancouver. She volunteered at a queer youth community center, she
was a counselor at the annual Camp for LGBTQ youth in the Lower Mainland, and she wrote and read her poetry at various gatherings around the city.

Amanda identified as a 19 year-old cisgender, immigrant, female scientist. Amanda explained that her Mandarin name means “boat,” embodying the idea of someone who could bring her family from one shore of happiness to the next. This, did in fact, happen when her family moved to Canada when she was 11 years-old. Amanda loved learning and was drawn to Think Again because of the growth that could happen from learning about social justice during workshops. Amanda held a special place in her heart for Mexico after she had lived there for 4 months after high school. Amanda was a science student at a university and was planning to major in environmental sciences.

Aria identified as a 19 year-old cisgender female. Aria described herself as an emerging anti-discrimination activist and psychology undergrad. She appreciated Think Again’s dedication to youth advocacy and believed that it was a great way to break down personal biases and refine prejudiced thought processes. Born and raised Muslim in Vancouver and of mixed Lebanese-Filipina ethnicity, Aria had a fetish for calling out stereotypes and encouraging diversity of all sorts. Her inspiration stemmed from mystical art, astronomy, and the past.

Brenda identified as a 32 year-old cisgender married gay male. He described himself as uncomfortable with the term “youth identified,” white, and from a middle-class background. During this project, Brenda graduated with an MA in Geography at a university. His research focused on LGBTQ activism in Mexico within a context of violence and increasing militarization. Brenda enjoyed reading, hiking and going out for food and/or coffee with friends.

Elia identified as a 24 year-old cisgender heterosexual feminist female. Elia described herself as a first generation Chinese-Canadian (“hyphenated identity”) who was more Western than Asian. She could speak conversational Cantonese and was learning more every day. Elia graduated from
university with a degree in Sociology during her volunteer commitment. Elia enjoyed singing, dancing, connecting with others, reading, reflecting, writing, being silly, trying out new restaurants and things to do, and traveling.

Sara identified as a 23 year-old cisgender heterosexual female who was Caucasian, middle to upper class, and a child of early divorce. Sarah was very close to her family and grew up moving all around the Fraser Valley. During her volunteer commitment, Sarah worked full-time as an administrative assistant at a large non-profit organization, was taking pre-requisite courses for graduate counseling programs, and was an active volunteer at various organizations around the city. She wanted to be a professional counselor and was applying to graduate programs for the fall of 2015. Sarah loved art, writing, reading, and dialogue.

Stacy identified as a 24 year-old cisgender white female scientist. Stacy grew up in a “cushy” suburb life near Vancouver. During her first year of university, Stacy started to become aware of oppression and began to get interested in social justice work. Stacy was a scientist and environmental activist who loved to goof off and geek out about things like polar bears. Stacy moved to a nearby province where she hoped to spread her love of recycling to her new neighbors during the study.

Verity identified as a 22 year-old cisgender female, university student, able-bodied, and white. She lived in Vancouver BC, but originally hailed from the interior of BC. Verity was working on her BA in English with a minor in Gender Studies. She spent her time in equal parts learning and unlearning and she didn’t regret a single challenging, joyous, unsettling minute. Since starting undergrad, Verity directed a musical, survived 15 fire alarms in one year as a residence advisor, interned with the Writers Festival, and performed in a feminist play.

Veronica was the original educational coordinator of the YGM and resigned from her position in the spring of 2015. Veronica identified as a 25 year-old cisgender lesbian female who
was mixed-race, Sephardic Ashkenazic Eastern European Jew. It was important for Veronica to let people know she was anti-Zionist. Veronica grew up in a small town in Saskatchewan and moved to Vancouver to do her MFA. She completed her MFA in creative writing while she was the educational coordinator. She was a passionate community organizer and worked hard to find and create hate-free spaces around the city.

Hermione was a long-time youth volunteer at TA and she replaced Veronica as the educational coordinator of the YGM in May 2015. Hermione identified as 22 year-old cisgender female. She described herself as a Muslim, Bangladeshi, South Asian youth of color. Hermione was a full-time Political Science honors student at university while she was the educational coordinator for TA. Hermione described herself as a passionate advocate for youth activism and collaborative change making. She could be found working with youth in the creative arts in her role as co-founder and chair of ArtShake. Hermione loved to read, eat, and do yoga. Her guilty pleasures included watching Criminal Minds and doing BuzzFeed quizzes.
1.2 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1.2 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1.2 illustrates the concepts that contributed to the view of learning and the narrative lens that framed this study. In this research, learning was conceptualized as “legitimate peripheral participation” (LPP) in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Briefly, LPP implies that learning is not simply situated in practice; rather it is an integral and generative aspect of practice in the social world. The community of practice framework was both grounded and extended with sociocultural theories of learning and development that recognize learning as more than simply knowledge acquisition, or even knowledge construction. Learning entails changes in how the learner sees themselves and is seen by others, necessitating changes in identities and values as one comes to know (Vadeboncoeur, Vellos, & Goessling, 2011). Consistent with this idea, O’Connor and Allen (2010) argued that learning involves the organization of valued social futures given sustained
engagement in social practices (O’Connor & Allen, 2010). Finally, following Bruner (1991), this work was informed by the idea that narratives “organize our experience and our memory of human happenings” (p. 4) in forms that are shared culturally and constrained by an individual’s access to resources, tools and relationships.

Legitimate peripheral participation provided a framework that brings together the interrelated concepts of the individual, practice and the social world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) described learning as legitimate peripheral participation and “a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and oldtimers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice” (p. 29). Legitimate peripheral participation is concerned with changes in participation that are varied, multiple, more and/or less ways of being diversely located within the community. Importantly, Lave and Wenger (1991) were explicitly ambiguous in their use of periphery and explained it as a tool for thinking about what is not yet, or as a way of accessing sources for understanding through increased engagement. Based on an apprenticeship model of learning, newcomers’ participation would change from peripheral along a trajectory of participation (not linear or unidirectional) informed by their intentions. Further, the meanings of their learning would evolve as they become full participants. Again, full participation accounts for the wide range of relations involved in the many manifestations of community membership. They explained that, “changing locations and perspectives are part of actors’ learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36). Clarifying their use of situated learning, they argued that all activity is situated, that learning and knowledge are relational, and that meaning is re/negotiated in relation to its trajectory of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thinking about people, practices and the social world dialectically foregrounds their relations and their mutually constitutive nature.
1.2.1 A broadened conceptualization of learning. This perspective of learning as participation is grounded and extended with scholarship from the sociocultural tradition. Sociocultural scholars have argued that learning is more than coming to know, an epistemic position, and requires a recognition of how learning shapes identities, an ontological position (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Vadeboncoeur & Portes, 2002). The interdependence of relational practices also shapes what is valued, for example, what social practices are valued, as well as forms of participation that are valued within a particular context. From this perspective, any theory of learning must also be a theory of the simultaneous co-construction of knowledge, identities, and values (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011). That learning is situated, dynamic, and relational is a foundational tenet of this perspective and plays out through participation in relationships and in social practices that reflect and constitute social relations and institutional contexts (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011). This framework is an important step towards avoiding individual reductionism and attends to irreducible tensions of sameness and difference in identity.

Social practices also form the foundation for O’Connor and Allen’s (2010) definition of learning as the organization of social futures. Their work builds from communities of practice previously outlined and extends it through a focus on learning as an activist project that relies on access to modes of participation and recognition that emerge as valued in a community. Drawing on situated and apprenticeship theories of learning and emphasizing the relational nature of learning, these authors explained, “[P]articular knowledgeable skills take on significance and become consequential only as part of systems of relations within a social community” (p. 161). Knowledge and identity construction are supported by the community and are organized toward possible social “futures in which these skills and identities will be consequential and powerful” (p. 172).

Understanding learning as the organization of social futures provides a framework through which we can examine how learning in a specific context may enable a particular range of social
futures for participants; social futures where knowing what, or that, or how contributes to the construction of ways of becoming and valuing that are more or less privileged in a particular context. For example, if I were interested in becoming a professional musician, then my participation in a context in which I was learning how to become a musician—by practicing recording, producing, performing and writing music—would enable me both to prepare for a potential social future as a musician and to work with others to build the values that are necessary to sustain this future. Learning as the organization of social futures highlights the intentional actions of participants to contribute in ways that are consequential beyond local interaction (O'Connor & Allen, 2010).

This view of social futures is not a near-sighted future-orientation; rather it embraces a view of “history-in-person,” understood as the “set of relations between intimate, embodied subjectivities and local practice” (Holland & Lave, 2009, p. 4). Thus, attention is paid to the ways in which history is brought to the present and is carried into the future through social practice. This concept is mobilized in this study through a focus on cultural artifacts. In this study, cultural artifacts are objects that are simultaneously material and ideal (Holland & Cole, 1995) that mediate social activity (Cole & Wertsch, 1996). Mediation was key to Vygotsky’s (1978) approach to understanding the interplay between cultural, historical and institutional contexts in the development of higher psychological functions. This focus enables the consideration of how cultural artifacts carry traces of their past uses as they mediate and transform youths’ participation, a process that also shapes their futures.

1.2.2 Narrative. Narratives, as Barthes (1975) argued, are “present at all times, in all places, in all societies”; there has never been a time, a person or a place without stories; narrative is “like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural” (p. 237). Scholars across the social sciences are increasingly recognizing that people use narratives as ways of ordering and making meaning of lived experiences; subsequently, the use of narrative and story as a conceptual and

Bruner (1991b) conceptualized narrative as a way that humans order and make meaning of their lived experiences and memories. Further, he argued that the stories we tell about our lives, our “autobiographies,” are a set of practices involved in “life making” (Bruner, 2004). Central to his later work on autobiography as life making is the argument that the practices we employ to tell our narratives inform our perceptions, organizing our memories and building the events of a life (Bruner, 2001). From this, Bruner (2001) asserted that we actually become the very stories we tell. Ochs and Capps (1996) argued that narrative both emerges from and informs experience. They described the inseparable relationship of self and narrative as phenomenological in that “entities are given meaning through being experienced,” and narrative is an essential tool used to mediate experiences and bring them into conscious awareness (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21).

A central aim of this inquiry was to examine how Think Again became a place of learning as participation in a community of practice, as well as to explore the experiences of youths in relation to the privileged kinds of knowing, becoming, and valuing that were made accessible to different participants. TA and the YGM were organized to support youths’ learning by bringing young people together to explore their world and to share their experiences and expertise with the common goal of a more socially just and equitable world. Although their participation was organized towards this shared goal, what and how that goal was made meaningful was varied and multiple across each of the participants. At issue in this study was the extent to which TA functioned as a community of practice whereby young people learned through situated activity or “legitimate peripheral participation” and for whom (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To this end, I explored how and why these young people came to TA and the particular relationships, practices, and skills
they gained access to (or did not) through their participation. In this work, I sought out youths’ perspectives on and understandings of their participation through socioculturally situated narratives as a method for examining the kinds of potential social futures for which they were preparing and TA was organizing.

1.3 Aims of the Study and Research Questions

My interest in how we come to know, to be and to value stems from more than 15 years of professional experience as an educator, mentor, social worker, counselor and therapist. I have been profoundly affected by the ways that systemic oppression sullied each of my roles, particularly through practices of categorization and labeling that perpetuated the student, youth, case or client as an individual “at risk” for various maladies and issues. I have been witness to, perpetrator of, and victim of the material consequences of the ways that the categories and labels imposed by institutions affect the lived realities of children, youth, and families.

An overarching goal of this study was to gather, generate, and share youths’ narratives that might challenge popular deficit narratives of young people. In addition to this critical aim of problematizing the concept of “youth,” this study encompassed three interrelated critical objectives. First, analysis at the macro level attended to the ways in which social relations and institutions influence opportunities for youth participation. This line of inquiry drew on theories of neoliberalism (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Enoch, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Larner, 2000) and activism (Gulbrandsen & Holland, 2001 Holland & Gómez, 2013) in order to understand ways in which neoliberalism both affords and constrains youth activist organizations and youth activism in Canada. The second attended to the social relationships and practices at the local level. Drawing on a community of practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this line of inquiry examined learning as participation within a youth activist organization. The third was concerned with the micro level and participants’ transformational learning processes involved in their becoming activists and critical
pedagogues. This line of inquiry focused on traces of participation across the youths’ constructions of knowledge, identities, values and their imaginings of possible social futures (O’Connor & Allen, 2010; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011). The community of practice framework used here enabled an examination of the ways in which learning as participation at a local level has the potential to effect changes in contexts beyond the immediate context. Linking the micro, local, and macro levels was especially relevant for this study of youths because participation at Think Again was motivated by youths’ commitments to becoming social change agents. Specifically, this research sought to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways can Think Again be described as a community of practice?
2. What forms of participation are encouraged at Think Again?
3. How does youths’ participation at Think Again support and/or challenge the broader narratives of youth?
4. How do participants narrate their lived experiences and participation at TA?

1.4 Methodology

Kidder and Fine (1987) described qualitative researchers as narrative gatherers and the analysis of fieldwork as the construction of a narrative. Further, they argued that all research is a form of narrative. Inherent in all forms of qualitative research is the value placed on the subjectivity of the researchers, as well as the participants (Weis & Fine, 2001). Language, in its many forms, provides an inroad for the study of how youths actively constructed meanings of their experiences. This study focused on youths’ co-constructed narratives and creative action projects as living, dynamic, tools of meaning making that were socially and historically situated (Ochs & Capps, 1996).

This critical qualitative inquiry focused on youths’ learning as participation that involved the active construction of knowing, being and valuing at TA. I drew on observations and field notes, interviews, and youths’ creative action projects to explore the meaning of these practices for the
participants. This approach to narrative de-centered the individual as an isolated and responsible agent in their own making by highlighting the situated individual in social, economic, and political contexts (Bruner, 1990). I discussed and reflected with youth about their creative action projects and, when applicable, addressed the social interactions in which the participants were re/constructed. Figure 1.3 illustrates the different modes of data generation.

![Figure 1.3 Methods of Data Generation](image)

This research relied on critical qualitative methods to examine the youths’ participation in social practices and what their participation meant to them. To do this, I built relationships with the youths by participating in their monthly meetings, activities and workshop facilitations as both a participant and an observer. Reflecting an ethnographic researcher as instrument approach, I learned about the social practices through an ongoing process of participation and reflection (Heath & Street, 2008) that evolved over time. My roles within the group were fluid; I aimed to support youths in designing and implementing their creative action projects; I led creative and brainstorming activities, dialogues, one-on-one meetings and open-studio sessions where I negotiated my
participant and/or observer roles in an ongoing manner. Participant observations were made of three videotaped monthly meetings.

In addition to the observations, there were two different types of individual interviews: experiential and elicitation interviews. Interviews were a dialogic tool (Knight & Saunders, 1999) for engaging with youths about their lives and learning as participation at TA. The interviews provided insight into lived experiences from the youths’ perspective; observations helped support and/or complicate these narratives. The experiential interviews focused on the youths’ lived experiences and their learning as participation. They included multiple invitations for them to tell stories about their past, present, and futures. The elicitation interview focused on youths’ creative action projects. The creative action projects were youth-driven, based on a topic or theme of their choice, and were open to include the following: visual and/or textual compositions, public art, social media, zines, social action, performance, song, dance, group dialogues, and so on. A brief description of each of the youths’ creative action projects is provided in Chapter Three with a more in-depth description and analysis in Chapter Six. The creative action projects themselves were not considered data, but the observations, field notes, and cultural artifacts generated throughout the process were. Youths were asked to bring an artifact that represented their creative action project to the interview, which opened with an invitation for them to talk about their artifact and creative action project. This interview focused on the narratives the participants told about the process (e.g., planning, conceptualization, intent, aim) and the content of their creative action projects (e.g., form, mode, medium).

This research focused on young people as cultural producers to gain insight into the ways in which they actively constructed knowing, being and valuing through participation at TA. The interpretation and analysis of the data was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based upon the themes, and informed by Bruner (1990, 1991a, 1991b) and Ochs (2007), I
then created narratives from the data. A second level of analysis focused on the ways that youths came to know through aspects of the curriculum of TA, and how they came to see themselves and each other, and the values they were generating (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2010) across their participation. I also utilized Sfard and Prusak’s (2005) framework for analyzing identities as stories that people tell. The third level of analysis drew upon the idea that young peoples’ participation in a community of practice was an act of future-making, and examined the ways they actively worked to construct a possible or desired future (O’Connor & Allen, 2010). Finally, I used a method of participatory analysis developed by Fine (2014) to co-analyze data with the participants, at two separate points in the process of analysis, in order to come to a more nuanced understanding of the data. In this work, the focus of the analysis was youths’ co-constructed themes gleaned from across the data: participant observations of the monthly meetings, experiential interviews, elicitation interviews about the youth-produced creative action projects, gathered and generated cultural artifacts.

1.5 Summary

This chapter introduced the dominant deficit narrative of young people and described this research: the research site and participants involved, the conceptual framework, and methods for generating and analyzing data. It began with a brief discussion of the social construction of “youth” and an introduction to this critical research. This was followed by a description of the research site and context before outlining the conceptual framework of this study. General aims and specific research questions guiding this study followed. Finally, an overview of the methodology was provided.

Different fonts, formats, and juxtapositions of text and images are used throughout this dissertation to distinguish two different layers of meaning making: the participants and my own as the researcher. Chapter Two consists of a review of the literature relevant to this study. The
literature review begins by situating the study within the current neoliberal context and draws on interdisciplinary youth-focused scholarship to ground this work on youths as cultural producers. This is followed by an in-depth review of communities of practice, as well as sociocultural and narrative scholarship as the frame for this study. In Chapter Three, I outline epistemological and ethical commitments, methods of data generation, and methods for interpretation employed in this research. The macro level of analysis is presented in Chapter Four and highlights the influence of the neoliberal context on youths’ participation. Chapter Five is an analysis of the local level of interaction, the community of practice, and describes how youths narrated their participation along an activist trajectory. Chapter Six focuses on the micro level through the youth participation narratives I created. Although the analysis chapters are presented as distinct interpretations, they are interdependent and mutually constitutive. This manuscript concludes with Chapter Seven, which consists of a summary of the implications and limitations of this study, with directions for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter consists of a literature review relevant to this study of youths’ learning through participation in a social justice organization. This study is situated at the nexus of the interdisciplinary field of youth studies and brings together work that addresses youths’ political and civic engagement and work that conceptualizes youth as cultural producers. Chapter Two is divided into five sections. First, I begin by providing an historical overview of “youth” as a social construct and then move to two sub-sections on: 1) Contemporary “youth” narratives, and 2) Contemporary neoliberal context. Second, I review scholarship that addresses youths’ political and civic engagement with a particular focus on research that conceptualizes youth as cultural producers. Third, I elaborate the conceptual framework of learning as participation in a community of practice that is grounded in and extended by sociocultural theory. Fourth, I outline narrative theory and the core tenets that underpin this study. Fifth, I conclude with a short summary of this chapter

2.1 Contextualizing Contemporary “Youth” Narratives

The way we think about and study learning and development has evolved over time and in relation to the sociocultural context. The creation of adolescence as a distinct developmental stage is often credited to G. Stanley Hall who defined the stage between childhood and adulthood as “a universal period of storm and stress” (Lerner, 2002, p. 29). Adolescence, according to Hall, was the ontogenetic process where children outgrew their animal-like traits and became more human-like. The underlying premise was that an individual reaches adulthood when they can contribute to the primary evolutionary goal of becoming “fully human,” including being socially and economically independent, in part as a result of the development of rationality (Lerner, 2002). The very basis of “adolescence” as a theoretical concept is the understanding that youths are animalistic, incomplete, irrational, hormonal, emotionally unpredictable, and erratic. The significance of defining a group of
people as inherently deficient is evident in the 100-year plus legacy of the normative understanding of adolescents as lazy, violent, dangerous, indolent, and impulsive (Vadeboncoeur, 2005).

This deficit narrative effectively categorizes and classifies all adolescents and youths as “at risk” for all kinds of pathologies, behavioral issues, criminal and/or unsafe acts. Classifying an entire population in this way has material consequences and affects how youths and adults relate, think, act and speak with and about young people and vice versa (Vadeboncoeur, 2005). As a scholarly field, human development is concerned with the processes of becoming. This future goal orientation relegates youths’ daily experiences as important solely for the ways in which they effectively, or not, prepare the young to become adults; this situates adults in a position of superiority, authority and self-actualization (Lesko, 2001). An underlying assumption within much of the developmental scholarship is a bias towards sameness over difference, or privileging of an unchanging or core self, through a focus on the individual (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011). Both Lesko (2001) and Walkerdine (1993) have argued that the historical canon, on which contemporary psychological constructions of the adolescent rely, is based on the values and experiences of white, middle-class males. Lesko (2001) explained, further, that the making of adolescence as white, masculine, and self-disciplined relied on the “other”—including girls, racialized youth, and poor youth—for definition. These scholarly discourses have laid one foundation for the way in which media and popular culture perpetuates deficit narratives of young people through negative stereotypes and generalizations, which this dissertation aims to challenge.

2.1.1 Contemporary “youth” narratives. One attempt to speak back to the prevailing deficit-based approaches to working with youths has emerged over the past 30 years from the field of developmental psychology and is a body of research and practices called positive youth development (PYD) that promotes a strengths-based perspective (Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). Larson (2000) argued that PYD developed separately from the field of developmental psychology
and, therefore, does not have a strong theoretical and research base. Additionally, the PYD literature maintains the idea of adolescence or youth as a transitional stage through a prioritization of future-oriented outcomes, and many of the strategies are geared towards vocational skills (Larson & Walker, 2006) and/or becoming productive citizens (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). These future-oriented goals are also grounded in dominant or white middle-class values, such as a notion of success that is grounded in individual achievement and economic productivity (Lesko, 1996).

Wyn and White (1997) argued that research on “adolescence” exemplifies a categorical form of research “because it assumes the existence of essential characteristics in young people because of their age, focusing on the assumed link between physical growth and social identity” (p. 12). Emerging from sociological and psychological scholarship, generational research aims to identify, describe, and classify groups of individuals—cohorts—that are born between certain dates as having some generalizeable characteristics, such as beliefs, identities, values, attitudes, or even worldviews. There are two distinct streams of generational research focusing on the current or “millennial” generation. The first stream takes a deficit-based perspective and constructs images of youths as passive products of culture who tend toward narcissism, individualism, cynicism, and entitlement (Twenge, 2006). The second stream takes a more strengths-based approach and portrays this group of youths as active makers of history and change and describes them as optimistic, smart, confident, group-oriented, and less violent than previous generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000). All of these explanations are geared toward neoliberal aims.

The first stream of generational research has fueled the widespread critiques of today’s youths as doomed for failure due to their high rates of unemployment, the increased number of youths returning to or staying in their home of origin, and the pervasive notion of young people as entitled and self-centered (see Twenge, 2006, 2013). The second stream of research is problematic because it perpetuates the idea of a normative “youth” or a model citizen that is based on white
western middle class values (see Howe & Strauss, 2000). In reality, all forms of generational research effectively stereotype and objectify a large group of people through limited narrative constructions based primarily upon their date of birth and multiple-choice questionnaires. The questions remain: To what end do the classifications and generalizations (good or bad) serve? How do negative narrative constructions persist in light of research, statistics, and youth-driven social movements—such as The Occupy Movement and The Arab Spring—that directly contradict these limited views of today’s youths?

2.1.2 The contemporary neoliberal context. The sociopolitical era at the time of this study has been described in many ways, including: the post-civil rights era, post-cold war era, the social era, the post-modern era, or the neoliberal era. All of these attempts at periodization aim to generalize and describe time periods in relation to significant social, political, cultural, and scientific events and many refer to overlapping time frames and are used interchangeably. In this section, I offer a definition of neoliberalism and note the multiple, dynamic, and negotiated nature of neoliberalism as “a consequence of the contestation between dominant and oppositional claims, rather than simply being imposed from above” (Larner, 2000, p. 19). I then focus on the ways in which neoliberalism contributes to particular “youth” narratives and influences opportunities for youths participation within the Canadian context.

Most of the youth-focused literature reviewed here utilizes a post-Reagan and Thatcher version of neoliberalism that Harvey (2005) referred to as the neoliberal revolution. This revolution, particularly in the US and the UK, was achieved democratically and relied on political consent of the majority of the population in order to sway elections to the far right (Harvey, 2005). Drawing on Gramsci, Harvey (2005) argued that consent is grounded in “common sense,” which is constructed “out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions” (p. 39). This form of neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that
emphasizes the market and free trade, privileges private over public interests, and advocates for minimal government intervention in all domains. Harvey (2005) defined neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2).

Harvey (2005) argued that neoliberalism must be brought down through the linking of theory and practice that connects specific local forms of resistance in a unified broad scale social movement that is grounded in class struggle and a fight for economic equality. Holland and Gómez (2013) echoed Harvey’s call for a broad social movement and illustrated how the pervasiveness of neoliberalism actively undermines the potential for such a broad movement. They elaborated that collaboration across geographic locales and disparate movements and causes is necessary in order to effectively challenge hegemonic views of neoliberalism towards a “politics of possibility.”

For this study, neoliberalism is viewed as practices that contribute to the construction of society through an ongoing cycle of contestation, rather than a set of deterministic policies and institutions (Larner, 2000). Centeno and Cohen (2012) and Larner (2000) argued similarly that in order to rupture monolithic interpretations of neoliberalism, scholars must address policy, governance, and ideology as three interrelated aspects of neoliberalism. This perspective emphasizes the cultural influence of neoliberalism (Centeno & Cohen, 2012) in relation to policies and strategies of governance that are inherently complex, contradictory, and tenuous (Larner, 2000). For example, while neoliberalism stresses less government that does not mean there is less governance (Larner, 2000). Neoliberalism as governmentality stresses the ideological and discursive aspects of neoliberalism as influencing the contemporary ethos around themes of individual accountability and responsibility alongside discourses of competition and consumerism (Larner, 2000).
The multiple and contentious nature of neoliberalism is particularly evident in the Canadian neoliberal discourse. In Canada, Enoch (2007) argued that neoliberalism is distinct from Harvey’s depiction of neoliberalism in Gramscian terms as a democratically achieved ideological take over of “common sense” as in the United States and Europe. Rather, he argued neoliberalism emerged in Canada despite the prevailing oppositional public attitude, which he describes as a Keynesian political and economic outlook that is in favor of governmental intervention and support (Enoch, 2007). This critique of neoliberalism as a distinctly un-Canadian ideology is an argument based on the idea that there is a national Canadian identity, an identity that embodies progressive values, such as strong social services and universal health care, is environmentally conscious, welcomes and celebrates diversity, and strives for civil rights both at home and abroad. Although Enoch (2007) argued that neoliberalism in Canada is distinct in that it has emerged without popular consent and directly contrasts the progressive national Canadian identity and ethos, it remains that the elected dominant political party of Canada has enacted neoliberal ideology and policy at local, national, and global levels and across domains (e.g., environment, education, and military).

Of specific concern here are the effects of neoliberalism and how they manifest in the lives of the young people in this study as neoliberalism manifests differently across local sites, nations, and global networks. The problem is that neoliberalism informs, and in many instances, undermines youths’ opportunities for learning and participation in schools and community-based settings. For example, neoliberalism has affected educational policy and practice with the push towards privatization and school choice (Davidson-Harden & Majhanovich, 2004) and a shift in resources, such as funding availability and requirements for youth participation from creative and cultural enrichment towards entrepreneurship and vocational training (Goldfarb, 2002). Biesta (2005) argued that the “new language of learning” has become the dominant educational discourse,
reflecting the marketization of education, for example, as an exchange between a provider (teacher) and a consumer (student).

On a broader scale, some claim that neoliberalism has created the social and economic conditions that hinder youths’ transition towards adulthood (Craig & Dyson, 2008). Many believe the student debt crisis in the US, for example, is preventing young people from becoming economically independent (http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/16/student-debt-crisis-may-be-largely-about-smallest-borrowers). Further, Woodman and Wyn's (2013) work challenged the “youth” as transition and developmental stage perspectives and advanced a view that looks at the interrelated processes of humans-in-context. This latter view supports the argument that within the current neoliberal context the meaning and reality of youth and adulthood are rapidly changing. These perspectives on neoliberalism critique the perspective that all human activity, including youth engagement, should have a marketable outcome. A consequence of this, as noted by the authors above, is the limitation of our capacity to conceptualize alternative meanings of social engagement and activity.

Economic and social factors provide a much-needed contextual layer to the dominant narratives surrounding youth and work, education, and engagement. As a province, British Columbia is known as having some of the worst (and steadily increasing) income inequality in Canada (Ivanova, 2009). Beautiful British Columbia, formerly known as The Best Place on Earth (http://www.beautifulbc.net), between 2000-2012 maintained a child poverty rate higher than the national average (First Call BC, 2014). Vancouver was most recently named the most expensive city in North America (Meisner, 2012) and is also home to the nation’s poorest zip code: the Downtown Eastside (Brethour, 2009). Vancouver is an extreme microcosm of the nationally and globally spreading economic disparity that sparked a worldwide oppositional movement called The Occupy
Movement. Occupy, as it’s commonly called, began in September of 2011 and more than half of the participants were younger than 34 years old (Captain, 2011).

A central concern of The Occupy platform was the economic challenges facing many young people today. Factors, such as limited availability due to school attendance, lack of vocational experience, hiring requirements, the increased potential for being laid off as a newer employee (Bernard, 2013), and the decrease in entry level jobs, are crucial elements that must be addressed when discussing youth employment and education. For example, young people are graduating and entering a lagging workforce with excessive debt only to find few available jobs relate to their degree, which has led to an increase in underemployed youth (Weissmann, 2014). In BC, more young people than ever before are attending post-secondary education, but they are paying more than ever to attend the most expensive schools and institutions in Canada (Smith, Peled, Hoogeveen, Cotman, & McCreary Centre Society, 2009). Regardless, youth unemployment rates and the decline of job opportunities, which spiked with the 2008-2009 recession (Bernard, 2013), forced many young people to pursue higher education and advanced graduate degrees resulting in an increase in personal debt (Smith et al., 2009).

Voter turnout is another way that youth engagement has been measured and is often reported as “evidence” for youths’ apathetic, lazy, and self-centered lifestyles. While Canada reports a strikingly low voter turnout rate for 18-24 year olds, national trends illustrate a significant increase from a turnout rate of 25% in 2000 to 39% turnout rate in 2004 (Lockton, 2008). The most self-reported barrier keeping young people from voting was a lack of knowledge about the electoral process in addition to difficulties getting a voter identification card and access to polling stations (Youth Vital Signs Leadership Council, 2013). To say that a group of people are or are not political based on voting erases not only the sociopolitical context, barriers for voting, and alternative forms of political engagement that occur outside the organized democratic system, but also an individual’s
rationale and choice for political participation, such as withholding one’s vote as political action. The socially constructed assumptions about “millennial youth” take on new and contradictory meanings when situated in the neoliberal context in which they are embedded, thus, highlighting the need for studies that inquire into the narratives of young people.

2.2 Recognizing Youth as Cultural Producers

Divided into two sub-sections, this section begins with a review of the interdisciplinary literature on youth and civic engagement. Second, I describe literature that addresses youth as active cultural producers and makers of meaning in and through creative and activist practices. It begins with a discussion of cultural production and then reviews literature that focuses on creative processes and activism. The aim of this section is to build a conceptual bridge for thinking about how youths’ meaning making is an ongoing negotiation within a mutually constitutive web of social relationships and practices in order to re-imagine alternative places of learning that might generate possibilities.

This literature is divided in two distinct sub-groups. The first group reflects what Kelly (2014) referred to as a liberal pluralist ideology and generally approaches youth as “citizens-in-waiting” (Kennelly, 2011) in need of skills or competencies in order to become active and engaged citizens (e.g., Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silbereisen, 2002; Youniss & Yates, 1997). The second group reflects a critical ideology (Kelly, 2014) and views youth as active agents of change working towards social justice (e.g., Ginwright et al., 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). The final objective is to bridge the youth activism literature with scholarship that conceives of youths as cultural producers, or in Kelly’s terms, as “political actors and knowing subjects” (2014, p. 397).

2.2.1 Youth as “citizens in waiting.” The first group of literature emerged largely from the PYD paradigm and is an ever-growing body of scholarship concerned with youth and civic
engagement that addresses issues such as developing civic competence in youth (Youniss et al., 2002) or catalyzing youth political participation (van Benschoten, 2000). These scholars advocate for civic-minded education and youth programs as pathways to social change and/or positive academic and developmental outcomes (see Christens & Dolan, 2011; Ginwright et al., 2006; Yu & Lewis-Charp, 2006; Zeldin, 2004). Sherrod (2006) described two historical periods of scholarship on youth civic engagement: the first was in the 1950s and reflected a traditional socialization model reflective of the Eisenhower presidency and post-war era, and the second, during the 1970s, focused on collective social movements during Civil Rights era. Legacies of these influences can be seen throughout the contemporary literature on youth activism and citizenship that focuses either on individual outcomes or transformation at the social level.

Youth citizenship, within the fields of civic education and development, became understood as politeness, caring for the elderly, being kind to strangers, and limited forms of community engagement and took on the function of categorizing “good citizens” from “bad citizens” (Kennelly, 2011). The idea that youths were not only uninvolved, but also apathetic about civic and political happenings (Putnam, 2000; Sloam, 2012), came to be referred to as a “crisis in citizenship” (Hart, 2009). The “crisis in citizenship” echoed the “youth at risk” narrative and effectively positioned youths, this time in the political sphere, as a problem, deficient, and a risk to society at large. These socially constructed “crises” underscore much of the work within the positive youth development paradigm, which emerged in direct response to the “youth at risk” claims, by taking a strengths-based approach to promoting citizenship as an essential component of healthy development.

From these discussions, a body of educational and developmental scholarship emerged that views youth activism and civic engagement as interventions that will help young people develop from “citizens in waiting” (Kennelly, 2011) into active engaged citizens ready and able to participate in a democratic society (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Youniss et al. 2002; Zeldin, 2004). “Civic
competence” became a key term, defined in Youniss and colleagues’ (2002) seminal piece as “an understanding of how government functions, and the acquisition of behaviors that allows citizens to participate in government and permit individuals to meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interests within a framework of democratic principles” (p. 124). While taking an explicit strengths-based perspective of youths, they argued that it is the responsibility of adults to prepare youths for their inevitable role as political actors (Youniss et al., 2002). Flanagan and Levine (2010) proposed an explicitly developmental and future-oriented argument that civic engagement was crucial to the maturation process and enabled youths to become young adults. Another popular youth development perspective focused on interventions to foster resilience and resistance to oppressive social conditions that youth experience (Larson, 2000; Lerner, 2002). These approaches to youth activism are compatible with neoliberalism in that they situate the locus of responsibility for the self and society within the individual stressing the need to become a “good citizen” and they conceptualize citizenship as a static outcome or achievable objective, rather than a socioculturally situated dynamic process (Biesta et al., 2009).

The second group of literature has emerged more recently by scholars who have embraced an explicitly critical or social justice perspective. This shift highlights a move from conceptualizing youths as passive recipients of civic skills and knowledge, as in a socialization model, to an active form of youth agency whereby youths are civic participants. Ginwright et al.’s (2006) volume brought together interdisciplinary research that considered youths as agents of social change who are situated within a particular sociocultural context and who work to resist the tendency to view youths as “future citizens” by viewing them as “present civic actors” (p. xx). A second theme of this literature included the idea that youths’ perspective are valuable and they have a right to be involved in activities and decisions that directly affect their lives (Zeldin, 2004) and is consistent with the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child.
An aim of much of the research utilizing a social justice approach to youth activism is to provide insight into the ways in which youths’ lives are influenced by social, political, cultural and economic conditions. Scholars contributing to this literature already hold that youth engagement geared towards civic and political participation is good for youth and society; therefore much of the scholarship focuses on the conditions of participation, such as activities and roles, pedagogy, and adult—youth relationships (Kirshner, 2008; O'Donoghue, 2006; Zeldin, 2004). Kirshner (2008) proposed four recommendations for how adults can structure and guide youths’ civic engagement: start by identifying an authentic problem with youth, create opportunities for youth to work with and learn from mature or “veteran” activists, intentionally build a project supporting youths’ skills and interests, and allow ample time for a project to come to fruition. Again, the end goal is for adults to create the conditions for youths to gain experience and skills for civic participation, and to do so with youth.

### 2.2.2 Youths as cultural producers.

This review begins with a brief introduction to cultural production. It then shifts to a selective, rather than comprehensive, review of work on youth and cultural production. The reviewed works merge at three conceptual intersections crucial to this study. First, they situate practices and cultural production within their historical and social context. Second, they focus on the interrelatedness of practices and contexts through which youth conceptualize, negotiate, construct and disseminate meaningful cultural products. Third, they are concerned with how these practices and contexts contribute to personal and social transformation.

#### 2.2.2.1 Cultural production.

O’Connor (2003) defined culture as a dynamic process through which people make meaning “by drawing on cultural forms as they act in social and material contexts, and in so doing produce themselves as certain kinds of culturally located persons while at the same time reproducing and transforming the cultural formations” in which they are situated (p.
Simply speaking, we all produce culture through our daily routines, such as our decisions about what clothes to wear, and through these decisions we draw upon, reproduce, and transform the cultural conditions in which we are embedded. Levinson and Holland (1996) defined cultural production as a theoretical tool that enables the portrayal and interpretation of the ways in which people actively encounter material and ideological conditions. Important to Levinson and Holland’s (1996) work is their attention to the mutually constitutive nature of people and the social world and to the ways that people enact and contest particular socially constructed subjectivities. Cultural production emerges during these ongoing struggles of enactment and contestation between human agency and structure. Panelli, Nairn, and McCormack (2002) considered how youth, as cultural producers, create and negotiate social space by constructing meanings and expressing their understandings through various social and cultural practices.

Walkerdine (2007) argued that researchers must go beyond the Cartesian subject as active meaning maker and take on the “strategies of governmentality in the making of citizens” (p. 10). In other words, it is imperative to consider the cultural practices and the meanings generated from them as partly inscribed with discourses of power and modes of governance. Youth are understood here as capable social actors and cultural producers and, at the same time, they are constrained by the complex web of social relations (e.g., institutions, programs, organizational structure) within which they exist (Maira & Soep, 2004). This approach explicitly views youth as actively constructing meaning, but acknowledges that meaning is always afforded and constrained by the social relationships and practices through which meaning is re/constructed.

2.2.2.2 Creativity and activism. Creative processes, as cultural production, have long been theorized as a powerful means for personal and social transformation (e.g., Eisner, 1998; Greene, 1991; Mahon, 2000). Greene (1991) explained that “pluralities of persons can be helped to go in search of their own images” through poetry, sculpture, dance, painting, carving, and song (p. 28).
These expressive practices—of exploring how one feels, thinks, and perceives one’s experiences—rely on processes that require imagination and creativity to translate personal understanding into some sort of content that has a particular form (Greene, 1991). Following Hall (1988), youths’ cultural productions are both “formative and expressive” in that they both construct and reflect learning in terms of what they are coming to know, their negotiated identities, and emerging values within a dynamic web of social relations.

There has been a significant shift over the past 20 years in creativity and education influenced by the emergence of new expressive genres generated by technology and multimodality (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 2005; Gadsden, 2008; New London Group, 1996). Gadsden (2008) argued that these new focal points could bridge the local and the global, and link cultures and worlds across age, time, and space that would previously have been impossible. Due to its ability to transcend cultural, linguistic, and economic barriers, creative processes and art forms—including music, theatre, film, public art, and printmaking—have long been used as a vehicle for social change and especially as a tool for the empowerment of marginalized communities (Heath & Smyth, 1999; Respress & Lutfi, 2006; Silveria, 2007). Interest is increasing in the ways that youth, as active cultural producers, use creative processes and media for social transformation. The present study contributes to this emerging body of scholarship, that I now turn.

The majority of the literature reviewed here aligns with a critique of neoliberal ideologies and policies through explicitly critical approaches and social justice agendas. In the same way that neoliberalism has shaped the everyday lived experiences of youth it has also influenced social and activist movements. Gulbrandensen and Holland (2001) addressed how neoliberalism has affected local environmental activism and created what they call “hybrid forms of environmentalism” (p. 124). They explained that this hybrid form blurs agendas, politics, and goals through a reliance on partnerships between environmentalists, local businesses, government and non-governmental
organizations, and development agencies in order to win grants and gain funding opportunities. These partnerships tend to privilege economic interests and create what they call the “super-citizen” out of business leaders who are cast as apolitical in relation to politically motivated activists. All of which, Gulbrandensen and Holland (2001) argued, pose significant challenges to grassroots activism and “blunt[s] the critical edge of the environmental critique” (p. 124).

In later work, Holland and Gómez (2013) examined the alternative (local) food movement as a means for assessing the transformative achievements of contemporary activist movements. They identified a lack of collective and structural analysis within the movement. Drawing on Gibson-Graham’s 2006 book, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Holland and Gómez defined a “politics of possibility” as “a politics that not only aims to challenge the hegemony of capitalism as an economic system, but also to think about politics in a different way—as a politics of possibility.” This view focuses on the “here-and-now” as a means to construct alternative non-capitalist economies that are enacted in the present that catalyze “processes of becoming in place” (p. 132). In an attempt to identify politics of possibility, they concluded that the local food movement might be “a new form of activism emerging under neoliberalism that potentially constitutes a base constituency for more oppositional trans-local activists seeking significant change in the current food regime” (Holland & Gómez, 2013, p. 155).

In their work with young Canadian activists and artists, Porfilio and Watz (2010) explored young people’s perceptions and experiences of an initiative that promoted civic participation through arts-based cultural production, the 411 Initiative for Change. They found most youths regularly engaged in self-expression and communication about social issues affecting their lives through various forms of media, technology, and art. These youth cultural productions provided a rich and culturally relevant source for supporting youths through dialogue and reflection, critique of systemic injustice, toward collective social action (Porfilio & Watz, 2010).
Kinloch (2007) highlighted the interrelatedness of personal and social transformation when art is used for activist purposes. The youths in Kinloch’s (2007) study used art as a means to catalyze community support by reflecting on the shared history and cultural resources of their community in relation to the discourses of urban revitalization and challenges of gentrification they were facing. Drawing on Dewey’s notion of “art as experience,” they conceptualized art as “songs of human struggles, tools that stimulate community conversations, and visible signs of everyday life—housing projects, abandoned storefronts, ‘rubble,’ and the busy 125th Street thoroughfare connecting Harlem’s west-side to its east-side” (p. 38). Kinloch (2007) described a transformative process whereby the youths—understanding that cultural practices are inscribed with relations of power and discipline—began to “resee” their community by artistically documenting their experiences while simultaneously paying attention to the conflicting social, political, and historical tensions. She explained that the youths recognized the history of their community and then used art to narrate stories of belonging that were embedded in spatial and cultural struggle (Kinloch, 2007). They then came together with elders and longtime residents of the community to share their art forms and engaged in an intergenerational dialogue that generated active, transformational, and reciprocal learning for all participants (Kinloch, 2007).

Coryat (2008) echoed Porfilio and colleagues’ insights that many of today’s youths are actively engaged in cultural production and conceptualized youths as “protagonists in the realms of culture and politics” (p. 2). Her linkage of personal—social transformation is through a view of cultural production as a personally empowering process and as a space where youths participate in local and global democratic practices. Coryat’s (2008) research focused on how youth-made media, especially in places of war and conflict, has the potential to “shift the perception of marginalized groups from racialized others to empowered citizens” (p. 6). Key to Coryat’s work were the
historically and culturally situated social practices that young people negotiated together—through dialogue and reflection—while working toward a more socially just democratic society.

Sandlin and colleagues (Bracken, Sandlin, & Wright, 2009; Sandlin & Milam, 2008) examined “culture jamming” as a form of critical performative pedagogy aimed at challenging and countering the neoliberal politics that underpin mass media. Sandlin and Milam (2008) argued that culture jamming has the potential to: 1) open up spaces of learning through creative and cultural production, 2) create community, 3) facilitate transformational learning of whole persons (they use the term corporeal to connote embodied forms of learning), and 4) engage people in collective political participation. Similarly, Chavez and Soep’s (2005) work on the “pedagogy of collegiality” emphasized adult—youth partnerships as mutuality and as a joint process and product. They explained, youths and adults jointly share the risks involved in transformational learning and the work of exploring, interrogating, and creating media productions that intervene in the larger social world (Chavez & Soep, 2005). Their work speaks back to current neoliberal education practices through an emphasis on the historically and culturally situatedness of social relationships and practices with an explicit emphasis on building connections to “something larger than oneself and one’s immediate world of interaction and experience” (Chavez & Soep, 2005, p. 431).

Finally, I draw on two additional works to further develop the notion of cultural production as social action. First, Cambre (2009) examined how a grassroots youth collective in Venezuela used images of Che Guevara as “an operative sign system that continues to nurture dynamic forms of political and cultural change” (p. 339). Utilizing a historical lens, Cambre (2009) described how this particular image has been appropriated for popular consumption on t-shirts and posters; as well as it’s continued re-emergence and use for social movements around the globe. Cambre (2009) claimed the Venezuelan youth used Che’s image to invoke his Marxist view of praxis and labor and an anti-capitalist stance, as well as to create new relationships between word and image, which is
vital because text and image work differently. Drawing on Arendt, Cambre (2009) defined “action as an articulation of human togetherness” and, together, the youths constructed meaning and identity through creative action (p. 356). Creative action highlights the social relationships and practices through which young people engage in ongoing, never completed or finalized, transformations of identities and their social communities.

Second, Green (2010) examined the way a youth collective, the Black Arts Collective, utilized arts activism as a way to engage in and challenge the negative discourse and incarceration epidemic facing youths of color specifically in relation to the “school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 297). The social relationships and practices of the youth collective sought to merge arts and activism based on Freire’s notion of praxis, a process of action and reflection. Praxis is another way to conceptualize the interrelatedness of personal and social transformation that is key to all of these works and the present study. An explicit goal of the youth collective was to re-center race and trace popular discourses (e.g., the “war on drugs” and zero-tolerance policies in schools) that continue to alienate minority youth historically, so that they could make sense of their lived experiences and inspire change for a more socially just future (Green, 2010). These works converge in their approach to creative processes and activism as an invitation of “meaning-making, critical questioning” that may open “us to visions of the possible rather than the predictable; it permits us, if we choose to give our imaginations free play, to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, 1994, pp. 494-495).

The literature reviewed here provides a general overview of a broad field of scholarship concerned with youths’ civic engagement, political participation, and activism. Beginning with a historical overview of “youth” as a social construct and a discussion of the contemporary socioculturally situated narratives of youths. I then focused on scholars who have taken up civic engagement as an important domain for positive youth development and educational outcomes. From there, I shifted to literature that considers youth as cultural producers and focused on works
highlighting youths’ creative and activist productions. Together these works create a foundation for thinking about the youth participants in this study as cultural producers and TA as a site for cultural production. Similar to this study, much of this scholarship provides a counter-hegemonic view of young people by focusing on youth who are actively engaged in some form of social critique and/or social change projects, however, the majority of it focuses on either structural constraints or youths’ expressions of agency. The present study offers a critique and alternative to the strengths and deficit-based literature, as well as the critical scholarship reviewed, by examining the macro, local, and micro factors involved in youths’ participation.

2.3 Grounding and Extending Communities of Practice with Sociocultural Theory

In this study, communities of practice frames how learning as participation supports the construction of knowing, being and valuing. The purpose of this section is to provide a more in-depth discussion of the community of practice framework and then ground and extend it with sociocultural theory towards an integrated framework for understanding how young people co-construct meaning through participation. First, I develop the community of practice framework outlined in the first chapter with more recent applications and extensions of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work. This section is organized using three key elements of a situated learning framework: *apprenticeship*, *social practice*, and *learning as knowing, being, and valuing*. Second, I ground the community of practice framework with a socioculturally informed *dialectical perspective* and extend it through an elaboration of learning and the concept of social futures.

2.3.1 Learning as participation in a community of practice. In the years since Lave and Wenger coined “community of practice” it has become a widely popular tool for conceptualizing learning as participation in many disciplines, such as education (e.g., Edwards, 2005; Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007; Kirshner, 2008; Mitra, 2008), organization and management (e.g., Brown & Duguid 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002), and information science (e.g., Davenport &
Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning framework provided an alternative to the prevailing cognitivist and behavioral approaches to learning that viewed learning as an individual process and prioritized the notion of learning as acquisition in discrete decontextualized activities (Handley, Sturdy, Finchman, & Clark, 2006). A community of practice framework is grounded in the Marxist tradition of social practice theory and emphasizes the historical nature of emotion, motivation and social relations (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Holland and Lave’s (2009) work on “contentious local practice” elaborates this by attending to how differently located participants encounter each other and negotiate inevitable conflicts and tensions through participation in cultural practices.

Lave and Wenger’s work has also been touted as a paradigm shift in learning due to their view of social participation as an integral component of learning, rather than a contextual or accompanying factor of learning (Hughes et al., 2007). The move to view learning as situated activity, referred to as “legitimate peripheral participation,” enabled a shift to social participation, rather than individual cognition or behavior, as:

a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and oldtimers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29)

This definition highlights learning as holistic and offers a view of the person actively engaging in and with the world in a reciprocal process of transformation. This framework shifts the focus from learning as an individual psychological process to one that is fundamentally social by focusing on
how increasing participation in ongoing practices with others generates changes in the person engaged in social activity.

Lave and Wenger (1991) located LPP within a community of practice, which they defined as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Also helpful to this work is Mitra’s (2008) definition of a community of practice as a group of people that “share a common concern about a problem and seek to deepen their understanding of this problem through interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 222). In his later work, Wenger (1998) developed a more precise model for communities of practice with three key dimensions: the shared repertoires that develop in mutual engagement on a joint enterprise. Wenger (1998) focused on how individuals negotiated multiple identities and trajectories of participation across their multiple communities of practice as a key dilemma for individuals. This idea of changes in how one comes to know, be, and value in one community of practice influences and is influenced by changes in other communities highlights the inherent tension and conflict within this social practice theory (Holland & Lave, 2009).

2.3.1.1 Apprenticeship. Situated learning is based on an apprenticeship model wherein newcomers enter a community of practice and experts support them as they move toward mastering knowledge, skills, and identities through participation. Hanks (1991) described apprenticeship as an interactive process in which the apprentice engages by simultaneously performing in several roles—status subordinate, learning practitioner, sole responsible agent in minor parts of the performance, aspiring expert, and so forth—each implying a different sort of responsibility, a different set of role relations, and a different interactive involvement. (p. 23) This model of participation does not rely on the idea that every newcomer enters into the same role with the same tasks and responsibilities, but the understanding that all of these components shift over time and space along with the learners’ relationship to the whole (Hanks, 1991). Learning as
peripheral participation focuses on the trajectory of participation as one transitions from newcomer to full/er participation or oldtimer (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and these trajectories are multidirectional, diverse (no two are the same), and situated in the social world.

Lave and Wenger (1991) utilized the apprenticeship model in order to get at the inherently social and situated nature of learning. They explained that the apprenticeship framework highlights the wide range of social practices necessary to study “the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world” (p. 32). Apprenticeship moves beyond the tendency to simplify situated activity or situated learning as context or “container” towards a theory that views learning as relational, meaning as negotiated, and focuses on the whole person acting with the world. This world is socially constituted and the dialectical relations between the world and the person highlight the mutually constitutive nature of the world and people in activity (Lave, 1991). Lave (1991) explained that the use of the terms master and apprentice enabled a way of thinking and talking about the ways that the social relations “in which persons and practices change, re-produce, and transform each other” (p. 68). Thinking about apprenticeship this way highlights the reciprocal, mutual, and negotiated nature of learning.

Critics (Edwards, 2005; Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005) of this framework have argued that the explanation that learning is legitimated through “acceptance by and interaction with acknowledged adept practitioners” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 100) is vague and ignores alternative modes of participation and learning, such as rejection or resistance. The idea that one enters a community of practice—which can be interpreted as assuming a distinct boundary, rather than a porous and diffuse set of relations—as a willing learner hoping to become a member and, thus, is defined by their membership status ignores the fact that one is simultaneously participating in many different overlapping and conflicting communities of practice. This critique also fails to recognize a central premise of Lave and Wenger’s work, which is that the meanings that participants’
make through and about their participation are varied, multiple, divergent, and evolve over time within particular contexts.

Lave and Wenger (1991) addressed this issue with their explanation of legitimate peripheral participation as a model of apprenticeship where expertise and authority, particular manifestations of power, will always be varied, negotiated, relational, and evolving. Thinking about people as always involved in multiple communities requires an understanding of membership and participation as layered, interacting, and mutually influencing across the communities through which one engages. Lave (2012) later elaborated, “a relational perspective, ‘knowledge’ or ‘knowledge-ability’ must be understood as part of, and as taking meaning from and for, persons engaged as apprentices to their own changing practice across the multiple contexts of their lives” (p. 167).

**2.3.1.2 Social practice.** Wenger (1998) defined practice as a “way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action” (p.5). Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning takes form in social practices, which contrasts with traditional views of learning that focus on learning as a result of pedagogical structuring. Learning, instead, evolves through participants’ engagement with and negotiation of the social relationships and practices organized by the oldtimers. This view of learning enables analysis that accounts for the conflictual nature of social transformation through a view of learning as changing social relationships and practices.

Legitimate peripheral participation refers both to the changes in members’ emerging knowledge, identities, and values in practice and to the reproduction and transformation of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This linkage of changes in persons and changes in community provides a platform for thinking about learning as the internalization of social relations: “In any given concrete community of practice the process of community reproduction—a historically constructed, ongoing, conflicting, synergistic structuring of activity and relations among
practitioners—must be deciphered in order to understand specific forms of legitimate peripheral participation through time” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56). This perspective highlights the contrary and contested nature of social practices through which the interrelated cycles of learning and social reproduction emerge. Lave (1996) elaborated on the fundamental role of social practices in the construction of knowing, being and valuing in which she argued that becoming fundamentally shapes knowing.

**2.3.1.3 Learning as knowing, being, and valuing.** Lave and Wegner (1991) made their epistemic and ontological assumptions clear in their overarching premise that learning entails the transformation of people and of communities. They insisted that cognition is not an adequate way to think about learning and described learning as transformational participation and the re/production of communities of practice. Based on this assumption, the authors claimed that learning, social membership is inherently value-laden, and identity are interdependent, evolving, and socioculturally situated, thus we arrive at their axiological stance. They linked knowing, identity, and values through the understanding that learning takes place through ongoing participation and interaction with others in a valued social community that involves changes in the whole human being. Lave (1991) explained that

> learning is recognized as a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice; the process of changing knowledgeable skill is subsumed in processes of changing identity in and through membership in a community of practitioners; and mastery is an organizational, relational characteristic of communities of practice. (p. 64)

This complex model focuses on the ongoing transformations of people, of practices, and the field of social relations through which they take place, in order to conceptualize learning as neither wholly
subjective nor entirely intersubjective, but learning as a blend of both the subjective and intersubjective, as mediated by the field of social relations in which they are situated (Lave, 1991).

Lave and Wenger (1991) conceived of “identities as long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice” (p. 53). Wenger (1998) argued that learning transforms who we are and creates “personal histories of becoming” in relation to our communities, thus, linking knowing and being (p. 5). Lave (1991) described identity as dependent upon our interaction and activities with others. She explained that identity construction “is also a way of speaking of the community’s constitution of itself through the activity of its practitioners” and that without participation there may be “no basis for lived identity” (Lave, 1991, p. 74). In this way, participation is essential for the construction of values. In her later work, Lave (1996) explicitly addressed the paramount task of identity construction as a social process alongside the construction of knowledge and skills through social practices. She explained, “[K]nowing’ is a relation among communities of practice, participation in practice, and the generation of identities as part of becoming part of ongoing practice” (p. 157).

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) example of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as a community of practice is particularly helpful in elucidating these three concepts—apprenticeship, social practices, and learning as knowing, being and valuing. They described AA as a community of practice in which newcomers learn to become, or develop an identity, as non-drinking alcoholics. AA is a particular “cultural system” that consists of beliefs, identities, values, and behaviors alongside specific ways of dealing with and interpreting experiences and events (Lave, 1991). Newcomers to AA learn through participation (e.g., observation, interaction, and reading) the beliefs and particular ways of interpreting experiences and events whereby they actively construct new identities as non-drinking alcoholics. AA’s social practices are grounded in storytelling with the goal of constructing a life story, or narrative, that contributes to a new identity and “new meaning of the teller’s past and
future action in the world” (Lave, 1991, p. 73). Newcomers gain access to the community’s overarching goals and objectives through meetings and organizational literature, by observing oldtimers as they model storytelling, and by spending time interacting with near peers, practitioners and oldtimers. Over time, their participation changes as they construct a new identity of themselves as a non-drinking alcoholic and as they eventually become recognized as full participants and eventually oldtimers (Lave, 1991). This example provides an opportunity, which Lave and Wenger (1991) do not take up, to explore how the broader institutional relations of AA, as an organization that emerged in the US in the 1930s from an organized spiritual movement has grown into a global network reporting a membership of over 2 million in 2000 (http://www.aa.org/), interacts with and mutually influences the more localized participation in communities of practice.

Two key issues with this framework are addressed before moving on. First, the concept “community” does not refer to a static and homogenous group of people, a visible boundary, or a “primordial culture-sharing entity” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Community, in this work, is understood to be a set of relations between people, activity, and the social world that develop over time and in relations with other co-occurring and intersecting communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although this study focuses on TA and the YGM, it considers the young people and their participation to be a constantly evolving set of relations for which meaning is re/negotiated in the broader social world. Young people are members of many communities, and there may be communities of practice within said communities; their ongoing changing participation in each continuously influences the others. The second issue, closely related with the first, is concerned with the notion of the meaning of membership in a community of practice and what it entails. Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that, as an integral component of social practice, learning involves the whole person in relation to the community, thus, implying that becoming a “participant, a member, a kind of person” (p. 53). They further explained, “learning thus implies becoming a
different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations” (p. 53).

Thinking about learning as a holistic endeavor also entails thinking about learning and membership as ongoing dialectical processes. Learning is viewed as co-construction and emphasizes the importance of oldtimers in structuring and shaping the social practices and relationships that contribute to the newcomers’ learning. Participation and membership do not rely on agreement, cohesion, or acceptance; importantly, dissent, resistance and challenge may be valued aspects of social relationships and practices within a community. And even if they are not within a specific community, the concept of community is not defined by homogeneity or consensus. Sociocultural theories of learning and development provide theoretical grounding and extend this community of practice framework.

**2.3.2 Sociocultural extensions.** This inquiry is informed by sociocultural theory, specifically drawing on Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) dialectical perspective and extended with two elaborations of sociocultural theory: 1) *Learning as knowing, being, and valuing*, and 2) *social futures*.

**2.3.2.1 The dialectical perspective.** Vygotsky was heavily influenced by Marx and dialectical materialism after the Russian revolution of 1917 (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007). In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx and Engels critiqued traditional Hegelian materialism for the lack of attention to the individual in relation to their social context (Tucker, 1978). Vygotsky drew on Marx’s notion that consciousness develops through practical activity in the social world, thus highlighting the interdependent (Lee, 1985) or sociogenetic (Panofsky, 2003) relation between individuals and society. This view argues that interpsychological (social) and intrapsychological (individual) functions are dialectically related and cannot be reduced to a simple either/or binary; they must always be held in tension as interrelated and mutually constitutive (Roth & Lee, 2006). In other
words, social, interpersonal, inter-mental processes are necessary antecedents and give rise to individual, intrapersonal, intra-mental processes (Cole & Wertsch, 1996).

In dialectical thinking, the term *contradiction* is used to describe the interpenetration of dialectical opposites, or the unity of opposites, which presupposes their mutuality and inseparability (Marquit, 1983). Historical materialists broke from the dominant philosophical traditions aligned with formal logic and dualistic thinking. Psychology as a discipline was said to be experiencing a crisis due to the limits of these traditional schools of thought that relied on the mind/body split and privileged *either* individual subjective experience *or* generalizable laws based on objective observable behavior (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007). Vygotsky was said to be responding to this “crisis in psychology” by proposing the idea that development was a dynamic transformation of “socially shared activities into internalized processes” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192).

Like Vygotsky’s work, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) community of practice stems from a Marxist tradition with its dialectical perspective of participation as a dynamic, evolving set of relations, and a view of the interrelatedness of “agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing” (p. 50). This view—that we are helping to make our social world through our participation in it while we are simultaneously also being shaped by it—aligns with the critical education scholarship that advocates for learning through praxis (Freire, 1970) and the view of criticality as practice (Burbules & Berk, 1996). The dialectical perspective is one aspect of communities of practice that enables the study of learning as contributing to macro, local, and micro levels, individual and social transformation.

**2.3.2.2 Learning as knowing, being, and valuing.** Vadeboncoeur et al.’s (2011) framework looks at identity construction across three interrelated layers: 1) the individual acting with mediational means, 2) social relationships with others and social practices, and 3) social relations dialectically constituted through institutions (see Figure 2.2). Each layer mediates experience in
unique ways. An individual’s history of experience is important for each layer and form of mediation. The first layer focuses on individuals operating with mediational means (e.g., cultural semiotic systems, objects, tools, artifacts). This is an important step away from individual reductionism. The second layer pays attention to the social relationships and the practices through which those relationships become meaningful. This enables the examination of issues of power and resistance inherent to all relationships. Finally, the third layer considers the social relations and institutions that mediate experiences. Drawing on Marx, Vadeboncoeur et al. (2011) defined social relations as relations between members of groups (e.g., teachers, parents, ethnic, or language groups), between individuals and groups, or between group members that reflect implicit patterned practices that are not necessarily visible or intentional by the participants. Institutions, such as families or schools, also include groups that may have shared experiences and/or concerns and contribute to the social relations between groups.
This framework reflects a move away from individualistic explanations of differences between people as innate differences, towards explanations of differences as different kinds of experiences with unique mediational means and social practices (Kozulin, 1998). At the crux of this conceptualization of identities is the recognition and rejection of the historical bias towards a single, core self characterized by sameness over space and time. This perspective views identities as a...
dialectic of sameness and difference and identities as “continuously becoming, dialogical relations, and contextual negotiation” (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011, p. 244). Thus, identities are viewed as complex, relational, and contextual negotiations, rather than attributes or traits of an individual.

2.3.2.3 Social futures. In this study, learning entails the construction of knowing, being and valuing and relies on the understanding that these constructions involve “becoming recognized, and recognizing oneself, as a member” of a community of practice (O’Connor & Allen, 2010, p. 161). Youths enter a community of practice as newcomers where they are welcomed, albeit differently, by oldtimers who have organized the social relationships and practices along a trajectory towards the goal of becoming a full participant in the community (O’Connor & Allen, 2010). The work of the oldtimers is to create conditions necessary for social continuation; their objective is to support newcomers along a trajectory (organized experiences, opportunities, tasks, roles) towards futures where they replace the oldtimers. This directly challenges Biesta’s (2005) critique that sociocultural theories of learning undermine the role and value of teachers (or oldtimers) by focusing on the activities of learners (or newcomers). O’Connor and Allen (2010) argued that when considering learning as the organization of social futures one must pay equal attention to issues of access and issues of recognition because there are no benign contexts in contemporary society. In other words, access to participation is always limited and can never be assumed as open to all and recognition is always tentative and negotiated. This raises three questions: who does and who does not have access to a community?, who can and does become recognized?, and under what conditions does recognition take place?

An activist trajectory is distinct from a traditional learning and career trajectory, such as an engineer, in that it exists outside most academic and professional institutions and disciplines and without concrete end goals. O’Connor and Allen (2010) argued that because these trajectories exist outside institutions and systems of privilege they require ongoing organization and negotiation.
They described the learning trajectory of two young spoken-word artists that entered a community as apprentices and learned knowledgeable skills and identities that involved recognition of themselves and each other as spoken-word artists and their role in the broader emerging spoken-word movement of which they were a part. The community of practice that the young apprentices joined was situated in relation to the broader spoken-word movement that relied on the ongoing organizational work of oldtimers. Thus, the possibility of a future as a spoken-word artist relied on intense ongoing organizational work at both the local and broader levels, including the ongoing organization of funding for the program. Learning becomes consequential when what has become a recognized practice by members from within the organization gains recognition from others outside the organization (O’Connor & Allen, 2010).

Gutiérrez (2008) conceptualized a “collective Third Space” as a particular social environment or “learning ecology” where students could re-imagine who they are and who and what they might be able to be and do in the future (p. 148). She described the youths’ participation as a struggle for new social futures based on a shared ideal of a socially just world by focusing on their social relationships and practices in relation to their sociocultural context. Learning in this space, Gutiérrez (2008) explained, was “organized in ways in which conversation, dialogue, and examination of contradictions are privileged across learning activities with varied participation structures: tutorials, comprehension circles, writing conferences, teatro, minilectures, and whole-class discussions” (p. 154). Mentors (oldtimers) co-constructed social practices with a blend of social theory, play and imagination into the social practices they co-constructed with apprentices (newcomers) that help them link the past, present, and imagined future through what Gutiérrez (2008) referred to as “social dreaming—a collective dream for a better world” (p. 158). The purpose of this work was for students to develop a “social semiotic toolkit” as extensions to their repertoires
of practice that enabled them to conceive of and design new potential social futures (Gutiérrez, 2008).

The conceptual and methodological framework of this study prioritizes the youths’ emerging and evolving social relationships with mentors, peers, near-peers and oldtimers and practices as contexts through which knowledge, identities, values, and potential social futures may be generated. The community of practice approach utilized in this study emphasized the socially negotiated nature of knowing, being, and valuing that emerged through social relationships and practices that were framed by a social justice agenda. One of the explicit goals of TA was to provide an opportunity for youths to create the tools and skills necessary for imagining and creating a more social and environmentally just world. Thus, the telos of learning at TA involved a trajectory towards a personally and collectively valued future identity as an activist, change maker, educator, citizen, or creator that directly challenged the pervasive negative portrayals of youths. Importantly, the meanings of the knowledge, identities, and values that youths constructed through their participation at TA were fluid, multiple, divergent, contentious, and inherently social.

2.4 Narrative

There are many different conceptualizations of narrative, each with its own distinct categorical structures, aims, and methods. The early narratologists or structuralists were primarily concerned with verbal or literary texts, followed by the contextualists who were more process-oriented and accounted for the social and contextual factors of the narrative (Page, 2010). Gubrium and Holstein (2008) argued that there have been two distinct narrative turns. The first was a focus on narrative structure and the second was on narrative practice. The former approach theorized the internal structure and function of stories. At the crux of this work is the understanding that the internal features of narratives have generalizable characteristics that move us beyond the individual level. They described the latter approach as an interweaving of the internal content and organization
of the story and the context and conditions that enable the story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). They posited that story and storytelling (narrative practice) are intertwined and that to understand one we must study them both (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008).

Categorizing Bruner as a structuralist, Gubrium and Holstein (2008) ignored his dialectical approach to narrative that addresses the interdependence between the sociocultural context and the individual’s story, or the socially constructed narrative. In paying attention to the social and cultural conditions in which the narrative is constructed, the relationships and practices that mediate the narrative, as well as the content and form of narrative, the researcher is able to ask important questions concerning the conditions, practices and resources necessary for the production of narratives. For example: who produces particular kinds of narratives about youth and young people?, how do these narratives become recognized and popularized?, what are the consequences of these narratives?, and how are these stories taken up and/or challenged? Most importantly, what are the narratives that young people construct about their lived and imagined experiences? First, I provide a review of literature on narrative and define concepts that underpin this study. Then, I review scholarship that describes the structure and form that makes narratives distinct.

2.4.1 Narrative constructions. Humans actively make meaning of their experiences that take place in a sociocultural context through semiotic interpretation (Bruner, 1990). This perspective emphasizes the role of cultural tools—language and other symbolic systems—in mediating how we think about and represent our experiences (Bruner, 1991). Narratives are cultural tools in that they mediate the meanings and understandings we construct of our lived and imagined experiences. Narrative has conventional forms, culturally transmitted, that are shaped by an individual’s sociocultural context and the tools available to them (Bruner, 1991).

Polkinghorne (1991) explained that the ability to understand and produce narrative discourse happens at an early age and is universal across cultures. There are many genres of narratives; they
vary in form and presentation (Barthes, 1982). Narratives can be read, heard, sung, performed, painted, enacted, written and sculpted (Barthes, 1982). Generally speaking, narratives are understood as stories that have a temporally organized series of events and an effort to create something of those events: “to render, or to signify, the experiences of persons-in-flux in a personally and culturally coherent, plausible manner” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162). Additionally, for humans to actively participate in culture requires a narrative understanding because narrative is how we make sense of our experiences (Lyle, 2000).

Bruner (1990) put forth the notion that humans make meaning of the world using two distinct strategies: paradigmatic (or logico-mathematical) and narrative understanding. The aim of both is to connect events through distinct processes, but the paradigmatic mode seeks to identify universal truth conditions while the narrative mode looks for particular connections or relationships between events. Narrative understanding, from Bruner’s (1990) perspective, is a universal mode for making meaning or ordering of experiences that is employed by people from all cultures.

Bruner’s (1990) theory of narrative understanding is a developmental one. For example, he argued that children have an innate capacity (biological) to organize experience in narrative form, which transforms and develops over time. This innate tendency or readiness is nurtured through social interactions where children encounter the models and cultural tools necessary to support narrative understanding (Bruner, 1990). Drawing on Bruner, Polkinghorne (1991) put forth the notion that “self” is a narrative construction that is temporal and developmental. Narratives organize our experiences into “meaningful units” that have a temporal sequence and are developmental. Narratives reflect an ongoing construction that is never completed, is culturally situated, and incorporates past, present and future (temporal) experiences (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 141).
Peacock and Holland (1993) argued for what they call a “life stories in process” approach to narrative and identity. The four process approaches—cultural, hermeneutic, psychosocial, psychocultural—emphasize life stories as a crucial human endeavor in that they reflect collective meaning, social communication and relations, and the formation of self or society. The practice approach used in this study is presented in opposition to traditional structural accounts of narrative in that they are dynamic and uncompleted, and are conceptualized as powerful social, cultural and psychological constructions. Bruner (2004) argued that:

eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives. (p. 694)

This position highlights the role of social relations and the dialectical nature of the individual and society.

Many educational and youth focused scholars have found conceptualizing identity or selfhood through a narrative lens advantageous (e.g., Bruner, 2004; Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Lightfoot, 1997; Ochs & Capps, 1996; Nicolopoulou, 1996; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). These scholars range in disciplinary focus, theoretical and methodological commitments and purposes, yet all link narratives with the study of identity. A traditional psychological perspective employs concepts, such as self, identity, or self-concept, to describe a singular or individual, coherent, and often times stable concept of identity/self (see Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011). Narrative can be a useful tool for dismantling these traditional individual internalized notions of identity and selfhood towards an understanding of identity that is inherently social in nature, dynamic and contextual (see Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Ochs and Capps (1996) explained, “narrative activity seeks to bridge a self that felt and acted in the past, a self that feels and acts in the present, and an anticipated
or hypothetical self that is projected to feel and act in some as yet unrealized moment” (p. 29). The metaphor of a bridging of temporal selves is useful in that it evokes the dynamic and contextual nature of narratives and selves that are connected by a bridge of perspective, experience, emotion and thought.

Studies using narrative as a conceptual and methodological tool for studying youth and identity provide insight into how narrative functions as a cultural tool. Aligned with the developmental view of narrative, Nicolopoulou (2011) argued that the stories of preschool aged children are meaningful and can tell us much about the ways that children relate to and understand the world. As we grow and develop our narrations evolve and become more complex. McLean’s (2005) research on late adolescent identity development as a life story focused on autobiographical memories and conceptualized adolescence as a time when life story emerges and meaning making is heightened due to the cognitive, physiological, social and cultural state of adolescence.

Sfard and Prusak (2005) conceptualized identity as narrative in which they equated “identities with stories about persons” and elaborated that discursively produced identities consist of a collection of narratives that are reifying, endorsable and significant (p. 14). Reifying narratives stress repetitiveness while endorsable narratives are those that “the identity-builder” would say accurately reflect the general situation. A significant narrative is one that if changed would likely affect the storyteller's feelings about the identified person. Sfard and Prusak (2005) distinguished between two types of narratives about people—actual and designated—that are two sets of reifying significant narratives about the participant that are also endorsed by the participant. Actual identities tend to be told in the first person, in the present tense, and tend to be factual. Designated identities tend to be narratives told that have the potential to become true in the future. They also utilized the bridge metaphor for learning as the link between individuals’ actual and designated identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).
Importantly, researchers who draw on narrative conceptualizations share a desire to understand how people make meaning of their experiences through stories or narratives that calls attention to the mutually constitutive relationship of the internal or intrapsychological functions—desire, intent, motive, affect—and the sociocultural context of these experiences. These two interrelated planes—the individual and the social—must be given equal attention in order to fully understand that “negotiating meaning, constructing an intersubjective and partially shared reality, becomes the fountainhead of subjectivity” (Lightfoot, 1997, p. 50). Lyle (2000) explained, “So the affective connection is also the story connection. Whenever our emotions are involved, so too is a narrative, a story or story fragment, that sets the context and the meaning” (p. 56).

2.4.2 Narrative distinctions. Not every speech, story, painting or tale is a narrative; there are specific characteristics and distinctions that constitute a narrative. Bruner (1990) outlined four grammatical requirements of successful narratives. First, an emphasis on human action or agency that he described as goal-oriented activity that is directed by agents. Bruner conceptualized the action as organized by crucial turning points in narratives that can illuminate divergences from the norm or expected script of a story to the “idiosyncratic and quintessentially agentive” aspects of the story (Bruner, 1991b, p. 73). Second, that events are organized in a coherent sequential order. The sequence or ordering of separate events (constituents) are attributed meaning through an overarching configuration that otherwise would not be possible; this configuration is the plot or fabula (Bruner, 1990). This narrative element illuminates the interpretative nature of narrative in that the plot is intentionally constructed by the narrator as a way of expressing meaning that is open for interpretation by an audience (Bruner, 1990).

The third distinction is that narrative is sensitive to what is canonical and violations of the canonical in human interaction. Bruner (1990) described this feature of narrative as the ability to forge “links between the exceptional and the ordinary” (p. 47). He argued that the worthiness of
any story—*the why it is worth telling*—is because there a breach or violation to the expected or normative script or canon, “*the function of a story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern*” (1990, pp. 49-50).

Finally, the fourth distinction is that all narratives are told from a particular vantage point or point of view; no narrative is “voiceless” (Bruner, 1990, p. 77). Bruner (2004) described narrative as unfolding on a “dual landscape”: a landscape of action, where the actual events take place, and a landscape of consciousness, which is the inner worlds of the actors involved (p. 698). Thus, Bruner (1991b) argued that narrative accounts must focus on humans and their intentional—and internal—states (emotions, values, desires, beliefs) and how those intentional states lead to particular action.

The core themes generated from the narrative literature reviewed here are: that narrative is a universal method of meaning making, sense making and/or the making of selves. This does not imply that narrative structures, interpretations or representations are universal nor are they ever completed. Rather, it means that narrativity is a universal process that human beings engage in, one that varies in mode, form, purpose, and meaning. The act of narrating, telling or storying is universal and, arguably, humans have an innate capacity to understand and construct narratives. Narratives are social in nature and emerge in a particular sociocultural context. Narratives and meaning are dialectical in that through narrating an experience an individual’s meaning of that experience changes and as the meaning changes so does the narrative. Narratives are cultural tools in that they mediate our experiences and the meanings we glean from those experiences and are open to interpretation. In this study, the narratives I co-constructed with youths from themes across the data are situated in relation to the popularized narrative of “millennials” as a means for exploring the extent to which the popular narrative describes the participants at Think Again.
2.5 Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed a broad body of interdisciplinary scholarship that is relevant to this inquiry into youths’ participation at Think Again, a youth-led social justice organization. This study is situated at the nexus of the interdisciplinary field of youth studies and brings together work that address youths’ political and civic engagement and work that conceptualizes youth as cultural producers. This review began by providing a historical overview of “youth” as a social construct and then drew on literature to illustrate the ways in which neoliberalism contributes to particular “youth” narratives and influences opportunities for youth participation within the Canadian context (Harvey, 2005; Holland & Gómez, 2013; Larner, 2000). From there, I shifted to literature that considers young people as cultural producers in order to build a conceptual bridge for thinking about how youths’ meaning making is an ongoing negotiation within a mutually constitutive web of social relationships and practices (Biesta et al., 2009; Maira & Soep, 2004).

This was followed by a review of the community of practice scholarship (see Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) that was grounded and extended with sociocultural theory (see O’Connor & Allen, 2010; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) for an integrated framework for understanding how young people co-constructed meaning through participation at TA. The community of practice approach utilized here emphasized the socially negotiated nature of knowing, being, and valuing that emerged through social relationships and practices that were framed by a social justice agenda. Finally, the study was grounded in a narrative perspective drawing largely on Bruner (1990, 1991, 2004). This perspective is based on the understanding that narrative is a trans-cultural form of meaning making, sense making and/or the making of selves. This literature review provides a foundation for the methodological framework that follows.
3.1 A Brief Interlude

I can recall some of the details of my first interaction with the youth at TA as though it were yesterday. I went to a YGM monthly meeting on a cold rainy Sunday evening at the TA office. The City Building was locked and we had to text or call Veronica to buzz us in, standing, waiting, nervous excitement, butterflies, and fidgets. She didn’t respond to my texts, but a young person showed up and we both got buzzed in. I made small talk with the youth on the elevator ride up to the fifth floor where about eight of us crammed into the tiny TA office to watch the film projected onto the wall. Someone offered me a chair, I declined. They moved anyway. I reluctantly sat down, right in the middle of the group. I’m a back corner kind of girl, but I couldn’t exert that desire here. That would make me really look and feel like an outsider or observer.

Folks trickled in until about twenty after or so and there was a general feeling of comfort and ease. After things settled and the presenter was squared away, Veronica pointed out the location of the bathrooms and introduced the food and the gluten-free and veggie options. She then prompted us to check-in: “say your name, your preferred gender pronoun, and something about your weekend.” When it got to me Veronica helped me out by explaining that I was a PhD student at UBC and that we were hoping to collaborate on some research. Phew. This was the first time I’d ever stated my preferred gender pronouns as part of a group activity—it was significant in that it really made me think about how immediate and instinctual it is to make assumptions about people’s genders. I then became really curious about my judgment skills and wondered if anyone would surprise me, no one did.

A local organization was there to demonstrate and talk about their work of creating safer schools through film and anti-homophobia workshops. The presenter talked about the work that they do and showed some short films made by and about queer youth. One was absolutely beautiful, it was about three Brazilian high school students and themes of sexuality, gender, ability, love, and friendship. Afterwards we talked about the

\[3\] Different fonts are used throughout this text to visually signal the reader of a shift in voice and to evoke a different sensorial reading experience.
films, our feelings, key themes and issues. It almost felt like a graduate classroom, the vernacular included words like problematic, intersectionality, and globalization.

That meeting is still so clear to me. I thought about what I wore: jeans, Converse sneakers, a hooded sweatshirt. I wanted to blend in.

Fast Forward 10 Months:
We had the graduation this past Sunday at my house. It was a potluck that started at 1 o’clock in the afternoon and people could come and go as they wished. People arrived throughout the day, brought delicious food, mostly gluten-free and all vegetarian. We had some yard games and easy conversations. There was nothing formal about the event, no check-ins, awards, or recognitions. Verity had asked to use the time to practice for her CAP diverse books workshop and that may have been the highlight of the event. We all sat in a circle in my backyard with the goal of helping Verity refine and prepare for her workshop that was to take place the following day at the Library. I took some photos, Brenda did some filming for his Creative Action Project, and we all wholeheartedly participated. Everyone was impressed by Verity’s knowledge, the layout and structure of the workshop, and were compelled by the subject. Afterwards folks asked questions, gave feedback, and Brenda gave a lot of suggestions and assured Verity that she was going to do awesome.

Hermione expressed her appreciation for the group and their hard work and dedication. She encouraged folks to continue to take part in TA and that she hopes they stay involved. She invited them to think about the office and staff as resources for their continued work and that the door would always be open in the hopes of future collaboration. She then expressed gratitude to me and my involvement as being ‘pivotal’ to her and to the group. I was a bit taken aback, I just wasn’t expecting it. I still feel sometimes like I’m constantly shifting to the foreground and background. I feel almost a bit opaque and that when we’re in the full group setting I blend into the background and then when it’s in smaller or one-on-one settings I am fully there…in the foreground and active. It’s weird. It’s similar to the idea of being both the participant and observer as a continuous shifting of roles that are fluid, negotiated, and relational. I think what I am getting at are the limits of the mind. Even if
I am feeling like I am taking a step back or a more observational role, that does not mean that’s how it is perceived by others. My observations, perceptions, understandings are and always will be limited to a partial awareness. …

Setting these two social practices, the monthly meeting and the graduation, beside one another it is easy to identify changes and distinctions. The most accessible changes to me are the personal shifts in my own subjectivities and roles. I went from feeling like an interloper to very much part of the group—a shift in my own participation from periphery to core. I knew what kind of food to make and what dietary restrictions I needed to accommodate. I didn’t think about what I wore, I just put on a black maxi dress because that is what I’d wear for any backyard party. I didn’t worry about blending in. I felt comfortable to just be me.

3.2 Introduction

An overarching goal of this study was to support, gather, and share youths’ co-constructed narratives of participation in a social justice oriented organization. This study was guided by the following questions: 1) In what ways can Think Again be described as a community of practice?; 2) What forms of participation are encouraged at Think Again?; 3) How does youths’ participation at Think Again support and/or challenge the broader narratives of youth?; and 4) How do participants narrate their lived experiences and participation at TA?

This study was grounded in the critical research tradition and drew upon situated learning, sociocultural and narrative theory. Two related commitments formed the foundation for this research design: first, a commitment to recognizing youth as active agents within and across sociocultural contexts; and second, a commitment to learning from and with youth as they co-constructed narratives about their participation in TA.

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology of this study. First, I address the epistemological underpinnings of this research. This includes a sub-section on reflexivity and the responsibilities of narration. Second, I describe and discuss the research design including an
introduction to the participants and the modes of participation that contributed to different forms of data generation. Third, I outline the method of analysis employed to make meaning of the data. This includes a discussion of two different emergent collaborative approaches for data analysis with the youth participants and an overview of how the interpretations emerging from this analysis were reviewed, challenged and checked.

3.3 Epistemological Underpinnings

This study falls within the tradition of critical qualitative research, which has been described as political, participatory, decolonizing, unruly, performative, healing, and transformative in nature (Denzin & Giardina, 2009). Inherent in all forms of qualitative research is the value that is placed on the subjectivity of the researchers, as well as the participants (Weis & Fine, 2001). Havercamp and Young (2007) argued that qualitative researchers are interpreters, rather than reporters, and they are more concerned with the “emergence of a new, dialectical understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 278) than they are in an accurate or “true” portrayal.

Critical research seeks to account for the dialectical relationship between the sociocultural context and participants’ lived experiences (Fine & Weis, 2004). Research within the critical pedagogy tradition begins by asking questions about the “systems of belief and action that have aggregate effects within the power structures of society” with the aim of transforming “inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 47). While these descriptors are ideal, they must be held in tension with a limitation of many critical research agendas, which is the tendency to focus on structural factors as determinants or individuals as active agents that may re-create more situations of oppression and domination (Weis & Fine, 2012). The objective of this critical approach is to elucidate the linkages between macro, local, and micro-level processes that influence the lived experiences of young people who were learning to become activists within TA’s critical education framework.
The assumption that there is a distinct boundary or an either/or binary of insider—outsider status denies the porous and fluid nature of these positions. Over time researchers will experience moments across a spectrum of insider/outsider-ness that emerge in relationships within a sociocultural context. Challenges to the in/outsider binary explicitly address the emotional and affective experiences of researchers that are often omitted because of their “controversial nature” and potential threats to “validity claims” (Blackman, 2007). These omissions reflect a positivist approach to research that prioritizes objective methods that produce a Truth, validating the results and the researcher’s status as expert. Further, an objective or positivist perspective privileges outsider status over insider status based on the argument that outsider positionality enables a more objective, detached, and unbiased viewpoint (Fine et al., 2003). By utilizing a critical dialectical stance, I embrace the understanding that all research is inherently subjective and relational, thus co-constructed.

Thus, this research was an active interpretation and narrative co-construction told from my point of view. My goal was not simply to describe my own positionality, but also to implicate myself as actively constructed/ing this research within a particular sociocultural context of academia that has oftentimes perpetuated oppressive ideas and/or knowledge claims, especially about populations that have been marginalized. Reflexivity, for me, was about how to responsibly represent the narratives and experiences of research participants while challenging and working to transform the dominant pejorative social narratives of youth by revealing the structures and systems that contribute to them (Fine et al., 2003).

3.3.1 Reflexivity: Responsibilities of narration. Reflexivity is a source and process for examining power relations and combating challenges in understanding, situating the research within its particular sociocultural context, as well as a practice for researcher accountability (Heath & Street,
Following Fine et al. (2003), self-reflexivity addresses two dilemmas persisting since the reign of positivism: responsibility and representation. The first is that “a speaker’s location is epistemologically salient” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 7). In other words, the “place” from where one speaks (social locations or identities) influences any claim they make. The second—the practice of privileged persons speaking “for or on behalf of less privileged persons”—has actually increased or reinforced oppression of the groups spoken for or about (Alcoff, 1991, p. 7). These issues are relevant to studies of young people who are socially, economically, and politically marginalized and where speaking for the “other” has increased the oppression experienced by this group through widely disseminated pejorative “youth” narratives (Lesko, 1996; Twenge, 2006).

The first issue is commonly taken up in qualitative research through researcher positionality statements where one declares their social locations and/or identities and how those contribute to the research narrative (Fine et al., 2003). While this is important work it also brings to the fore inherent epistemological and ontological contradictions of reflexivity. On one side is the awareness and understanding brought about through ongoing critical interrogation and self-reflection. On the other side is the paradoxical trap of naming and describing an identity or social location in ways that imply a coherent, innate and/or fixed state. This notion of identity as fixed or innate attribute of an individual is contrary to the sociocultural theory of identity as dialogic, negotiated, and socioculturally situated (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011) that frames this study, as well as the assumption that underpins this reflexive practice: that power is negotiated and relational. Another common pitfall in much of postmodern research is the tendency to use positionality statements in order to establish one’s authority and objectivity (Fine et al., 2003). A reflexive practice emerges through these conceptual and philosophical tensions. Following Denzin (1997), good reflexive texts are messy “texts that are aware of their own narrative apparatuses, that are sensitive to how reality is socially constructed, and that understand that writing is a way of ‘framing’ reality” (p. 224).
This study is a narrative construction of meaning, and reflexivity is an ethical and political commitment to addressing the always partial, socioculturally situated, and power-laden nature of this practice (Fine et al., 2003). To this end, reflexivity is limited by the philosophical assumptions that underpin it, and by no means is it possible to ever be “fully” critically reflective. The purpose of this reflexive practice was to explicitly acknowledge that this narrative was told from my limited point of view, which was influenced by the dynamic and relational social locations that I inhabit.

The second concern is about the responsibilities, burdens, and ethics of researching and writing “with” or “for” others (Alcoff, 1991; Fine et al., 2003). In Western society, young people are positioned in ways that often require adult permission or advocacy for their voice. Thus, research with or on youth or those who are marked as “other” in some way poses unique challenges that require ongoing interrogation of positionality and power dynamics that are inherently fluid and relational (Alcoff, 1991). Following Alcoff (1991), reflexivity is important, however it does not actually change or nullify the unequal power dynamics present in the adult/youth research relationship, and if speaking for youth is disempowering and potentially increases the subordination of this group, then arguably speaking on behalf of, or with, youth is problematic as well.

Central to this work and to my relationships with the participants were specific aspects of my subjectivity, including my age and my evolving role as a mentor, my position as an academic, my multiple selves, and my past lived experiences. I make this statement while acknowledging the rich contradictions and theoretical inconsistencies it poses. I rely on the sociocultural conceptualization of identity that grounds this study to argue that although I may “claim” these identities (or social locations), I do so with the understanding that they are dialogic negotiations that evolve over time through socioculturally situated social relationships and practices (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011).

For example, age was a central marker of distinction between the participants and me. Based on my age, I would not have had access to or been able to participate in TA as a staff or as a
volunteer. This established my role in the YGM as distinct from the educational coordinators and youth volunteers from the outset of this study. Brenda, a cisgender male participant, struggled with TA’s “youth-identified” classification and we had many discussions about what that meant, what peer-to-peer education means, and the role of ally-ship in youth-focused social justice work. I shared Brenda’s frustration with “youth” as a category and would consider myself a child in some ways, a youth in others, and an adult in others. Each of these selves—child, youth, adult—are partial, negotiated, and socioculturally situated. Reflexivity is a tool to think through these multiple selves in relation to the participants and experiences I had through this research, and narrated here. There are many narratives within this text, all authored by me, but co-constructed with the youths. All of the narratives shared here are partial, limited, and fragmented accounts of the youths that emerged through the shared experience of this research.

As a critical researcher it was and is my responsibility to interrogate my position of privilege and power in relation to the youths with whom I work. An explicit aim of this research was working toward a more socially just and egalitarian world. It is imperative to engage in a process of self-reflection at the risk of re-inscribing, re-producing, re-colonizing groups of people. In this work, I sought to tell a story that could transform popular and common sense ideas about young people that binds their lived experiences to the structural and contextual factors that influence them in order to disrupt the prevailing deficit “youth” narratives.

3.4 Research Design

This section includes four parts. First, I provide a description of the recruitment process, the participants, and the participatory commitments that frame this study. Then, I discuss the forms of participation and associated methods of data generation. Third, I describe my analysis framework and the specific data analysis approaches that were employed in this study. Finally, I present an explanation of how I confirmed the research findings with the participants.
3.4.1 Participatory negotiations: Participants and recruitment. A collaborative approach to youth research carries significant epistemological and methodological implications. The assumption that youths are both valuable holders of knowledge and experts on their experience reflects epistemological commitments held within the collaborative and participatory research paradigm (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). These researchers often employ various qualitative and quantitative methods, frequently citing a need for flexible and creative research designs that are ideologically congruent with the youth participants (Cambre, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Researchers working within the youth participatory action research (yPAR) paradigm oftentimes position themselves as collaborators working alongside their participants, rather than the traditional objective/expert researcher position (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright & James, 2002). Although this study was not a yPAR project per se, aspects of it were informed by yPAR. In particular, I sought to recognize participants as valued collaborators and experts on their lived experiences and participation. Cammarota and Fine (2008) explained the explicitly pedagogical nature of yPAR by drawing on Freire’s (1970) notion of praxis. Within this paradigm, praxis is a central component of the researcher’s commitment to transformation and empowerment. The yPAR tradition provided valuable tools to think with and through TA’s youth-driven engagement, as well as their focus on supporting youth to take action through praxis.

As an educator, I strive to facilitate dialogue across difference. As an educator of future educators, my aim is to generate transformational learning that will catalyze my students, as future teachers, awareness of, desire for, and the ability to communicate across differences in their own classrooms. I want my students to be exposed to a broader array of pedagogical techniques and approaches and I do this by bringing in guest presenters, workshops, and speakers into our classroom community. This was how I learned about Think Again and I promptly scheduled a workshop for both of my classes.
Veronica and a youth volunteer facilitated the workshop and Aria was there as an observer. The workshop included an explicit critical analysis of macro and structural influences. It was more sophisticated than I had expected. The workshop challenged my students and catalyzed a lot of resistance amongst them. It is impossible to pinpoint the exact trigger, but it began almost immediately when Veronica asked the class to create a community agreement. Two students took this as an opportunity to overtly challenge each other: one claimed that everyone should assume the best in each other while the other argued that everyone should think before they speak and be considerate of everyone in the room. Their resistance evolved to disrespect during the workshop and I was forced to actively discipline several of my students. This daylighted an aspect of my teacher identity that I continue to grapple with: the disciplinarian. The workshop was powerful. It pushed my students and me outside our comfort zones. I was intrigued. I wanted to know more about Think Again and the youth who volunteered and worked there.

After the workshop I inquired about TA’s specific projects, visions, methods, and goals. Quickly, with Veronica and the TA staff, we began discussing a potential research partnership through emails, skype calls, and face-to-face meetings. In the fall of 2013, I began to attend monthly meetings and events in order to get to know the organization and build relationships with the youths. As a critical researcher, I was concerned with the sharing of expertise and skills and building reciprocal community-university partnerships. The first question I posed to them was, “How can my expertise and skills contribute to and support the organization?” We decided that I would write a report summarizing the study and relevant findings for the organization. Because of my background in and love for the arts and creative expression, I enthusiastically agreed to take an active role in supporting the youths with their creative action projects. Further, I committed to becoming part of the TA community and contributing to their long-term sustainability with my knowledge and skills.
Morrow (2005) noted the broad range of sample size amongst qualitative research and argued that there is no simple or strict guideline. Rather, decisions about sample size should be based on collecting adequate data for the purpose of the study. The emphasis should be placed on the quality of procedures, such as the length and depth of interviews, and include a variety of evidence, all of which are supported by my chosen research data generation methods (Morrow, 2005).

The YGM project began in September of 2013 with 15 young people between the ages of 18-32. I began attending meetings in October to build relationships with TA and the YGM group. During the same week in March, I acquired behavioral research ethics board (BREB) approval, and Veronica told me she was leaving TA; they were not sure who was going to take over for her. All of my previous anxieties and preoccupations melted away. My entire focus shifted to getting the research and the creative action projects going. I hoped that these activities and a shift in focus could help support and possibly invigorate the YGM group through the transition. Veronica was adamant about getting the research started before she left; we began the recruitment and informed consent process immediately.

All of the youth participants were invited, but not required, to participate in the research. Participants were recruited in March and April of their year long commitment to TA at which time there were approximately 10 YGM volunteers. Veronica introduced this research to the youth at a meeting and sent a follow-up email in order to insure that they understood that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and would not affect, positively or negatively, their participation at TA. I presented the research with a question and answer session and informed consent at the April monthly meeting. All of the youth were given additional time to think about their decision and talk with me about the commitment. A total of eight youth and two educational coordinators
participated in this study. Data was generated between April 2014 and the project graduation in September 2014 (see Figure 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>May 2014</th>
<th>Participant Observations (of Monthly Meetings)</th>
<th>Sept 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Experiential Interview</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2014</td>
<td>Elicitation Interview</td>
<td>Sept 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 2013</td>
<td>Cultural Artifacts</td>
<td>Sept 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.1 Data Generation Timeline**

Veronica resigned from her position as education coordinator and was replaced by Hermione as of May 1, 2014. Hermione was an oldtimer at TA and had started volunteering with them four years ago when she was in grade twelve after participating in a TA workshop during an event at her high school. Elia, Verity, Sarah, Aliza, and Brenda made up the core group of youth that attended meetings, completed or worked on their own and attended each other’s creative action projects, and kept up regular communication. Their narratives are the focus of Chapter Five. Stacy moved to another province in the middle of the study and did not complete her CAP. Veronica, Amanda, and Aria officially resigned or quit TA before the end of their commitment. Although each of their situations was unique, there was a similar underlying rationale for all of their decisions: the desire to maintain the integrity of their beliefs and values. This required them to leave TA. For example, Veronica completed her MFA in the winter and felt she needed to pursue her career as a writer full-time. In addition, Amanda had expressed that her family was her core value; the most important thing in her life. When a family situation arose, she had to leave TA so she could shift her attention there. These participants often came up in conversations, were invited to all events and
came to some, and were considered part of the group regardless of their presence or absence (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1**

**Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Preferred gender pronouns</th>
<th>Participant Chosen Demographic Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veronica (Ed Coordinator)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: she &amp; her</td>
<td>Lesbian, Romanian, Mixed-race, Sephardic Ashkenazic Eastern European Jew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elia (Youth Volunteer)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: she &amp; her</td>
<td>Feminist, Heterosexual, First generation Chinese-Canadian (“hyphenated identity”), more Western than Asian, Can speak conversational Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliza (Youth Volunteer)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: she and her</td>
<td>Fem-lesbian, Queer, Filipina, Italian, Youth of color,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah (Youth Volunteer)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: she &amp; her</td>
<td>Heterosexual, Caucasian, Mid-upper class, Child of early divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda (Youth Volunteer)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: she &amp; her</td>
<td>Asian, Chinese, Immigrant, Scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy (Youth Volunteer)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: she &amp; her</td>
<td>Caucasian, Scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verity (Youth Volunteer)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: she &amp; her</td>
<td>University student, Able bodied, White, Living in Vancouver BC, but originally from the interior of BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda (“Youth” Volunteer)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Cisgender Male: he &amp; him</td>
<td>Uncomfortable with the term “youth identified” Gay, Married, White, Middle-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria (Youth Volunteer)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: She &amp; her</td>
<td>Muslim, Arab, Filipina, Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermione (Ed Coordinator)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Cisgender Female: She &amp; her</td>
<td>Muslim, Bangladeshi, South Asian, Youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**3.4.2 Methods of data generation.** The methods for this study were designed to support youths’ co-constructed narratives of their lived experiences and participation. Drawing on qualitative data that are not necessarily in narrative form, I examined how young people actively constructed their participation at TA. My line of inquiry focused on the ways in which youth participants re/constructed and narrated their experiences through their participation with a
particular emphasis on the youth-produced creative action projects. A narrative framework was designed in order to interpret and analyze narratives within the data (see Table 3.2).

**Table 3.2**

**Overview of the Research Design**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In what ways can Think Again be described as a community of practice?</td>
<td>Participant Observations (videotaped monthly meetings)</td>
<td>Thematic Analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiential Interview (focus: learning as participation and lived and imagined experience)</td>
<td>Narrative Analysis: Bruner’s (1990) four grammatical requirements of narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elicitation Interview (focus: creative action projects)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Artifacts (organizational documents, fliers, TA web-site and blog)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What forms of participation are encouraged at Think Again?</td>
<td>Participant Observations (videotaped monthly meetings)</td>
<td>Thematic Analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiential Interview (focus: learning as participation and lived and imagined experience)</td>
<td>Bruner’s (1990) four grammatical requirements of narratives and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Artifacts (organizational documents, fliers, TA web-site and blog)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does youths’ participation at Think Again support and/or challenge the broader social narratives of youth?</td>
<td>Participant Observations (videotaped monthly meetings)</td>
<td>Level 1: Thematic Analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiential Interview (focus: learning as participation and lived and imagined experience)</td>
<td>Level 2: Bruner’s (1990) four grammatical requirements of narratives and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elicitation Interview (focus: creative action projects)</td>
<td>Level 3: Participation as knowing, being, &amp; valuing (Sfard &amp; Prusak, 2005; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011) and participation as future-making (O’Connor &amp; Allen, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Artifacts (organizational documents, fliers, TA web-site and blog)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do participants narrate their lived experiences and participation at TA?</td>
<td>Participant Observations (videotaped monthly meetings)</td>
<td>Level 1: Thematic Analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiential Interview (focus: learning as participation and lived and imagined experience)</td>
<td>Level 2: Bruner’s (1990) four grammatical requirements of narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Artifacts (organizational documents, fliers, TA web-site and blog)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When youth joined TA and became part of the YGM team they made a commitment to participate in five different practices: 1) facilitation, leadership, and anti-oppression training, 2) co-facilitating at least 4 workshops, 3) attending monthly meetings and activities, (4) intergenerational mentoring, and 5) contributing to the TA blog and social media, and creating and sharing creative action projects. The methods of data generation focused on the monthly meetings and the creative action project components of the youths’ TA participation. The data generated differed for each participant based on their attendance at meetings and events, whether or not they completed a creative action project, and whether they fulfilled their volunteer commitment and graduated. Data consisted of participant observations based on the video recorded monthly meetings, an experiential interview, an elicitation interview that focused on their creative action projects, and gathered and generated cultural artifacts. The following discussion is organized by three aspects of youths’ participation and the forms of data generated from each.

### 3.4.2.1 Participant observations: Monthly meetings

Participant observation is a key method in qualitative, especially ethnographic, fieldwork. Heath and Street (2008) articulated the ethnographer’s goal of “making the familiar strange” (p. 32) by engaging in an iterative process of engagement with the topic of study, which requires becoming familiar with the theories, methods, and subject of study. This familiarity evolves from a cyclical process of “observing, noting, reading, thinking, observing, and noting” and is a key form of data collection within the ethnographic tradition (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 33). Immersion and participation in the setting are key to qualitative research, and participant observations enable researchers to learn from direct experience while maintaining a keen eye to what they hear, see, and do (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The monthly meetings of Think Again were held in various locations around the city including the TA office, a park, a youth arts collective and graduation was held at my home. Meetings took place on Sunday or weekday evenings and typically lasted two hours. Youths
generally arrived within the first 20 minutes of the meeting and it was completely acceptable for people to come and go as they needed. There was always some form of food and drink at meetings with attention to special dietary needs. Each meeting began with a brief check-in that sometimes included a prompt, such as “If you could eat anything in the world right now what would it be?” During the earlier meetings that took place while Veronica was the educational coordinator, check-ins always began with stating your name and your preferred gender pronouns. The focus of these early meetings were decided by the youth and included a workshop about Safe Schools, a book club-style meeting at an anarchist bookstore, an Immigration and Citizenship rally, and a youth arts collective. When Hermione took on the educational coordinator role, the youths were shifting their attention towards their creative action projects and meetings were used to workshop, brainstorm and support them towards their goals. The check-ins during the later meetings were more general and tended to focus on the youths’ creative action projects.

The monthly meetings were a core practice of the youths’ participation and a focus of this study. I attended nine monthly meetings in total: five monthly meetings prior to commencing the research, four monthly meetings during the research, three of which were videotaped, and the graduation event. One of the meetings during the research was held at a youth arts center and they asked that we not record the meeting due to privacy issues. Participant observations were generated after the three recorded monthly meetings while watching the video of the meeting.

3.4.2.2 Experiential interviews. Interviews are a popular method for gathering qualitative data about participants’ experiences and the ways in which they perceive and make meaning of the world (Kvale, 2006). Interviews have been conceptualized as an effective technique for gaining information about a participant’s life and experiences through a more personal and dialogic method by encouraging participants to narrate or tell a story (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Fine (2007) described the dynamic and co-constructed nature of interviews as extremely unpredictable and that
researchers “often find themselves as vulnerable and jolted as their participants. It may be as important to consider, then, how researchers shape the interview/observations/ethnographies as it is to consider how they are reshaped in the process” (p. 465). I conceived of interviews as developmental and temporal in nature, as well as co-constructed within particular sociocultural contexts (Bruner, 1990).

Experiential interviews were used as a dialogic tool for engaging with youth about two topics key to this study: lived experiences and learning as participation. In this way, interviews were a tool for supporting the participants’ reflection on their experiences and participation. This interview took place during the first three months of the research. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were audio or video recorded based on the participants’ preference. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient to the participants and included my home, their homes, various cafes and coffee shops. The experiential interviews were later transcribed and each participant was provided with a copy of their interview transcripts for their review and feedback. At the beginning of each experiential interview, participants were prompted to give a life history narrative, describing how their awareness of social injustice originated and how it developed over time. Interviews aimed to elicit narrative explanations through open-ended questions, the allotment of ample time for participant narrations, and by the researcher supporting and recognizing extended responses (Polkinghorne, 1988). The interview was semi-structured by a list of guiding questions and invitations to share stories in order to gain a better understanding of the young peoples’ relationships with and conceptualizations of their lived experiences and participation as learning (see Appendix B).

3.4.2.3 Elicitation interview: Creative action projects. The creative action project was a new component to TA’s program and during an early meeting Veronica asked for my help in supporting the youth with their projects. Agreeing to this role and responsibility was an important
step toward negotiating a reciprocal relationship, which is a key value of mine as a critical researcher. The creative action projects themselves were not data, rather the focus was on the narratives youths’ told about their process and production in two different forms of data. I begin with a brief description of each of the youths’ creative action projects to ground the discussion of the elicitation interview method that follows.

Elicitation interviews, focused on the youths’ creative action projects, were conducted with Sarah, Aliza, Elia, Verity, and Brenda. Sarah and Aliza partnered to create their public art event titled: US: Un/limiting ourselves. Sarah’s goal was to reach and connect with as many people as possible through dialogue and art about identity and especially about the identities society puts on us and her desire for people to just “be.” She invited people to write down identity statements on pieces of muslin in order to expand the growing web of identities. After people wrote down their statements, Sarah invited them to reflect on their identities through art on a large wooden mural structure. Aliza wanted to engage in dialogue with people and invited them to make anti-oppressive wearable art. Aliza set up a table of art supplies and her button maker and button templates for people to create their own buttons. She believed that community and connection could be made through wearing art that is explicitly anti-oppressive, such as the rainbow to signify identity or allegiance with LGBTQA folks.

Elia started her creative action project knowing that she wanted to organize a film screening and dialogue. She chose the film, “Double Happiness” because it represented some of her challenges growing up in Vancouver as a first generation Chinese-Canadian. Elia partnered with Cinevolution and the Richmond Women’s Resource Centre and hosted the event at the Richmond Caring Place and about 20 people attended both the film and the dialogue.

Verity was inspired by the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign and wanted to move beyond TA’s visual focus to print and text based representations of gender and sexuality. She partnered
with the local public library and created a workshop for their teen advisory committee about
diversity in young adult fiction. As part of the workshop, Verity supported the youth towards action
by placing notes in books at local bookstores and libraries that described the
#WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign and listed resources and ways for them to get involved. Verity’s
project also spurred the library to implement a teen book club that read and talked about books
from the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign.

Brenda wanted to create something that would be useful to TA and, through conversations
with Hermione and the other TA staff, he decided to create a short film about the YGM groups’
creative action projects. His goal was to create a tool that could be used in future workshops or
trainings that help youths think about and implement their own creative action projects. Brenda set
up interviews with the other volunteers and with me. He attended and filmed their creative action
projects, and collected footage at meetings and the graduation event, but had not completed his film
by the end of this study.

I drew on artifact mediated research methods (see Cole, 1995; Jeong, Chen, & Looi, 2011;
Pahl & Roswell, 2011) to engage participants in a cultural artifact elicitation interview. This method
extended Liebenberg’s (2009) claim that visual research methods are considered valuable tools for
researchers working as “border crossers” in communities and cultural contexts that are not their
own, in that they enable different ways to confront issues of power, representation, collaboration
and participation in research contexts to cultural artifacts. Drawing on participant re/produced
cultural artifacts acknowledged the situated nature of artifacts in communities and enabled the
examination of artifacts as mediational means through the stories the youths’ told about them (Pahl
& Roswell, 2011). A potential benefit of the elicitation format was that the participants might have
an increased awareness of their cultural worlds, the tools they use to navigate them, and come to
new understandings by reflecting and talking about their chosen cultural artifact during the interview.

Another strength of elicitation interviews is the potential for participants and researchers to develop a collaborative relationship and negotiate power by having the participants decide the focal point of an interview (Clark-Ibanez, 2007). By inviting the participants to determine the initial content for the interview, I encouraged them to sketch their meaning making practices through a focus on something that was important and relevant to them. For this inquiry, I was concerned with how participants’ employed cultural artifacts as mediational means, rather than conducting an examination of the form of the cultural artifacts as a representation of meaning. Participants were asked to show their artifacts and tell about their artifacts. Their answers helped me gain a better understanding of how they made meaning of their participation and lived experiences (see Appendix C).

The youths’ creative action projects were multimodal, thus, they were an ideal focal point for an elicitation interview that focused on both the process and content of their creative action projects. The elicitation interviews took place towards the end of the YGM project and after the youths’ had completed their creative action projects. I asked each participant to bring a cultural artifact that they felt represented their creative action project to the interview. I also compiled photos, fliers, and images that I gathered throughout the process into a simple collage format that I printed and shared with each participant during the interview as back up in case they forgot their artifacts. None of them did. I gave the participants the collages as a thank you at the end of their interviews. The interviews lasted between a half an hour to two hours and were audio or video recorded based on the participants’ preference and later transcribed (see Appendix D). Descriptions and images of the creative projects are presented as part of the youth narratives told in Chapter Six.
3.4.2.4 **Cultural artifacts.** Cultural artifacts were constructed and gathered throughout this study. Public documents—such as minutes of meetings, fliers for events and gatherings, newspaper clippings and so on—were collected in order to obtain information about the community and TA. Institutional artifacts, such as program practices, the TA web site, grant proposals, and workshop curricula, were compiled and contributed to the data corpus. Additionally, photographs and/or some visual representations of the participants’ creative action projects were also collected.

Cultural artifacts were also generated throughout this research in a reflexive journal where I kept my notes and reflections, doodles, lists, and process notes. Although not data per se, my reflexive journal was a valuable tool to reflect on my roles, responsibilities, and personal transformation throughout this experience. Field notes and photographs taken before, during, and after all of the meetings, activities, and creative action projects I attended were compiled in the reflexive journal. Table 3.3 illustrates the data that was generated with each participant.

**Table 3.3**

*List of Data Generated by Participant*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant Observations (video monthly meetings)</th>
<th>Experiential Interviews</th>
<th>Elicitation Interviews (creative action project)</th>
<th>Cultural Artifacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quit 5.1.2014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermione</td>
<td>3 + grad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Started 5.1.2014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elia</td>
<td>4 + grad?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>3 + grad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>(via Skype)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verity</td>
<td>4 + grad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>3 + grad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliza</td>
<td>3 + grad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quit 6.23.2014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quit 7.1.2014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4.3 Methods of interpretation: A framework for narrating meaning. A main objective of this study was to examine youths’ participation and meaning making at Think Again. Together, with the youths, I generated multiple forms of data in order to better understand how and what participation at Think Again afforded these young people. I have emphasized the co-constructedness of this research narrative, but I am the primary narrator and I have arranged the stories and plot in a particular way.

The analyses presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six are intended to be a “dialectical conversation between context, action, the individual and the collective” (Holland & Gómez, 2013, p. 143). The three analysis chapters are designed to illustrate the interrelated layers of youths’ participation (see Figure 3.2). Chapter Four provides an historical analysis of the broader sociocultural context. Chapter Five zooms in on local places of practice and examines TA as a potential community of practice. Chapter Six focuses on the intersecting “politics of possibility” through youths’ participation narratives.
The analysis unfolded across the three contextual layers. The contextual layers are interrelated and contribute to and shape the others. Three distinct levels of analysis were undertaken and entailed multiple readings of the data that were recursive and iterative, like an ongoing feedback loop. The first level of analysis was a thematic analysis of the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second level of analysis drew upon the thematic analysis in order to construct youths’ participation narratives (Bruner, 1990). The third level of analysis examined the youths’ narratives to identify traces of participation as constructions of knowledge, identities, and values (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011). This analysis also entailed identifying how participation generated particular social futures (O’Connor & Allen, 2010). Here I describe each level and then outline two methods of collaborative interpretation following Fine’s
(2014) participatory analysis. I conclude with a discussion of how the findings were reviewed and checked.

As a critical researcher, my approach to interviews is relational and conversational, rather than one-sided and objective. My intentions for interviews were twofold: to co-construct meaning and to build relationships. In addition to constructing stories with the youth, I empathized, laughed, ate, and shared similar personal experiences. I also utilized a counseling tool of listening for recurring themes or plot and then synthesized and reflected them back to the participant for validation or challenge. Finally, the methods of transcription were theoretically informed, including decisions about what to include, exclude, and the level of detail necessary to reflect the social and contextual nature of the data (Ochs, 1979).

3.4.3.1 Level 1: Thematic Analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as a method of interpretation that involves the identification, analysis, and recording of patterns (themes) within data. Reflecting the critical framework of this study, I approached the data with an analytical focus on how participants socially constructed meanings of their participation at TA. This entailed ongoing critical reflection on how my own subjectivities and the sociocultural context influenced the data construction and interpretation of the data. With this in mind, I conducted two iterations of thematic analysis. I first conducted an inductive semantic thematic analysis of a data set consisting of all of the participants’ experiential interviews. This involved a data-driven coding process without trying to fit it into a theoretical or analytical category (Patton, 1990) while identifying themes at the surface level of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then took these initial findings back to the participants and conducted the participatory analysis # 1 with them (discussed in the next section).
This was followed by the construction of narratives to describe youths’ participation described below.

For the second iteration, I conducted a deductive or theoretical latent thematic analysis of the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved a more researcher driven coding process guided by key theoretical concepts framing this study. For this analysis I coded the data looking for underlying ideas and assumptions—ideologies—that shaped the semantics of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This coding contributed to a description of the data and the theorization of the sociocultural context and macro levels of influence that shaped participants’ meaning making of their lived experiences and participation.

3.4.3.2 Level 2: Participation narratives. I drew on all of the data constructed with each of the participants to examine how each of them described their participation. Although there were 10 participants in this study, I focused on five participants (Sarah, Aliza, Elia, Verity and Brenda) who were highly engaged in TA and this study as well as the second educational coordinator (Hermione). I constructed a participation narrative that drew upon all of the data generated with all six of these participants. A single document was created for each participant that consisted of: experiential and elicitation interview transcripts, field notes, relevant cultural artifacts and participant observations alongside a table referencing videos of monthly meetings. The analysis drew on all of the different forms of data in order to cross-reference, challenge, support, and elaborate upon salient themes and stories. The analysis was conducted after data generation was completed and after all of the participants had graduated from TA, therefore, these are my stories and narratives that are based on the experiences I shared with the youth and the stories they constructed and told through their participation.

This analysis was conducted through three readings with the goal of examining the ways in which youths’ described their participation at TA. First, each participants’ data document was read
and re-read in order for me to familiarize myself with the content. The second round of readings were framed by Bruner’s (1990, 1991a, 1991b, 2004) conceptualization of narrative as a symbolic system communication or a cultural tool for meaning making. All data was analyzed using Bruner’s (1990) four grammatical requirements of narratives to distinguish narratives within the data. Once the decision is made to narrate, choices are made regarding the order and sequence of events, the details of the story: the who, what, where, when, and how told from a particular point of view. These narrative complications take place on what Bruner (2004) referred to as the dual landscape of the protagonist’s internal states (e.g., thoughts and feelings) and the situational circumstance (e.g., actions and events). The moral stance narrative dimension is deeply rooted in the community and sociocultural context and reflects the standards for social roles, practices, beliefs, and values in relation to the social expectations of person, community and sociocultural context (Ochs & Capps, 2002). This approach to narrative enabled me to read for the lived experiences that mutually constituted participation in Think Again.

The third reading entailed a close reading of each participant’s document and watching of the relevant videos to cross-reference salient themes across all of their data. The point of view of the youth participant was a focal point for this reading. This reading entailed the second iteration of thematic analysis that examined the ways in which the participants’ made meaning of their lived experiences and participation across the micro, local, and macro contextual layers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was guided by the following questions: how do the stories the participants are telling locate them as participants in a particular cultural place and time?, and how are their stories mutually constitutive of the sociocultural context? The goal of this reading was to link the participants’ experiences to the larger context of youth participation in Canada.

3.4.3.4 Level 3: Traces of participation. An initial focus of this level of analysis was to examine the participants’, both the educational coordinators and youth volunteers, participation in
TA could be described as a potential community of practice. An aim of this analysis was to understand what happens when people come together, interact, relate in a particular organization. I conducted a close reading of the data in relation to the research questions. Attention was also paid to the stories the young people told about learning as participation.

The first iteration of thematic analysis was data-driven, but loosely guided by the following questions: what does it mean to learn in at TA?, how and why did the participants come to TA?, how did they talk about social justice?, and what were the stories they told about themselves as learners?, and what possible social futures did participants construct through their participation at TA? Attention was also paid to the interactional and embeddedness of the interviews and moments of resistance, emotions, refusals to tell, or omissions. This reading was done on digital transcripts of the experiential interviews and codes and notes were organized in a data table that included three columns: 1) question/code; 2) interview name, Line #, and quote; and 3) interpretation and notes. From this initial analysis, I identified two emergent themes across the youths’ interviews: 1) the value and role of community, and 2) social justice as a learning process. These emergent findings provided the foundation for the participatory analysis #2 (PA #2) (described in a later section).

After the PA #2, I conducted two additional readings with hard copies of the transcripts using highlighters and post-it notes for coding and note taking. The first reading followed Bruner’s (2001) argument that we become the stories we tell and Sfard and Prusak’s (2005) claim that identities are the stories we tell about ourselves and about other people. This analysis examined youths’ stories for traces of identity construction. Sfard and Prusak (2005) distinguished two types of narratives about people as actual identity and designated identity—two sets of reifying significant narratives about the participant that are also endorsed by the participant. Actual identities tend to be told in the first person, in the present tense and tend to be factual for example, “I am an activist” or “I have good communication skills.” Designated identities tend to be narratives told that have the
potential to become true in the future for example, “I want to become an activist” or “I have to develop better communication skills.” These readings were guided by the following questions: are they reifying (stress repetitive actions)?, are they endorsable (would participants agree that it is a accurate reflection of the world)?, and are they significant (do they imply in/exclusion from the community)? This enabled a critical reading of the youths’ narratives in relation to the dominant socially constructed narratives of youth. An objective of this analytical level was to bridge the micro/local in relation to the macro through the understanding that identity is key to the dialectic of learning and the sociocultural context (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

For the second close reading, I focused on the stories the young people told about their participation as generating ways of knowing and valuing. The participants talked about who they were, are, and wanted to be. These stories held traces of how they came to know in relation to the social relationships and practices they engaged in at TA. Specifically, I examined the ways that the youths talked about their participation as a means to construct knowledge. For example, stories about their participation as contributing to ways of knowing about social justice issues, facilitation skills and techniques, event planning and implementation, and much more. Attention was paid to the way they talked about their new knowledge as important for various reasons and particularly in relation to the creation of desired social futures. Finally, this reading also consisted of the identification and examination of what was important and valued by the participants and included stories about how youths’ participation enabled and/or restricted them to embody and act in accordance to their values.

I also examined the proleptic aspects of the youths’ participation at TA by focusing on the ways in which youths’ addressed or revisited the past in ways that told about the present and future (Ochs, 1997). The goal of this reading was to examine if and how participation in TA enabled participants’ access to valued social futures (O’Connor & Allen, 2010). In this way, youths’ offered
possibilities and imaginings about the future, such as what and who might become sometime down the road. This reading was guided by the understanding that participation involves the active organizing of relationships and trajectories toward futures, which is underscored by the idea that humans are always actively organizing the conditions for and meaning of their actions. That this is an inherently value-laden process requiring ongoing attention to the flows of action and adaptations that successively contribute to the emerging and jointly negotiated understandings of the experience (O’Connor & Allen, 2010) provided a lens for analyzing the ways in which youth made meaning of their experiences and participation. Finally, during this analysis, attention was paid to the ways in which neoliberalism influenced youths’ participation across the macro, local, and micro contextual layers (Holland & Gómez, 2013).

3.4.4 An emergent method of collaborative interpretation: Participatory analysis.

Weis and Fine (2012) advocated that researchers’ utilize a “critical bifocality” when investigating people’s lives and communities by paying equal attention to the structural constraints that mediate them. Fine (2014) described participatory analysis as a means for practicing bifocality that could potentially destabilize dominant narratives and result in co-constructed counter-narratives. A participatory analysis is a method of analysis whereby researchers engage with their participants as experts and co-researchers to help refine understandings of the research and data (Fine, 2014).

In this study, I conducted two iterations of participatory analysis of the data. The first is referred to as participatory analysis #1 (PA #1) because it was conducted first chronologically, but is addressed most fully in Chapter Five. PA #1 focused on the experiential interviews and was conducted at the August monthly meeting with Hermione, Elia, Verity, Brenda and Sarah. PA #2 took place after the youths’ commitment to TA was complete and is discussed in Chapter Four. PA
#2 focused on the video data of the monthly meetings and was conducted with two participants—Sarah and Brenda—over two coding sessions.

**3.4.4.1 Participatory analysis #1.** Participatory analysis #1 took place after all of the experiential interviews were conducted and transcribed. The first step in the process was to provide the participants with their interview transcripts and time for them to review, edit, and clarify them. Only two of the 10 participants provided notes of elaboration and minor edits to clarify meaning. After I had heard back from all of the participants, I conducted two close readings of each of the interview transcripts and additional readings to identify themes and stories across the interviews. Based on these readings, I constructed some initial findings. I brought the initial findings to a monthly meeting and we conducted a participatory analysis that was video recorded (see Appendix F). I took extensive field notes before, during and after the participatory analysis. After the meeting, I watched the video of the participatory analysis while taking notes two times to examine the dynamic process of the group as we co-constructed and negotiated new meanings and understandings of the data together. I used these field notes to revise the initial findings according to the participants’ reflection and dialogue. At this stage, I also drew upon cultural artifacts (i.e., organizational documents) to elaborate upon and develop the narrative findings. My final interpretation of this analysis is presented as a narrative of learning as an activist trajectory in Chapter Five.

**3.4.4.2 Participatory analysis #2.** Scollon and Scollon’s (2007) work on nexus analysis and social groups supports a premise that underscores this analysis: that the focus of analysis must be on units of action that are socioculturally situated. They explained, “even though our predilection was for close social-interactional studies of face-to-face encounters, each such point—a classroom, a dormitory, university application and acceptance procedures, high school offices—was linked into a network that cumulatively was leading to endemic, institutional, social discrimination” (Scollon &
Scollon, 2007, p. 615). This is consistent with the call by Vadeboncoeur et al. (2011) to avoid individual reductionism by focusing on mediated action as the unit of analysis.

The video recordings of the monthly meetings provided a method to document, review, and analyze data that could provide insight into the youths, their actions and their relationships with each other and the YGM as a group. The participatory analysis of the video was a collaborative method of analysis whereby we (the youth and I) analyzed how youths socially constructed TA, media, meetings, themselves, and each other when they came together. Central to this work is the understanding that social interactions are infused with particular goals, understandings, symbolic and material resources available, and the evolving relationship between the involved youth (Baron, Pea, & Engle, 2012). Importantly, the goal of this analysis was to gain a better understanding of what happened when these young people got together, therefore, it focused on their social interaction. Attention was paid to overt body language, laughter, and pauses or silences, but not to more subtle interactions such as facial cues, gestures, or eye gaze.

The video data was analyzed using the following systematic approach. First, I reviewed all of the data collected for each meeting. I used two video cameras for back up and in some cases an audio recording was also made. I watched and assessed these videos and decided which one would be the viewed for the analysis based on sound and image quality. The other video was used as back up and we toggled back and forth between the videos if the alternative perspective provided another layer of information. Finally, I watched each selected video and made a detailed “content log” for each video that listed timestamps, participants, events and interactions, and notes in a table (Ruhleder & Jordan, 1997).

Second, I prepared three possible analysis templates for the two youth co-analyzers to review and select based on their preference. When they arrived, we reviewed the templates and narrowed it down to two. We then watched two minutes of video and they selected the template we used
subsequently for all video analysis (see Appendix G). I provided them with copies of the content logs and we reviewed them and clarified our goal for analyzing the evolution of the group and social interactions. We selected one segment of video from each meeting to analyze that was best suited to our aims: balancing respect for their available time and the intention to focus on video that had the most group dialogue and interaction. Instead of using a preconceived coding scheme, themes emerged through multiple re-playings of the video, our dialogue, and our deepening understanding of the video interactions. I undertook a final independent analysis by checking patterns of interaction and themes against other sequences of recording and other forms of data including field notes, interview transcripts, and cultural artifacts (Ruhleder & Jordan, 1997).

3.4.5 Reviewing and checking the findings: Validity and triangulation. In line with my collaborative and participatory epistemological commitments, I viewed the participants of this study as collaborators and knowledge holders on what the “youth” label meant and felt like to them, as experts on their own experiences (Fine, 2008). Fine (2008) argued that in participatory projects expert validity must include “plural and subjugated expertise” to the traditional standards of expertise because there is an explicit commitment within the paradigm to support, honor, and develop varied knowledges and explicitly trouble traditional and hegemonic notions of who is the expert (p. 223). The research space was designed to recognize and elevate the youths’ local knowledges as research practices through conversations, contestations, and agreements.

I provided three distinct opportunities towards honoring and recognizing participants’ experiences and voices. In the current study, participants were provided with a copy of both of their interview transcripts with an invitation for review and feedback. All of the edits and changes participants made to their transcripts were saved as the final transcript that were used for the analysis. Second, I conducted the participatory analysis as an opportunity for the youth to negotiate and grapple with the data together in order to contribute to a dynamic and refined interpretation of
the data. At the graduation event, I shared the evolution of the analyses that followed PA #1 with the youth and asked them to critique, challenge, affirm, and provide feedback on my evolving understandings. Their responses provided another layer of meaning to the data through a sharpened range and focus of expertise that strengthened and democratized the notion of expert validity (Fine, 2008).

Construct validity is understood to be the way that one assesses the degree to which theoretical notions and concepts are meaningful and valid (Fine, 2008). It was important for participants to understand, agree with and/or challenge the concepts of this study. For example, “youth” and “youth identified” were central concepts to both this study and their participation at TA, these concepts were grappled with, questioned, critiqued, and assumed throughout the process and added another layer of meaning to how I think about the symbolic and material consequences of “youth” as a social construct. Another method I used towards construct validity was my own critical reflexive practice: I considered how my knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values impacted all aspects of the generation and interpretation of the data.

Triangulation involved the incorporation of multiple sources of data to address each research question. This was accomplished by using methods that generated different forms of data that contributed to a richer and more complex narrative telling. The reflexive journal—including field notes, observations and reflections made during and after interviews, about the participants, and insights gleaned throughout the data collection process—provided important subjective insights to corroborate, challenge, and elaborate the data generated from the two different interviews, participant observations of three monthly meetings, and cultural artifacts.

3.5 Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the methodology of this study. In so doing, I addressed epistemological concerns that provide the foundation of this co-constructed research endeavour and
the partial, subjective, and limited research narrative. This included my responsibility, as a reflexive researcher, to not only consider my own evolving position in relation to this research, but also issues and ethics of narration that I hoped to lessen through collaboration. The data generated through qualitative methods of this study enabled me to study the participation of youth as cultural producers in ways that were meaningful and relevant to them. I outlined the methods of analysis utilized to construct meaning of this data and two methods of participatory analysis. Chapters Four, Five, and Six consist of the narratives constructed through these analyses. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the conceptual and practical implications of this analysis and study.
Chapter 4: Structures of Domination: The Neoliberal Shaping of Think Again

Conceptualizing Think Again through a narrative lens enabled a dual focus on the macro level factors that shaped TA and how youth encounter those factors at the local level through their participation in TA and the Youth and Gender Media (YGM) project. The question at issue here is: In what ways can Think Again be described as a community of practice? This analysis also attends to the question of: How does youths’ participation at Think Again support and/or challenge the broader narratives of youth? Central to these questions is the understanding that all participation is socioculturally situated. This chapter builds upon and extends the previous discussion of neoliberalism in Chapter Two by examining the ways in which the neoliberal context influenced TA. Briefly, drawing on Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is a set of economic and political practices that advocate for liberal or free markets and prioritize private over public rights. I also draw on scholars who challenge neoliberalism as a set of discourses and practices that are regulatory, but not deterministic in that they emerge in and shape different contexts in situationally specific ways that generate unique conditions of possibility (e.g., Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Holland & Gómez, 2013; Larner, 2000).

Youth engagement, youth activism, learning and participation do not take place in a vacuum; social relations and institutions are key mediators of young people’s participation (Panofsky, 2003). Contemporary extensions of Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Biesta, 2013; Larner, 2000; Lemke, 2002, 2003) provide a useful tool to examine how broader structural factors afford and constrain youths’ participation. This perspective centralizes the relationship between the nation-state and individuals’ identity constructions. Neoliberalism as governmentality stresses the autonomy of individuals and market logic through cultural practices (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Larner, 2000). This chapter focuses on the influence of the macro level on youth participation,
which is represented in Figure 4.2. Figure 4.2 begins an extension of Vadeboncoeur et al.’s (2011) sociocultural perspective of identity construction (see Figure 2.2) as informed by data from this study. This framework becomes meaningful and relevant when applied to this particular organization and situated within the Canadian context. In this chapter, I focus on how social institutions, such as schooling, influence the social relations between the TA staff and the youth volunteers of the YGM. This macro level analysis attends to the ways in which ideology, policy, and funding mutually influence each other and significantly shape opportunities for youth activism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Macro: “Structures of Domination”</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>(Holland &amp; Gómez, 2013)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Social Institutions</strong></td>
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<td>[e.g., youth engagement, schooling, TA]</td>
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<td>[e.g., YGM: TA staff and Youth volunteers]</td>
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<td>linking ideology, policy, funding</td>
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<td>[e.g., global: CRC, national: CEYE, local: CYS granting institutions: national, provincial, and local]</td>
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<td>[potential socialization &amp; potential transformation]</td>
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**Figure 4.1 Youth Activism: Structures of Domination**

The analysis and discussion presented in this chapter draws primarily on the cultural artifacts and the videos of monthly meetings that were confirmed, challenged, and elaborated with additional data sources. I drew on literature and data to construct two narratives that, when juxtaposed, provide a view of the macro and local levels of influence on TA and youths’ participation at TA. The first is a composite narrative of TA as an organization. The second is a data-driven narrative of youths’ social construction of TA. I use bolded text for participant quotes, underlined text to delineate cultural artifacts, and italics for data from the researcher’s reflexive journal.

**4.1 Think Again: An Organizational Narrative**

This organizational narrative begins with historical material and features of the context, then shifts to the evolution of TA as an organization, and finally narrows in on the Youth and Gender
Media (YGM) project. I focus on the YGM project with the intent of constructing an organizational narrative that is relevant to this study and the participants’ experiences with TA.

**4.1.1 Narrating the historical landscape.** The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (The Charter)—signed into law in 1982—stated that all Canadian citizens have a “right of equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination,” including discrimination based on age ([http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1355260548180/1355260638531](http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1355260548180/1355260638531)). Although youth under the age of 18 are excluded from voting in Canada, The Charter provides legislative and policy support for youths’ civic engagement. The Charter is an important piece of the Canadian context because it outlines youths’ legal rights and freedoms as being equal to adults. In so doing, it includes youths’ rights and responsibilities to engagement and decision-making on issues that impact their lives (Smith et al., 2009).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the global community in 1989 (UNICEF, 2009). In 1991, Canada ratified the CRC under the leadership of Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (Mitchell, 2010). Central to the vision of the CRC was to “contribute to the protection and promotion of rights of the child and to support the active participation of youth in society” ([http://www.uncrepc.org/intl/about-us/vision-and-mission/](http://www.uncrepc.org/intl/about-us/vision-and-mission/)). The CRC explicitly connected youths’ rights and responsibilities within a framework of civic participation. Canada’s implementation of the CRC has been critiqued widely. Mitchell (2010) reported that, “[a]n exhaustive study released by Canadian lawmakers from the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights found that children and young people have been ‘silenced’ from any meaningful debate on participatory, democratic citizenship (Senate of Canada 2007, 201)” (p. 37).

In 2009, UNICEF conducted a review of Canada’s implementation of the CRC, which they reported as having “enormous challenges” (p. xi), and made the following recommendations to the federal government:
1. Pass enabling legislation to make child rights a part of Canadian law and ensure that all legislation in Canada complies with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international normative standards for children.

2. Establish a national children’s commissioner to place children high on the political agenda.

3. Establish a children’s budget to identify the amount and proportion of resources spent on children at the federal, provincial and territorial levels.

4. Monitor the implementation of the Convention by developing regular public reports on the status of children and their rights in Canada, facilitating participation by children in setting the national agenda and promoting a system of accountability for children’s rights.

(pp. ix-x)

Mitchell (2010) concluded that, in the nearly 25 years since the adoption of the CRC, it has yet to be implemented in any systematic or meaningful way in Canada.

As outlined in the UNICEF report, there is no pan-Canadian youth strategy framework and the federal government has not prioritized a youth agenda in that no federal minister has been assigned or taken on responsibility for the youth mandate (MacKinnon, Pitre, & Watling, 2007). In light of this evidence, one could view Canada’s ratification under the conservative leadership of Mulroney as a strategic maneuver (Lemke, 2002). By ratifying the CRC, Canada effectively aligned itself with the global human rights and rights of the child movements, which contributed to the idealized story of Canada as a nation-state that promotes human rights at home and abroad while having very little impact on the material realities of young people living in Canada.

The examination of youth engagement at the national, provincial, and local levels lends insight into the various “structures of domination” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) that influenced youths’ participation at TA. The Centres of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE) was
founded in 2000 as part of the National Children’s Agenda (a group working towards federal public policy for young people in Canada). The CEYE is a national organization based in Toronto that brings together youth, youth workers and service providers, researchers, and policy makers. The mission of the CEYE is to “identify, build and implement models of effective practice for meaningfully engaging youth and to document the results” (http://www.engagementcentre.ca). The CEYE defined youth engagement as: “meaningful and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity focusing outside the self. Full engagement consists of a cognitive component, an affective component, and a behavioral component - Head, Heart, Feet” (http://www.engagementcentre.ca). This narrative is consistent with positive youth development, as described in Chapter Two, because engagement is defined in two ways: 1) as affecting multiple developmental domains and, 2) is about doing something beneficial for someone or a social organization, rather than one’s self.

In 2007, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) created the Youth Advisory Council with the goal of bringing together young people from across the province to share their expertise, skills and experiences with the Ministry. The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development’s youth engagement mandate reads:

The diverse perspectives, ideas, experience and wisdom of young people can – and should – contribute to the communities in which they live. Youth engagement ensures that young people become an integral part of the work of organizations and communities and that their voices help shape the future. (http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/youth_engagement/index.htm)

This narrative of youth engagement reflects a shift from a view of youths as passive recipients of services to youths as citizens who are actively engaged in the issues and processes that affect them.

An explicit focus on civic engagement is evident at the local level, specifically with Vancouver’s Civic Youth Strategy (CYS), which was adopted in 1995 (Smith et al., 2009). “The
Civic Youth Strategy is a coordinated long-term plan of action providing a framework to support the City’s work with young people (9 to 24 years old) and to engage Vancouver’s diverse youth communities in civic issues” (http://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/observatory/city-vancouver-civic-youth-strategy#sthash.xCwD5G35.dpuf). Currently, the CYS is a branch of the City of Vancouver’s Social Planning Department working toward the goal of “making Vancouver an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable city that cherishes, nurtures, welcomes and celebrates people of from all backgrounds and of all ages” (http://www.icasc.ca). In Vancouver, the Civic Youth Strategy increased awareness of the value and importance of involving young people in the civic process (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, it resulted in the creation of a Youth Outreach Team in 2002, whose primary goal was to create opportunities for youth engagement and to connect youth with available resources (Smith et al., 2009). This policy was implemented four years before TA was founded and it provided a funding resource and platform for their own and many of their community partners’ youth-driven work.

These global, national, and provincial mandates and initiatives concurrently afforded and constrained youth engagement, TA, and youths’ participation. On the one hand, they increased an awareness of and possibilities for youths’ civic engagement, which could be argued a positive outcome in itself. On the other hand, they could be viewed as structural maneuvers that have effectively shifted responsibility for youth and community well-being from national and provincial public institutions to local organizations and individuals. As evidenced by the UNICEF (2009) report, other than ratifying the CRC, the federal government has sloughed off the economic, legislative, and political burdens of youth engagement. The analytical lens of governmentality renders clear how government intervention unfolds through indirect strategies of control—mandates and discourse—that locate the burdens of responsibility entirely upon individuals (Larner, 2000). For example, in Vancouver, the Youth Outreach Team was created with the goal of
connecting youth with resources necessary to create local youth-driven endeavors and opportunities. On the surface, the idea that youth help other young people access resources and funding to implement their own projects and ideas seems an ideal form of youth engagement. Upon closer examination, it is clear that this model results in young people shouldering the entire burden of responsibility for youth engagement. Not only are young people responsible for participating in engagement opportunities, now they are responsible for creating these opportunities, including all facets of the funding process, such as applying for, evaluating, and awarding grants and resources. This effectively positions young people as fully responsible for the creation of and participation in opportunities that will contribute to their own well-being.

This analysis exposes the cultural aspects of neoliberalism in shaping youth participation (Centeno & Cohen, 2012). The CRC emphasized “youth voice” and individual rights and responsibilities through a participation lens; these values are evidenced across the positive youth development and civic engagement literature and are echoed in some form across the youth-relevant mandates and strategies in Canada. The CEYE at the national level, the MCFD mandate at the provincial level, and the CYS at the local municipal level align in their vision for youth engagement that has a positive effect on communities. Even while avoiding the “at risk” or “crisis in citizenship” narratives, all of these mandates emphasize the individual as responsible for their own and their community’s development. Similar to the positive youth development narrative, these institutions promote a strength, rather than deficit-based perspective, but the underlying premise remains: that youth and societal well-being are reliant upon individuals who are actively engaged in making their communities—and in so doing themselves—better. A positive side of these youth-focused initiatives is the fact that they have increased the awareness of and opportunities for youth participation across Canada. Indeed, they have created a platform for valuing young people’s perspectives and experiences; this alone is a significant contribution. The ways in which these
structural influences inform ongoing negotiations and contestations at the local level highlights how neoliberalism influences, but does not determine the field of youth participation (Larner, 2000).

4.1.2 Narrating Think Again. Think Again was motivated by the understanding that a sustainable, robust, and democratic future depends on a generation of knowledgeable, empowered, and engaged young people. This organizational mandate echoes the national, provincial, and local narratives by couching youth engagement as imperative for a desired future democratic society. Also reflected here is the casting of ideal youth as knowledgeable, empowered, and engaged—“future citizens” (Kelly, 2014)—who exercise their individual rights and responsibilities. Think Again, through this particular lens, implicitly situated their work as an intervention that would contribute to the development of the ideal society and citizen.

Think Again was an educational organization and their primary learning objective was to empower young people to take action toward social and/or environmental justice. Think Again described itself on the website as:

a youth-driven not-for-profit organization based in Vancouver, British Columbia that educates and empowers young people on social and environmental justice issues. We support youth to live as active and engaged citizens within our local and global communities by providing resources, training, and education. The main activities include: supporting youth volunteers, providing leadership and facilitation training, facilitating workshops around the province, and catalyzing youth-led social and environmental justice actions.

This description reflects a future-orientation and situates youth as “citizens in the making.” Think Again was founded in 1998, three years after the initiation of Vancouver’s Civic Youth Strategy (CYS), created by Andy, the founder and executive director, and a group of young people who were working together on an international trade agreement called the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). They organized a conference on globalization that brought together 150 young
people from around the Pacific Northwest and TA evolved from that gathering. In 1999, TA secured office space and then became a registered society in 2000.

During their first year, TA visited secondary and post-secondary schools around BC and facilitated workshops on globalization, free trade, food justice and other social justice issues. In the 2013 Annual Report, TA listed the following accomplishments for the year: 35 educators trained; 165 workshops and trainings facilitated; 16 communities reached; 3,983 youth engaged in workshops and 3,755 volunteer hours logged. Evident in this report is the influence of a market rationale through the quantification of youth participation, which supports the idea that in a neoliberal era all social activity has measurable outcomes. From a market-focused lens, civic engagement—especially volunteering—has become a tool for youth to accrue experiences—outcomes—that have market value in other domains. In other words, volunteering has become a method for youth to gain skills and experience that will contribute to their success in school or work. This is also a central rationale for youth engagement across the positive youth development paradigm. Challenging this notion, Morimoto and Friedland (2013) found that the burden of youth engagement actually increased social and economic disparities since youth must individually rely on their own resources to access and participate in these opportunities.

In the 15 or so years since TA was founded, they have developed workshops and projects on topics ranging from voter engagement, free education, film and media events, climate justice, agricultural justice, migrant justice, gender and media, and healthcare. During that time, they facilitated over 2,200 workshops and worked with over 65,000 young people in the Lower Mainland and throughout BC. TA developed many of their projects collaboratively with community partners. TA’s membership in and commitment to a growing network of like-minded organizations and groups is one of the organizations’ strengths. They supported each other by trading workshops, materials and sharing resources, partly out of necessity due to the dearth of resources and partly
given an “orientation to a collective and a building of community—an us” (Holland & Gómez, 2013, p. 146). The “us” in this case consisted of local individuals and groups that were critical of the status quo and working towards social and environmental justice. This like-minded group of community partners emerged as a “politics of possibility” and together they opposed and negotiated the dwindling pools of funding and resources for youth engagement and social justice.

In 2009, Andy, resigned as the executive director with the explanation that it was time for him to step aside so younger people could take over and move TA in new directions. Jacelyn was appointed to be the executive director and she has continued in this role. At the time of this study, TA had four staff and a small office space that kept operating costs to a minimum. As a small team, there was a sense of shared responsibility and efforts to work together in order to evolve in a relevant and effective manner. TA had a Board of Directors with always at least one youth member who has equal say in all decisions. This reflects the notion of “youth voice” called for in the UN CRC and the national, provincial, and municipal youth engagement strategies, yet it does so without essentializing or valorizing youths’ perspectives and experiences.

In 2012, the TA staff and the Board of Directors undertook a strategic planning and organizational development initiative. This resulted in the following revised mission statement: TA’s mission is to create spaces where:

- Youth voices and ideas are valued,
- Youth lead challenging conversations,
- Youth can share their unique opinions and ideas,
- Youth can build connection to self and society,
- Youth can build positive relationships, and
- Youth are inspired to action.
This mission reflects TA’s values and outlines the strategies they employed toward their end goal of a democratic future and a generation of knowledgeable, empowered, and engaged young people. The concepts of youth voice, positive relationships, and connection to self and society reflect the “youth at risk” narrative through a positive youth development lens, which dominates the national, provincial, and local youth engagement initiatives. The explicit statement of “youth voice” as a value reflects the CRC and positive youth development discourse and illustrates the pervasiveness of neoliberalism across global, national, and local levels. “Youth voice” is essentially the idea that young people’s unique perspectives and knowledge should be valued, but has been critiqued for essentializing and tokenizing youth experiences for adult-driven purposes (see Soep, 2006b; Tannock, 2004 for relevant critiques). TA took up “youth voice” in such a way that circumvents some of these neoliberal implications through their peer-to-peer education model, which they described as for youth by youth. This illustrates the idea that neoliberalism shapes youth engagement opportunities through an ongoing struggle (Larner, 2000) across layers of context that becoming meaningful through local participation.

TA was primarily funded by grants and this revised mission could be viewed as a strategic maneuver to position the organization towards particular funding opportunities, thus highlighting another layer of influence of neoliberal values. In order to survive in a neoliberal society individuals and collectives must make choices—un/consciously—that will make them competitive in job or funding markets. This mission statement also resists neoliberalism by emphasizing the relational and dynamic aspects of youth-led engagement and focusing on the intent to “create spaces” where possibilities might emerge, rather than specific objectives or outcomes. This reflects a more nuanced view of neoliberalism that emphasizes local conditions, relationality, and the necessity of co-opting available narratives in order to position the program and program participants within a neoliberal landscape (Larner, 2000).
4.1.3 Narrating the Youth Gender and Media Project. The Canadian Heritage Foundation highlighted resource scarcity as a primary barrier to youth engagement in Canada (http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/pc-cp/publctn/2009-01/106-eng.cfm). In 2013, Youth Vital Signs Leadership Council reported that 70% of arts and culture organizations in Canada cited obtaining funding as a major challenge to their continued operation. At the time of this study, TA sought and acquired grant funding for their various projects. Also during this time, interestingly, there was a nuanced shift within the funding and grant opportunities that required youth programs to produce employment-related outcomes. TA, as an education-focused organization, was able to highlight the ways in which their work explicitly addressed learning outcomes. For example, the primary objective of the YGM was to train a diverse group of young women as peer educators, providing them with skills in facilitation, gender analysis, and critical media literacy. The youth participants described facilitation skills and experience as desirable for their current or future employment. In this way, the youth participants positioned themselves simultaneously as consumers and commodities; they were “buying” skills and experiences and they are “selling” themselves in the market (Biesta, 2005).

The government’s deferment of the economic responsibility for youth engagement has created an atmosphere of competition and anxiety amongst youth organizations because they are all vying for the same limited funding streams that were primarily short-term grants. Thus, the types and amounts of available funding significantly influenced opportunities for youth engagement and are evident across the evolution of TA’s work. TA relied on grant funding for most of their projects and they considered funders as community partners who align in their shared goals. The YGM project was originally created because there was a fit of interest in gender and feminism amongst folks at TA with a match of appropriate funding opportunities available.
The YGM began in 2011. The year of this study was the third and final YGM cohort due to a lack of funding resources. The first two years of the YGM project were funded by a national Canadian women’s organization and this third year and final year was funded by a different national Canadian women’s organization. Both of the funding organizations shared a mission to advance women’s equality in Canada. This highlights the significant influence that funders have in shaping opportunities for youth participation that is heightened due to lack of government support. Competition for the limited available funding was fierce and, frequently, organizations have to adapt to fit into funding frameworks. TA only applied for grants if the project framework and objectives completely aligned with the potential funder, as it did for the YGM. This illustrates the way that historical influences indirectly shape the field of social relations and potential social activity (Holland & Gómez, 2013). This also creates another form of governance by forcing youth organizations to rely on unstable and short-term funding; thus adding another layer of labor, applying for funding, governed by unstable social relations, which is accompanied by the psychological affects of stress and anxiety. All of the staff at TA shared responsibilities for grant writing, which was in addition to the duties of their specific position. Contemporary youth activism in Canada is marked by feelings of personal responsibility, burden, anxiety and stress (Kennelly, 2009) and funding-related factors contribute an additional layer of stressors.

Both of the educational coordinators, Veronica and Hermione, expressed differing opinions about the role of funding in relation to TA’s evolution. Veronica and Hermione, while having differing opinions, illustrate the inextricable linkage between politics and funding. This linkage highlights the complex terrain that TA negotiated as an explicitly political organization whose existence relied on funding from many different sources. Veronica described the small size of TA as enabling a consistently radical political mandate that did not compromise funding:
And "TA" is soooo wonderful because it is so small it's managed to keep it's mandate really really radical without compromising it's funding. Um, so I'm always excited to play with that a little bit when I first get a group of youth and see what's important to them and also there is, that they can kind of transform the organization. (Veronica Int 1: Line 528)

Veronica also spoke to the value of being a part of an organization that evolved over time and through the influence of the youth volunteers.

A different approach was exemplified by Hermione’s speculations about funding. During her interview, Hermione explained the evolution of TA from a very political organization to one that was increasingly less political. She speculated that the need to keep their many and diverse funders happy may have contributed to TA’s evolving a/political stance.

Hermione: I think it [TA] became less and less political
Kristen: Mhm
Hermione: Um, don’t know why, I have a feeling it’s because of funding issues.
Kristen: I wondered
Hermione: Yeah (Slight laugh) Um, I think it is because of that. Just because of the funding that we get. We get lots of funding from like unions and everybody has different politics//
Kristen://Right//
Hermione: //you have to kind of balance all that. But it would be, like, it would be nice for TA to have the oppor—the space in the community//
Kristen: //Mhm//
Hermione: //to not have to—if it is because of funding—to not have to worry about keeping our funders happy and actually become a little bit, you know, take a stand and
Kristen: Yeah
Hermione: be more free with the work that we do. The other thing I would change is, now that I’m talking about funding, (Slight laugh) is, um, project related funding. It would be nice to not have to come up with projects all the time and actually sustain projects that we really, that are successful and the community really wants and needs. (Hermione Int 1: 1197-1214)

Hermione’s take on the role of funding and the evolution of TA illustrates how neoliberalism effectively undermines the potential for the creation of a collective social movement, which is essential to social change, because projects are not sustained and come to an end regardless of their success and popularity. This is consistent with Guldbrandsen and Holland’s (2001) finding about the environmental movement and activism becoming increasing apolitical due to the creation of
multi-stakeholder and public-private partnerships to meet the requirements and expectations for funding sources.

The YGM was created and designed in partnership with a sexual violence resource center, Vancity Women’s Center, a University Sexual Assault Support Center, and a women’s advocacy organization. TA linked the YGM project with the British Columbia educational curriculum for Social Studies 8-11, Planning 10, and Social Justice 12. The first cohort in 2011 co-designed the YGM workshop curriculum and created a flexible design so that facilitators can adapt and personalize each workshop. The noted aims for the YGM workshop were to produce the following learning outcomes for participants:

1. To understand gender as a social construction and define and distinguish “gender” and “sex.”

2. To identify ways that the media affects our understanding of gender identities and stereotypes.

3. To critically analyze and deconstruct media.

4. To build a toolkit for discussing these ideas with friends and addressing questionable representations when we encounter them.

TA made explicit connections to educational policy and curricular objectives so that teachers and administrators could provide a pedagogical rationale for bringing workshops into their classrooms and schools.

The fact that the majority of TA’s workshops were conducted in schools provides an interesting opportunity to examine the complex affordances and constraints of neoliberalism at the local level. Youth engagement and civic engagement are often conflated through a developmental discourse as evidenced in the mandates and strategies previously discussed. A distinction between
the two is that civic engagement is traditionally considered an academic domain while youth engagement tends to imply out-of-school activity. This conflation has contributed to what Biesta (2013) described as the tendency to turn “learning problems into political problems, thus shifting the responsibility for addressing such problems from the state and the collective to the level of individuals” (p. 67). In Canada, the “crisis in citizenship” discourse is underpinned through the broadly held understanding that schools were both a significant cause of and a solution for youths’ declining political knowledge and skills (Mackinnon et al., 2007). Twice the UN has recommended the solution of nationwide education initiatives that would also support the implementation of the CRC (Mitchell, 2010). At the core of this educational—political back and forth is the shifting of blame and responsibility, yet each rely on the same myopic future focus of the “problem individual” linked to the “problem society” to support their argument.

The blurring of youth engagement as either political or educational has contributed to a particular form of marketization of education in Canada that involves another shift in responsibility at the institutional (schools) and local (classrooms) levels. Schools, within the contemporary neoliberal context, are frequently lauded as distinct entities from the state, thus rendering them neutral, objective and apolitical spaces (see Apple, 1988). This positioning of schools as neutral sites coupled with broad mandates for youths’ political and civic engagement has created a double-bind where teachers are afraid of challenging the status quo at the risk of their jobs (Kelly et al., 2004), yet they are expected to teach their students political knowledge and skills. Enter organizations like TA that are able to negotiate educational policy and curricular objectives while maintaining an explicitly political agenda because they are not a public institution. Schools and teachers are able to outsource (market discourse) the explicitly political and somewhat controversial topics (i.e., migrant justice) to TA. In this case, the “problem” of civic engagement is poorly educated or dis-engaged youth and the “solution” is sloughed off by the educational system and onto local private and non-profit
groups. The problem, thus, is defined and solved by individual “learning” outcomes as opposed to broader structural issues and collective responsibility.

On the other hand, many of the youth described the liberatory potential they experienced by entering schools and classrooms as “outsiders.” Veronica spoke about the freedom she experienced to say and do things that she did not think would happen in schools otherwise. She described a facilitation experience:

**Veronica:** During one of our gender workshops and they were talking about length of hair as an indicator of gender and um, like, what it means for boys to have long hair and the teacher at the back of the room was kind of, described as a bit of a bro figure kind of piped up and was like [imitates gruff masculine voice]: "Well call me old fashioned" and Kara just straight up told him: "I would actually call that homophobic" and moved right on with the rest of the programming and those are things I couldn't do if I was a student teacher. Those are things I couldn't do if I was a student in that classroom, necessarily, unless I was super empowered or in touch with myself/

**Kristen:** /YEAH!

**Veronica:** So, as a facilitator, that's actually my job. To go in there and break down that particular structure. Um, without like, entirely insulting or dismantling the autonomy of the teacher, but it is a really lovely opportunity so I think that's something I wasn't expecting that I've really enjoyed. (Veronica Int 1: Line 194-207)

For Veronica, the workshops generated opportunities for facilitators to voice their beliefs and values that challenged educational institutions in ways that would not have been possible otherwise.

Veronica narrated the “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) that emerged through the intersections of neoliberalism and the localized social practice of workshop facilitation.

From the pool of applicants, TA selected the 2013 YGM team for their dedication to social change, hard work, and unique vision. The YGM team facilitated workshops on gender representations, anti-oppression, violence and media across BC. They also received mentorship from leaders around the community and catalyzed action and art around the province! All of the YGM volunteers signed a commitment form. The purpose of the commitment form was to formalize their participation and facilitate a high level of commitment by the youth. The YGM commitment included: 1) workshop training and facilitation, 2) mentorship, 3) monthly meetings,
and 4) a creative action project. To my knowledge, the 5th commitment of contributing to the blog and network was never addressed amongst the YGM group.

The workshop training and facilitation were at the heart of TA’s work. All youth participants received facilitation training and co-facilitated workshops in schools and community settings. Each participant agreed to co-facilitate at least four workshops. As noted on TA’s website: Through interactive activities, media analysis, collaborative partnerships, and peer education, we will examine issues around gender violence and encourage open dialogue to explore ways to de-construct the messages youth receive about gender identity. TA aimed for sustainability by creating a core group of volunteers and facilitators that would continue their engagement even after their commitment was over. This commitment to growing a sustainable collective movement was an important mode of resistance to neoliberalism for TA (Holland & Gómez, 2013).

The mentorship component was described in grant applications as a way to connect young people with organizations through mentoring and training opportunities. TA viewed mentoring as a way to help youths build their activist networks through intergenerational relationships. At the same time, it also introduced them to work experiences and opportunities that incorporated the skills and practices of the YGM, such as media de/construction, gender analysis, and/or violence prevention. TA’s hope was that this experience would generate youths’ ability to envision ways that the skills they developed through their participation could be applied in various settings and possibly be useful for future careers. The aims of the mentorship were twofold and when juxtaposed illustrate the multiple and complex manifestations of neoliberalism: the value of relationships and the importance of career experiences.

Each month there was an YGM meeting that focused on particular topics or skill building. TA considered the youth volunteers as key stakeholders and active decision-makers regarding project activities. Each cohort collectively identified the areas where they would most like to learn
and planned the monthly meetings together. This YGM cohort participated in a workshop run by an LGBTQ outreach organization, attended an immigration and citizenship-rights rally, and held meetings at a local anarchist bookstore, and another at a youth-run arts collective.

This was the first time the creative action projects (CAPs) were a formal component of any TA project. Veronica described the CAPs as an opportunity for youths to focus and take action on a topic or idea that was personally relevant to them and in their own community. The CAP was vague and broad in order to respect the idea that each of the youths experienced and related to issues of gender and media in unique, divergent, and/or overlapping ways. Both of the educational coordinators spoke highly of the creative action projects and saw this as a positive evolution of TA. A common critique, however, expressed by many of the YGM members was that the workshops did not pay enough attention to the action piece. At the YGM graduation, Hermione shared feedback from the TA staff about how impressed they all were with their creative action projects. Hermione explained that because of the perceived success of the groups’ CAPs that TA would be making them a formal part of the volunteer commitments in the future. In Chapter Six, I discuss the CAPs as a central practice that generated conditions of possibility for youths’ active construction of meaning through a “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013).

This overview of the YGM reflects a market-focused discourse through “volunteerism,” formal “contracts,” and a focus on a set of practices organized by the topic of gender and media. For some youth, volunteering was a strategic maneuver to gain experience and position themselves competitively in academic and work markets. Volunteerism has been touted as a form of youth engagement that represents one’s “character” and desire to “make a difference” and that shows youth as learning the skills and qualities that will enable them high levels of success (Morimoto & Friedland, 2013, p. 530). In their discussion of the local food movement, Holland and Gómez (2013) described the majority of participants as new or emerging activists who were focused on local
issues and motivated by a similar desire to make a difference through projects where they lived.
They elaborated that these organizations were “more focused on realizing a defined social outcome using ‘business plans’ and other concepts from the business world,” rather than creating a broader social movement through solidarity and collective action (p. 152). The challenge of creating a sustainable broad social movement at TA was exacerbated by the cohort model because there was little to no overlap between cohorts or between concurrent projects at TA; this severely limited the sustainability of youths’ participation. I return to the consequences of the cohort model and subsequent focus on local and disparate social action in Chapters Six and Seven.

As with all groups and organizations, TA had to balance both change and consistency at the same time. For example, TA continued to evolve in relation to the sociocultural context, while it’s values and mission have remained consistent over time: to educate, empower, and catalyze youth to work towards environmental and social justice in their lives and communities. TA was proud of the work that they did and they continued to believe in the power of youth to effectively create a more just world.

4.2 Think Again: A Socially Constructed Narrative

As a co-constructed narrative of TA and the YGM, the focus is on the social construction of the YGM and TA together through social relationships and practices. This narrative is told from the first-person point of view and begins with a description of the YGM group and then unfolds with a story of a single meeting that addresses the social construction of the YGM. I begin with an introduction to the YGM group and then focus on two distinct dialogues to illustrate the complex ways in which TA resisted and reinforced neoliberalism. The first dialogue was about the youths’ experiences facilitating workshops. The second dialogue was a moment of personal sharing that unfolded between meeting activities. Interwoven within the narrative text are comment bubbles for
two additional layers of analysis: my meta-narrative and comments from the participatory analysis #2.

Soep and Chavez’s (2010) notion of “thick participation” highlights my role in this narrative co-construction that exceeds authorial voice. I took part in co-creating the monthly meetings as an active participant, mentor, and researcher. These personal accounts connect the “cultural and structural, placing the self and the conventions and eccentricities of storytelling in a social context” (Soep & Chavez, 2010, p. 7). This reflects the idea that I, as the primary author, have a unique point of view that is socioculturally situated and directly shapes this socially constructed narrative. Further, by engaging with youth as co-researchers, we talked about the data, analysis, and worked together to challenge and clarify our interpretations of it. The participatory analysis provided a richer and more complex understanding of what was happening during these meetings, which made a significant contribution to the narrative that follows.

4.2.1 The YGM group. This was the third YGM cohort. They had two different educational coordinators during their commitment; both were present for the training weekend that took place at the start of their commitment. Veronica was the educational coordinator from September to May and then Hermione took on the role from May to September. The YGM began in September of 2013 with 15 members and by graduation, a year later, the group was down to about six members. Some people gradually stopped responding to emails, showing up to meetings, signing up to facilitate workshops, and some explicitly quit and asked not to be contacted anymore.

By the time I began this research in April there were eight members of the YGM group. Three participants left the YGM in the middle of this study for distinct reasons. Their reasons highlighted a range of the consequences that neoliberalism has on young people’s lived realities. One youth had been struggling to find relevant full-time employment throughout her volunteer commitment. She got her “dream job” in May, which required a move to a nearby province. She
continued to participate from afar until she became too busy with work to keep up with the YGM. Another participant, who was in the second year of university, experienced some familial stress at the beginning of the summer. She had explained that her family was her primary priority and she felt she needed to focus her time and attention there. The third youth was also a full-time university student and she took a full-load of summer school courses. She explained that her need for self-care and time to “turn it down” from the stress of school were reasons why she left the YGM. She also was seeking part-time work and did not feel she could manage all of her commitments.

Summer tended to be a quieter time for TA because so much of their work took place in schools. This was exacerbated by the teachers’ strike that took place in public schools across British Columbia between May 26-September 16 of 2014. Between May and September, only one YGM workshop and three monthly meetings took place because of scheduling challenges. Also during that time was the YGM graduation, many one-on-one and small group meetings, and the youths’ creative action projects. This YGM workshop that took place was in my continuing studies class of international undergraduate students at a local university.

Hermione and I usually met or at least talked on the phone and emailed before meetings in order to build our relationship, share ideas, and prepare. Hermione always sent an email to the group with a Google Calendar RSVP invitation. The Google Calendar invite and RSVP method was the way that all events, workshops and meetings were scheduled. We had the meeting described at a local youth arts

Meta-Narrative: I felt somewhat responsible for scheduling and communication challenges. Everyone was so busy and I couldn’t have done much differently, but it was something I thought about a lot.

Meta-Narrative: I scheduled this workshop for a few reasons. First, I believe in TAs educational model and think it can be a profound experience for participants. I love to be able to provide that kind of opportunity—access to different models of learning—for my students. I was also getting more and more nervous about the lack of opportunities for youth to facilitate. During the first interviews, I learned that all of the youth wanted to facilitate more and that some of them were frustrated by the lack of opportunity. I also was concerned about data collection and what it would mean for my research if there were no workshops to observe.
center that was one of TA’s community partners. The meeting location changed a few days before
the meeting because the desired venue was not available, but there was some miscommunication
about the change and as the youth arrived many of them expressed confusion about not knowing
where to go.

It was a gorgeous sunny day. I had to commute to the meeting from the university, but I
had my car and plenty of time. We were the only people using the center and we had it for as long
as we wanted. Hermione and I arrived at the same time and she let us into the center. It was stuffy
inside so we opened as many windows as possible. Hermione and I set out the snacks and art
supplies on the table, pulled the chairs and seats into a circle around the coffee table and I set up the
video cameras in the least obtrusive way possible. Youth started to trickle in at about five of and
congregated within 20 minutes or so of the start time. Oftentimes youth would arrive a bit late to
meetings coming straight from class or work and immediately head off to other social engagements
afterwards.

4.2.1.1 Interpretation. Woodman and Wyn (2013) argued that structural changes and
associated cultural values change over time and reshape what it means to be a “youth” and/or an
“adult” in contemporary society. Through their participation, these young people constructed a
meaning of “youth” as an extremely busy time—no time for summer vacations—and a time for
prioritizing self-improvement by constructing new skills and knowledge. This group of young
people put social engagements and vacations on the back burner. These activities were something
to hope for, but only if school, work, volunteering, and other commitments were fulfilled first. As
Brenda noted in PA #2, the structure of TA clearly assumed “youth” to be people with flexible
schedules (i.e., student or part-time employment). Full participation at TA included being available
to facilitate workshops that most often took placed during the work/school day. This created
barriers of in/exclusion to participation and membership to TA, as a community of practice: those
whose circumstances did/not fit with this framework, such as people with full-time jobs, faced barriers to participate.

The three youths that left the YGM during this study highlight the range of ways that neoliberalism can curtail youth participation. One youth obtained full-time employment, which interfered with her participation at TA, thus, confirming the expectation that “youth” must have lots of free and flexible time. It also contributed to the construction of what are appropriate “youth” activities, such as the “earning or learning” discourse in Australia (Jericho, 2014). A second youth had unexpected family needs that required time and resources, that made participation at TA unsustainable. This speaks back to how volunteerism and youth engagement can re/produce social disparity in that some youth simply cannot “afford” to participate because of the personal costs associated such as time, resources, and energy. The third young person that left did so due to her ongoing struggle to balance school, work, family and volunteering. She felt personally responsible for her own well-being, which she talked about in terms of “self-growth” and “self-care,” but this instance prompted feelings of guilt in that she was not able to work towards her ideal of social justice. This illustrates how neoliberal discourses of individualism and “politics of self” may contribute to heightened experiences of anxiety and guilt when we are unable to live up to the socially imposed expectation of always improving ourselves (Biesta, 2005; Larner, 2000).

In this way, TA contributed to the evolving construction of what it means to be a “youth.” For the young people in this study, gaining access to TA was contingent upon their status as a certain kind of “youth,” someone with free time. In addition, they had to be “youth identified.” During the May meeting, there was a discussion about how TA defined youth and what it meant to be “self-identified youth.” In a moment of pause between activities, Elia asked Hermione about her experiences with TA during her four years of involvement. Hermione talked about the changes in personnel at TA as related to their all being youths. She then defined youth as a time when you
want to try new things, opportunities, or go back to school, but that you grow out of quickly, “so life happens, quite quickly for youth.” Aliza then asked if TA had age requirements for participation, “or if you’re like 50 and you identify as a youth that’s okay?” Hermione responded that there was a specific age, but that she wasn’t sure what it was. I said that I thought it was “self-identified” and Hermione expressed surprise and Aliza suggested that 30 was a possible cut-off. I was aware of Brenda’s age, 32, and wanted to get Hermione’s take without implicating him, so I argued that there were participants over 30. Aliza agreed then that it must be self-identified and expressed her opinion that it should be self-identified. She defined youth as something that “comes with experiences, and you know, just like how you feel” and Hermione agreed. This aspect of participation was a significant point of contention for Brenda and is addressed more in-depth in his narrative in Chapter six.

4.2.2 Dialogue #1: Workshop facilitation feedback. After everyone had checked-in Hermione reviewed the agenda for the meeting and asked the group to share and provide some feedback about their facilitation experiences. Hermione then asked Elia if she wanted to share first since she had facilitated most recently and then immediately opened the floor to everyone, “if there’s anything that you want to share, go for it!” There was a few second pause before Elia responded timidly, “I guess I can start us off since I did the most recent workshop” and described a bit about her recent facilitation experience and some of the challenges and lessons she gleaned from it. Elia explained some of the difficulties of working with English Language Learners and the importance of “quality over quantity” and taking the time to create a shared understanding and she complimented

Analysis Notes:
PA #2 Brenda made the following notes:
- Brenda says its neoliberal 😊
- because the YGM group as a school, not volunteers it never feels comfortable
Hermione for the way she handled the workshop. I echoed Elia’s compliment to Hermione and invited her to share some of her strategies for communicating across differences with the group.

As Hermione spoke about facilitating, the role of facilitator, and facilitation strategies, she actually took on and embodied those aspects of the “facilitator.” She spoke for about 11 minutes during which there was little interaction amongst the group. The group became a quiet almost passive audience and Aliza and Verity appeared checked-out. Hermione then referred to Elia and explained how they debriefed after the workshop and how it is so easy to get frustrated as facilitators because, “we think in time, like we need to get this done before the time is over (laughing).” Elia interjected, “it’s like what happens in meetings or volunteer meetings.” Hermione agreed and continued “as facilitators that’s a key learning point for us, where we kind of have to think about why we are there. We are not there to check off a list of activities. We are there to get as much of the basic message that we’re trying to present out and understood” while Brenda nodded an “mhm” in agreement with her.

Hermione then described a challenging situation that occurred at the end of the workshop when a student argued that the reason more women are not in leadership positions is because they do not have the necessary traits. This is the dialogue that followed:

**Hermione**: I as, Hermione, it was more of Hermione making the call, rather than a facilitator: I was like, okay, can’t let this go. We need to talk about this even if we only have a couple minutes left. So what we did was brainstorm the qualities of a leader…they brainstormed things like: leadership, wisdom, knowledge, communication, can you think of any others [to Kristen]?

**Kristen**: the final one, which was his sticking point—

**Hermione**: Oh yeah! It was, so we put it up as endurance, but he explained it as basically the physical capacity to like work long hours and basically be able to be physically drained and still—
Kristen: Mentally as well
Hermione: Yeah, mentally as well!
Kristen: Tenacity is what I was thinking
Sarah: Ohhhh yeah
Elia: Stamina

Hermione then explained that she went through the list and asked if a man or a woman could have each trait. There was consensus that women or men could have all of the traits until we got to “endurance.” Hermione then said, “at that point it was cool because the other students in the class actually also started engaging him in the discussion—” I interjected, “and challenged” and Hermione nodded continuing, “challenging him as well…and then eventually, I don’t even remember how that ended?” I responded, “I asked him to, I was able to link it back to what they were doing in the course, which was essentially, framing research. So, how do you make an argument and what is necessary in order to make a claim or an argument—and that’s evidence and data to support it. So, I asked him where he would find evidence to support that claim and he had none.” There was laughter around the group and Brenda responded, “yessssssss!” Hermione then defined the role of the facilitator as not being a disciplinarian because that goes into the teacher/student dynamic and Elia interjected that facilitators are also not, “the experts.” Hermione agreed with Elia and then wrapped up, “that thing that Kristen said about evidence is not necessarily something we could—we could have said that—but it just would have, it shifts the dynamic a little bit because that goes into the teacher/student dynamic…so that was helpful as well. Overall, I think Elia and I would agree, that it was a really positive learning experience as facilitators (laughing) while Elia laughed and nodded in agreement.

Brenda raised his hand and asked: “I’m wondering in that situation for example, cause I’m thinking about the way you handled these

Analysis Notes:
PA #2 Brenda commented: “for me these meetings were about learning new techniques”
situations, I’m thinking in my head—aaaah—I don’t think I would be able to respond that quickly—” and Elia interjected, “I wasn’t able to!” He then continued to ask what to do when a participant makes a problematic statement, but you don’t really know what to do and whether it’s a good strategy to put it back on the class and asked, “so what do you guys think about that?” Sarah immediately answered “yeah, definitely” and explained how she does that at work. I [Kristen] agreed with Sarah and said, “that’s what I do” when I’m teaching and I’m not sure of how to respond to a situation. Brenda laughed, “that’s what I do. I’m wondering if that would have worked in this situation?” Hermione answered, “we did that several times in this workshop.” She then explained the importance of facilitators’ ability to assess when you can turn things back to the group and not have it backfire.

**Hermione:** Basically looking for safe spaces for that to happen. Because we also don’t want to open it to a group that will say: no, you’re wrong. You also don’t want that to happen, but at the same time you don’t want it to be, the group adding more problematic things to it

**Brenda:** Right

**Hermione:** as a response

**Brenda:** or to spend time in a circular conversation

**Hermione:** Yeah

**Sarah:** I think that as facilitators we need to acknowledge that sometimes we are imparting knowledge

**Hermione:** Mhm

**Sarah:** and in other moments open up to the group

**Meta-Analysis:**
Brenda was sharing his anxiety about facilitation and communicating his desire to learn and grow as a facilitator.

Sarah and Brenda then continued to clarify the inherent power dynamics of facilitation and workshops and strategies for sharing power. Brenda outlined what he saw as the minimal responsibility of a facilitator as “being able to manage the discussions that we are instigating (laughs) hopefully.”

The conversation then shifted to challenges of facilitating new groups, cultural differences, and challenges with communication and creating shared understandings. Aliza shared her opinion about needing to be aware of cultural differences with the group and gave the example that, “in
some parts of the world gender does not mean the same thing as here.” The group was attentive as Aliza spoke and there were nods and mhms around the room. Aria asked for resources and media links that Hermione had talked about earlier and Sarah asked me a specific question about a communication strategy.

Hermione then asked, “any final thoughts in terms of workshops or facilitation?” Sarah responded, “I just feel like I haven’t been able to commit to a lot of workshops, as much as I want to when I first, kind of, joined this group. Because they fall, so many of them fall within the work hours...I’m really glad to be a part of the group in a slight way, but I wish that I could do more” Verity, Aria, and Aliza nodded as Sarah shared this. Hermione then explained that TA is working to address the challenge of participants being at the whim of group scheduling Gender and Media Representation workshops, as well as the fact that most of the workshops take place during school and work hours. Sarah suggested doing outreach to other community and youth organizations and Aria nodded and elaborated upon Sarah’s idea. Brenda agreed with them and he supported Sarah’s suggestion by sharing an experience he had facilitating a workshop on a weekend.

At this juncture, the “we” became Hermione and TA and the “them” became the youth and I. Hermione suggested that I might have more insight into participants’ facilitation experiences through the interviews and I responded, “yeah, everyone wishes they had more!” To which everyone laughed and nodded and Sarah said, “oh, that’s reassuring.” Hermione made a joke that she heard that a lot from folks and

Analysis Notes:
PA #2 Brenda commented: “Sarah can’t do as much as she wants! -what does it mean that only certain kinds of people can actually facilitate?”

Meta-Narrative:
I did not notice this positioning until reviewing the video in the PA#2. I felt like I was constantly negotiating my distinct positionality, as neither in/outside, during my time at TA and with the YGM group. In reflection, it is clear that I was more aligned with the youth than with TA, but for me the youth and TA were interrelated rather than disparate parts of a whole.
that people think they hide the workshops from them. Brenda confessed, “I’ve accused, I’ve accused” and the group laughed in understanding. Hermione began to wrap up this discussion, but Verity interjected a critique of the workshops as too basic for most of the participants she encountered. She explained, “I wish it happened more that there was more emphasis [on] the um, taking action at the end because for all the workshops I did…that part got dropped and I feel like that is really important.” She then suggested that TA train participants on what to do when facilitating a group that already “gets it.” There were resounding “Yeahs” and “Mhms” and nods of agreement from around the group. Hermione responded by explaining that as a challenge that “most teachers face” and that “whenever there’s a group there’s always a spectrum of understanding.” She then continued, “but I understand you” and summarized the suggestions made by the group and concluded, “that’s really good feedback for us.”

At this point, Hermione described the history of TA and the evolution of the workshops over 14 years with the action component being a recent addition over the past three years. She continued to explain that most of the lead facilitators and trainers, including her, learned the workshops without the action component. She then distinguished herself from TA and said, “that’s really good feedback for me as well because I think I can also become more trained in” and elaborated how the action piece can be improved in the future. Hermione ended the dialogue saying “just in the interest of time” and invited the group to provide feedback at anytime via phone or email or meetings.

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4 … denotes speech deleted for clarity
4.2.2.1 Interpretation. During the PA #2, we noted that all of the monthly meetings were highly structured and had a somewhat formal feel. Brenda would often raise his hand before speaking, and Verity made similar gestures as well. The traces of their educational histories can be seen in this social practice that would be part of the role of a “good student,” which could shift to “good volunteer” at TA. This dialogue reflected what Biesta (2005) referred to as the new language of learning that negates the role of the teacher as educator in favor of a view of the educator as a facilitator who is there to meet the needs of the learner. He argued for two main primary implications of this shift in language to facilitating learning: first, the assumption that the learner already knows what they need, which negates the idea that that knowledge is precisely the goal of education and the expertise of the teacher and; second, the focus on the individual learner and an educational process that prioritizes efficiency and effectiveness. Through the dialogue all of us worked to construct a definition of “facilitator” in relation, and often in opposition, to that of a “teacher.” We discussed the workshop in my class where I was cast as a teacher and my role in the workshop was disciplinary in nature. The youths constructed understandings of the ways in which power would and could be negotiated in workshops with a focus on their role as facilitators, rather than “experts” and “disciplinarians.” The meanings the youths constructed of the workshops drew on their personal educational histories and favored the role of facilitator over that of teacher.

The parallel of TA to schooling seemed to apply at all levels. First, education was part of TA’s explicit organizational mission and aims; it was at the core of what they did. Second, learning and skill building were explicit goals of the YGM project and linked to objectives in grant applications. Third, the YGM events and monthly meetings had a definite “school” feel. Finally, the two distinct roles of the YGM were the educational coordinator and youth volunteers and were fixed and evident throughout youths’ participation. For example, the educational coordinators were the leaders—oldtimers—at monthly meetings and in workshops while youth volunteers were the
apprentices—newcomers—positioned always co-facilitators in workshops. During the PA #2, both Sarah and Brenda commented on the similarities of TA and their experiences with schooling.

Hermione explained the goal for this dialogue was to gather feedback from the youth about their experiences with TA so that the organization could continue to evolve and improve. This could be viewed as an essential aspect of praxis that is the popular education model that TA employs. Contrarily, this could be seen as reflecting the marketization of participation through a consumer-friendly discourse: the organization must continuously improve and better its product for consumer satisfaction and to maintain a competitive edge for the ongoing struggle for funding.

**Dialogue #2: Moments of meaning.** Brenda got up to leave and then said, “wait! We didn’t even talk about the thing.” The group discussed whether to stay late and plan or to have another meeting later on in the month. Sarah asked, “is it up to us to decide, without the rest of the group?” Hermione answered, “yeah, so not everyone is ever going to come to the meetings” and the entire group erupted in laughter. Sarah said, “I love how you said that, it’s like, cathartic for you” and Brenda laughingly said, “that was awesome.” Hermione then explained that we would run everything by the rest of the group for their approval and that everyone could provide feedback and suggestions via email. Everyone agreed that they could stay late and plan and Brenda called his partner to let him know he was running late.

While Brenda was on the phone I asked Elia about her brother. This sparked a full table discussion on siblings, family, and the sharing of similar experiences of unrelating to our families around issues of social and environmental justice.

Analysis Notes:
This was an important moment in the PA #2. Brenda commented: “we all shared a moment about how it kind of all fell apart” Sarah noted: “neat moment where group laughs about incohesion”

Analysis Notes:
During the PA #2 Brenda commented: “Finally getting to know each other.”

Sarah noted: “1st time we start learning about each other. TA-all business”
Kristen: Is your brother older or younger [to Elia]?
Elia: He’s a year younger than me
Kristen: Is it just the two of you?
Elia: Yeah. We’re not on good terms right now.
Kristen: You’re not?
Elia: No//
Sarah: //I feel like//
Elia: //We haven’t been since November
Kristen: (nods and slight smile)
Verity: I find that with my brother too. I think we’re gonna be friends again and then he just does something else
Sarah: (laughs)
Hermione: (nods vigorously)
Verity: I described (laughing), when I was meeting with my mentor the other day I was trying to describe my brother and I said if my brother and I were social media sites I would be tumblr, and he would be Reddit. And she was like: I don’t even know Tumblr that well but I totally understand what you’re saying. Cuz he’s very, he would never volunteer for Think Again and would probably not show up on a day of a workshop and all that stuff. Kind of against, um, like he makes fun of people for being quote unquote “social justice warriors”
Hermione: So what’s the alternative?
Verity: Um, just being, he basically thinks that, he doesn’t want people to be too, like, critical of the world around him because then that might make …there is some anxiety about his privilege in the world. A straight white boy, you know, that might unsettle some things for him and he won’t have as much power and that kind of thing
(Brenda finishes phone conversation and returns to table)
Verity: Yeah, he gets really angry at me when I point out racism in a television show and he’s like: why can’t you just enjoy the movie!?
Hermione: I love what you just said about, not being critical about the world around him and, you didn’t say, like, the world around us. Like
Verity: yeah
Hermione: Yeah, my brother is very similar to that
Kristen: My brother calls me a dirty hippy (laughs)
Sarah: My brother’s awesome
Elia: My brother calls me a bitch
Brenda: I just don’t even get into these//
Kristen: //I’m sorry [to Elia]//
Brenda: //discussions anymore. There comes a point, for me at least, and my family fights so intensely that it’s just not even worth it. Like, my sister works in the oil patch so like, (hands up in the air shaking head)
Sarah: (laughs)
Brenda: and so does my dad. So that right there.

5 tumblr. is a blog platform and social networking web-site. Reddit is a user-driven and organized entertainment, social networking, and news web-site.
Everyone shared something about our families. This was one of the few times where the group talked about their personal lives and it was a significant moment of connection that had a deeply felt emotional undertone. I say this because Elia was vulnerable and shared about her very tumultuous relationship with her brother. I followed up with Elia after the meeting just to make sure she was okay.

A couple of days later I was on the phone with Hermione and she asked me if I thought she should call Elia to follow-up on that conversation. I shared with her that I had felt a similar need to check-in with Elia and had done so. In hindsight, I see that I used this as a “teachable moment” in that I encouraged Hermione to trust her gut; if she felt a certain way about a peer or colleague that a quick expression of care or concern was never a bad idea. This also reflected my “thick participation” that sometimes came about in unforeseen ways.

4.2.2.2 Interpretation. Humor was a key relational device. What unfolded at this time was unexpected and emerged in the data as significant. At the beginning of the third activity, there was a moment of connection, relief, and humor when Hermione basically acknowledged absenteeism and challenges with meeting attendance. It was a moment of “realness” brought about by Hermione’s acknowledgment of these challenges—the elephant in the room—which made everyone laugh and come together over this shared experience. Through the interviews and this group discussion it was clear that everyone knew that the mentorship component was not effective across the group, but that some had good experiences while others did not. It had an almost confessional tone that was met with understanding and shared relief that they were not the only ones who had had a certain

Meta-Narrative:
This also highlights the ‘oddity’ of this moment within TA. To me it seemed like a conversation that could have happened any time and certainly much earlier in the group’s formation, but here it happens towards the end of the project and it is so startling—or out of context—that Hermione isn’t sure how to handle it. It’s almost as though personal sharing is beyond the scope of TA and when it happens it is kind of jarring or out of place.
“lack luster” experience. It was in these moments that TA pierced the ideology of neoliberalism through interpersonal connection and community.

The participants described the various struggles and challenges along their activist trajectories. In the current neoliberal context this often included feelings of alienation and isolation in particular, from their families. Occupying an oppositional stance to the status quo required critical thinking, reflection, action, and provocation. These shared expressions of alienation and struggle also highlighted the vital importance of places like TA where young activists come together and build communities of practice; whatever form they may take. This dialogue also reflects some of the co-constructive work of what an “activist identity” is, means, and looks and feels like. These moments of connection and community emerged through personal sharing of experiences and contributed to “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013).

The structure of TA—as was necessitated by organizational aims, YGM specific objectives, and stakeholder commitments—hindered youths’ construction of communities of practice. Through a neoliberal lens, participation was organized in economic terms and the focus was on time, scheduling and achieving a benchmark goal or outcome. The economic and political influence was visibly contributing to heavily structured activities that left no room for time for the youth to hang out. Unstructured time is essential for relationship building and the lack of it could be seen as reducing opportunities for community. It is important to recognize the multiple, negotiated and contentious nature of neoliberalism and the resulting fissures through which moments of community and possibility emerged at TA.

4.3 Summary

Think Again was explicitly political and considered itself an activist space—or site for collective action—in that it occupied an oppositional stance to the Canadian nation-state. TA was an example of localized collective action that operated at the intersections of global, national,
provincial and municipal factors such as mandates, strategies and structures. Holland and Gómez (2013) defined “structures of domination,” such as homophobia, as interlocking systems, practices and discourses that re/produce oppression, power, and discrimination. In this way, we are able to see how these various youth-focused factors, within neoliberalism, have contributed to a particular structure of domination related to youth participation. This analysis addressed the ways in which the participants in TA resisted and reinforced neoliberalism (Smith, 2003) and participation generated the conditions for possibilities that intersected, resisted, exceeded, and reinforced neoliberalism to emerge (Holland & Gómez, 2013; Larner, 2000).

Harvey’s (2005) conclusion that the only way to bring down neoliberalism would be through a broad scale social movement comprised of local forms of resistance that connect theory and practice provides insight into the consequences of Holland and Gómez’s (2013) claim that neoliberalism has significantly changed, and undermined, the potential for contemporary collective action. I do not want to oversimplify the complexity of what I have described above. TA was and is a remarkable place, it has all of the potential for revolutionary possibilities, but those possibilities were inherently compromised by the contemporary neoliberal context. This begs the question: Is TA’s mission to create a social movement impossible in neoliberal times? I would argue that youths’ participation at TA reflected the confluence of neoliberalism and oppositional forces (Larner, 2000) that generate “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) and that are essential to any and all personal and social transformation.
Chapter 5: Local Places of Practice: Learning as an Activist Trajectory

In this chapter, I focus on TA and the local places of practice of the YGM in order to illustrate and explain the ways that youth co-constructed meanings of TA and their participation at TA. Think Again was first and foremost a critical educational organization. Their mandate was to educate, activate and empower young people. Drawing on popular education and the work of Freire (1970), TA’s organizational structure and aims were grounded in a process of conscientization for both the youth volunteers and youth workshop participants. Freire (1970) likened conscientization to education in that it is a human process whereby active agents (conscious beings) gain an awareness of their “socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (p. 452). TA’s assumptions about social change were clear: by facilitating learning, young people would become empowered to take action for a more socially and environmentally just world. An underlying assumption of TA’s work was the understanding that learning can lead to changes in thinking and behavior that could contribute to a more socially just world.

According to Wenger (1998), individuals engage in multiple simultaneous identity trajectories that correspond to their various communities of practice. These trajectories are unique and “have a motion with momentum and influences based on how one has participated in the community and anticipates participating in the future” (Polman, 2006, p. 225). Trajectory is a useful metaphor for thinking about how youths’ membership to multiple communities intersect and influence each other over time. Learning at TA was organized to be an activist trajectory. Central to an activist trajectory was the widely defined and contested concept of social justice. Helpful here, because of their focus on teaching and learning, is Kelly et al.’s (2004) work on teaching for social justice. They offered a perspective of teaching as social justice that has “taking a stand” at the core and consists of three main elements: 1) a critical analysis of social and structural inequities, 2) a commitment to taking
action towards social justice, and 3) self-reflexivity through the questioning of one’s own beliefs and actions with an openness to alternative perspectives (Kelly et al., 2004). This definition supports the argument at hand: that youth described their participation at TA as a process of becoming activists by taking action.

This chapter addresses the following research questions: 1) In what ways can Think Again be described as a community of practice?, and 2) What forms of participation are encouraged at Think Again? The following data was used to answer these questions: youths’ experiential interviews, cultural artifacts, and the PA #1. The discussion focuses on the local places of practice that are represented in Figure 5.1. This analysis attends to the ways in which the layers of contextual influence unfold at the local levels. For TA, funding largely determined what types of programs and areas/topics of focus they offered. The YGM was created because there was a match between available funding and TA staff interests. The expectations of the grant, then, influenced all facets of the YGM: the workshop curriculum, program structure, aims and objectives, and available relationships and roles. For example, the original funding for the YGM required a mentorship component, hence the implementation of this with the YGM. Through their participation and their reflections about their participation the youths’ co-constructed a narrative of learning as an activist trajectory. In so doing, they articulated meanings of their participation and of TA as a particular place for learning how to effect social change. Importantly, the meanings and significance of this narrative and the stories within it are multiple, social, and situated.
linking ideology, policy, funding
[e.g., global: CRC, national: CEYE, local: CYS
granting institutions: national, provincial, and local]
[potential socialization & potential transformation]

Local: Participation
“Local Places of Practice”
(Holland & Gómez, 2013)

Social Practices
[e.g., monthly meetings and workshops]
zones of proximal development
community of practice

Social Relationships
[e.g., peer-to-peer, mentors & youth volunteers, ed. coordinator and youth volunteers]
internalization
(resist and reinforce)
[potential socialization & potential transformation]

Figure 5.1 Youth Activism: Local Places of Practice

Briefly, in this work narrative is understood to be both a process and product of meaning making (see Bruner, 1991, 2001). Bruner (2004) argued that narrative unfolds on dual landscapes of action and consciousness. This narrative lens enables the examination of how these two interdependent landscapes contribute to participation at TA. Central to this examination is how youth talk about their motivations, desires, intentions, hopes in relation to what they actually do. Thus, the meanings that youth co-construct vis-à-vis participation are evidenced in the stories they tell about their participation. Polkinghorne (1988) advocated for the use of “narrative” and “story” as equivalent and he used story to refer to “any narrative production in general” (p. 14). Polkinghorne defined both narrative and story as “the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite” (p. 13). In this chapter, “narrative” refers to the arrangement of participants’ stories that I crafted into a narrative of learning as an activist trajectory. “Story” refers to the ways that youth talked about themselves and TA through their interviews and the participatory analysis.
This chapter begins with an overview and description of the participatory analysis #1 (PA #1). The remainder of the chapter is organized in two sections that focus on specific aspects of a community of practice: participation and membership. The participation section is organized in two parts: 1) arrival stories and 2) evolving social practices. The membership section is also divided into two parts: 1) constructing communities and 2) evolving roles and relationships.

5.1 Narrating Meaning with Youth: Participatory Analysis #1

I conducted an hour-long participatory analysis with participants at a monthly meeting (see Appendix F). The purpose of this participatory analysis was to check my own emergent understandings of the data with the participant’s understandings and to co-construct meanings together with the participants. This participatory analysis included three distinct activities: 1) dialogue, 2) writing reflection, and 3) dialogue. What follows is a narrative of the participatory analysis #1 told from the first-person perspective.

5.1.1 Narrative. It was a gorgeous Vancouver summer day. I was so happy we had decided to have this meeting at a park with a beach. A pot luck too! It had all the makings of a perfect backdrop for our meeting. I had never been to the park where we met and it was located on the Downtown Eastside (DTES) near the Port Metro. I hauled so much stuff to the meeting I felt like a pack mule: cameras, tripods, art supplies, stuff from Sarah and Aliza’s CAP event, and food for the potluck.

I got to the park pretty early because I was excited and a little nervous. The only available tables were in the direct sun, but I knew that Aliza needed a table with proper seating so I picked one that seemed the most private and quiet. The park was loud. The Port was so busy and there was a nearby helipad. Every time a helicopter landed it felt/sounded like the inside of a whirring blender. As I set up the cameras, I worried about how conspicuous they were. I was especially concerned about the implications of cameras as tools of surveillance in relation to the residents of
the DTES and considered doing an audio recording instead. The educational coordinator, Hermione, walked up as I finished setting up the cameras and we sat in the sun and chatted for about twenty minutes before anyone else showed up. I shared my concerns about the cameras with her and she laughed in understanding, but reassured me that she didn’t think it was a big deal.

Eventually Elia, Verity, Brenda, and Sarah arrived and we had some food and checked-in before we started the participatory analysis. The participatory analysis was video recorded as a means to document and review the groups’ co-construction of meaning. I began the participatory analysis by reminding the youth that they all had taken part in an individual interview with me that shared the same basic structure and framing questions even though the content of each was unique. I described my epistemological stance as one that views them as the experts on their own experiences and reminded them that there was no right or wrong answer or idea. I explained to them that the goal of this analysis was to work together to co-construct a refined shared interpretation of their interviews. There was a pause and then Brenda asked if there were notes or if he was missing something and I said no as the youth made eye contact around the table and light laughter ensued. I immediately realized the abstractness of what I was asking them to do and wished I had made some sort of handout for them. Each of them had received a copy of their interview transcript prior to this meeting, but I did not have the foresight to ask them to bring them to this meeting. Sarah suggested to the group that I must have identified commonalities across the interviews and that I wanted them to guess what they were. I agreed with Sarah and then asked them if they had any hunches or ideas of what common stories or themes they thought might be present across the data.

They began by talking about how many workshops they had each facilitated. I pushed them to think about the workshops at a deeper level by asking them what workshop facilitation meant to them personally. I then reminded them that the interviews were “more your personal stories” and
asked, “do you think that you have similarities or differences or intersections with other people’s stories?” (Kristen PA #1: Line 102). Elia replied that she thought that they all shared a passion or interest in social justice issues. Verity suggested that the group had a common background and foundational knowledge of social justice that was academic in nature, rather than being based on lived experiences. Brenda followed Verity and suggested that they all had a “passion for learning” (Brenda PA #1: Line 119) and Sarah immediately agreed and said she was going to say the same thing. At this point, Verity said “yes” while Elia and Hermione nodded their agreement with Brenda. Brenda then addressed the fact that they all had busy lives and schedules and that some people could be more active than others and he nodded to Sarah as he said this. Sarah explained her challenge with her work schedule and facilitation times, to which everyone nodded and murmured in understanding.

After some pause, I presented the two emergent themes I had gleaned from the thematic analysis of the interviews: 1) the value and role of community (e.g., key to understanding self and others), and 2) social justice as a learning process (e.g., an ongoing process of building awareness). I then listed the following themes I identified across the interviews: the importance of dialogue, desire for opportunities to “do” and “act,” integrity as a value, high expectations for themselves, the importance of relationships and a sense of responsibility. Afterwards I asked if they had any initial thoughts. Brenda asked if I could read it again, and Elia laughed and nodded in agreement. I reread the themes, then Brenda asked if he could ask questions, to which everyone laughed, and I responded, “Of course!” (Kristen PA #1: Line 143).

Brenda asked for clarification about how I used and defined community and whether it was how they each used it or my conceptual use of the term. I explained that each one of them talked about and defined community in distinct ways. I then explained my use of the term “community of practice” as a framework for understanding their learning as participation. I asked if anyone wanted
to share what community meant to them and Brenda joked that that was my job to do. Through this conversation, the participants clarified TA as a particular kind of community and elaborated upon what it meant to them. I then shifted the topic to talk about the second finding: social justice as a learning process. I said: “I loved that you [Verity] said we all have a passion for learning and so within this place [the YGM and TA] that also takes on a focus of awareness.” Many of you talked about a desire for self-awareness and self-transformation as essential for social change…What do you think about that?” (Kristen PA #1: Line 279-281).

**Brenda:** I would say that you can’t be someone that’s going to engage in, like, you need to be able to think critically, in order to
**Verity:** Mhm (in agreement)
**Brenda:** to think about social justice, and, or, that doesn’t mean that you must have gone to school, but you must have a sense that: wait a minute, something’s not right here and to dwell on that and think about that.
**Kristen:** To question-
**Brenda:** Yeah, exactly, and that to me, if you’re thinking and dwelling, then you’re learning. (PA #1: Line 288-296)

They then talked about learning through critical engagement with social justice issues as being the primary reason why they were drawn to TA.

At this time, I began to prepare the participants for a reflective writing activity by asking them if they were drawn to or felt strongly about one of the narratives or themes I had presented. The purpose of this exercise was to engage the youth in a different mode of meaning making with the understanding that reflective writing may generate ideas, feelings, and meanings distinct from those generated through group dialogue. Elia asked if she had to think about the narratives in relation to TA. I answered Elia that it didn’t have to be specifically about TA, but that it needed to relate in some way. Sarah pushed back and argued that making a distinction between the two narratives about community and learning was false. She viewed them as cyclical, interdependent, and noted that she gets the energy to learn from community. *All* of the youth agreed with Sarah’s assessment. Brenda and Verity agreed that the second narrative—social justice as a learning
process—was the most powerful for them. Sarah asked if they could each do it their own way and I answered, absolutely. Ultimately, we decided that they could choose how to think about the initial findings I had presented and that it was all open to their interpretations.

I began a ten-minute writing exercise by reading the following prompt: “write a letter to anyone, dead or alive, about either or both of the narratives and how you hold them in your body” (Kristen PA #1: Line 329). With this prompt, I aimed to engage participant reflections on their embodied experiences in order to link their consciousness with their actions (Bruner, 2004) towards a deeper meaning of the data and their participation. This also aligns with Kelly et al.’s (2004) argument that action is embodied and that, “[T]aking a stand is not just about an analysis or words, however; the phrase provides a useful reminder that we are embodied and called upon, by the strength of our convictions, to put our bodies on the line, to take action” (p. 40). I let the participants know that it was up to them what they did with their letters and that they could share or keep them private if they wished.
After the letter writing session, Brenda and Verity read their letters out loud to the group while we listened, responded, and shared ideas (see Figure 5.2). All of the participants discussed their personal experiences and unique activist trajectories.

**Verity:** I’ve done things in the past that I’m not, like, the way that I got started in activism, I’m not happy with it, because I felt like I jumped in without really knowing what I was doing and it was very white savior complex, essentially, right? Where I was the little white girl who was gonna save all of the children of Africa

**Brenda:** mmm (affirming)

**Sarah:** (light laugh)

**Verity:** And I wish that I had teachers or been encouraged to actually learn a bit more about what was going on instead of just thinking, basing it off of so little

**Brenda:** mmm (affirming)

**Verity:** But now I feel like that, there’s a struggle there where I’m being held back by that: ‘But wait, you need to understand the context 100% first’

**Brenda:** mmm

**Verity:** So,

**Sarah:** But I feel like that naïve little white girl and groups like this are jumping into unknown territory and I think that they still need to exist, or that that kind of, like you said you didn’t like how you got into activism

**Verity:** Mhm (confirmation)
Sarah: But I just think that, I don’t know, [looked at Kristen for encouragement/affirmation] I feel like I’m experiencing that right now and it is a hard feeling
Verity: I had to/
Sarah: //But I don’t know how else you/
Verity: //I had to talk to a bunch of 7-yr olds last week and it was so difficult to like encourage them, but at the same time not be like, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING and YOU SHOULD GET INVOLVED IN ANY PROJECT, because maybe you shouldn’t. Maybe the most obvious way to make a change is not actually the most effective way
Brenda & Sarah: Nodding (affirming) (PA #1: Line 370-400)

Based on their past experiences, they expressed a common desire to be more informed and knowledgeable about issues and their fears of taking an ill-informed stance or action. This was followed by dialogue about the need for a balance between fear of not knowing enough because we’ll never know enough and trusting themselves and the process because we are always learning and growing. They spoke about their trust in the process as important to their becoming social change agents because of the value of learning through doing. At that point we were running short on time and I thanked them all for their help and invited further feedback. They made some jokes about my dissertation and the “awesome” data they gave me as we shifted to the next activity for the meeting that was planning the graduation event.

I conducted a final level of analysis after the PA #1 by juxtaposing cultural artifacts and my reflexive journal with the refined findings. The cultural artifacts provided additional data to elaborate upon, support, and/or challenge the youths’ stories in the experiential interviews. The cultural artifacts illustrated the ways in which the organization structured participation, such as the monthly meetings and the mentorship towards particular goals and outcomes. I was able to confirm, challenge, and elaborate interpretations using my reflexive journal where I kept notes on who attended meetings and events, communications with youth that reflected challenges or struggles with participating at TA, and my descriptions and interpretations of photographs and images of various aspects of participation.
5.2 Participation: A Desire For Self and Social Change

Key to both Lave and Wenger (1991) and O’Connor and Allen’s (2010) conceptions of learning is the idea that particular modes of participation give rise to significant skills and knowledge, identities, and values that are prioritized within a valued community. O’Connor and Allen (2010) argued that learning becomes consequential when it takes on significance beyond the community of practice. Key to this work is the goal of TA to be a place where oldtimers, in this study educational coordinators and mentors, apprentice newcomers, in this study youth volunteers, into practices that involved the production of youth as social change agents. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), the focus here is on learning as legitimate peripheral participation as an integral component of the social practices that constitute and are constituted by a community. Yet, issues regarding access, opportunities, and resources became an important consideration when studying participation in this dynamic community.

This section includes two sub-sections. First, I share the arrival stories that youth told about how and why they came to TA. Second, I then use data to illustrate how youth talked about, participated in, and transformed the social practices they encountered at TA. While the following discussions are separated for organizational purposes they are interrelated and contribute to and shape each other as parts of a whole.

5.2.1 Arrival stories. The stories that youth told about how they came to TA, and social justice work in general, provide a foundation for understanding how each of the youth perceived of themselves as activists. Think Again recruited volunteers primarily via word of mouth, social media, and outreach through their expansive network of like-minded organizations and groups. I discovered TA on the citywide youth services website when I was looking for local youth organizations and resources. I gained access to TA largely because I knew that such organizations existed, and I had the resources to know how and where to look for them. This initial level of
access is significant in that it establishes a border of in/exclusion based on the premise of knowing that opportunities like TA exist. An important fissure in this barrier is the number of high school students that encounter TA through workshops and the direct recruitment that occurs through those encounters. Two of the participants in this study joined TA after participating in workshops in their schools.

When asked how they came to TA, the youth described themselves, their motivations, and their goals and dreams for the future. During the PA #1, Verity described the group as sharing a particular arrival story in regards to their activist trajectories. She described the group as entering social justice work from an intellectual and academic place, rather than from personal experience. Across the data, all of the youth positioned themselves as learners and TA as a particular learning opportunity. When I asked Aliza about her reasons for coming to TA she answered: “My reasons for coming was, first thing: opportunities…Because opportunities for me builds community. It builds my knowledge on certain topics, I get to hear other people’s stories” (Aliza Int 1: Line 243). Aliza’s stories about her motivation and participation were always in relation to her membership to other communities, especially the queer activist community. She viewed her participation at TA as a tool for strengthening and building her other valued social communities.

Many of the youth saw TA as an experience that would move them towards a valued social future in terms of career or educational goals. For some, it was about exploring whether or not teaching or education would be a good fit for them. Brenda reflected:

I would love to get a job doing advocacy work or something like that. And I think part of the reason why I do kind of more formalized volunteering, like, now I can say that I’ve done these workshops. (Brenda Int 1: Line 1382)

Think Again was valuable to Brenda in part because it was a formal volunteer experience that could help him identify and attain a desired career, potentially as an advocate. Sarah wanted facilitation experience in order to change her role at the job she held during the project and she was also
Sarah talked about TA as a chance to do “public speaking exercises” and an opportunity for her to push and test herself in areas in which she lacked confidence. All of the youth expressed multiple motivations for joining TA. There was an implicit understanding among all of the youth that they expected to benefit from their participation at TA academically, vocationally, socially, and/or personally. Based on this implicit understanding, all of the youth were drawn to TA in order to gain access to the various forms of participation and relationships available that they deemed valuable to their activist trajectories.

Each of the youth talked about their love of learning and the value of challenges. They were passionate about learning in relation to activism and becoming more effective social change agents. They recognized and found comfort in this shared value and goal of learning as an activist trajectory. They talked about themselves as works in progress and as seekers of experiences that would push them to grow and develop. They recognized each other and positioned themselves as seekers and learners. In this way, they did the work of negotiating what Sfard and Prusak (2005) referred to as actual and designated identities: actual identities are “stories about the actual state of affairs” and designated identities are narratives that present a state of affairs that are “expected to be the case, if not now then in the future” (p. 18). Together, the youth talked about who they are—learners, students, works in progress—in the present tense or their actual identities and who they were becoming—activists, knowledgeable, teachers—in the future tense or their designated identities.
Sarah talked about learning as a driving force in her life, “I think I’m just constantly trying to learn and become aware” (Sarah Int 1: Line 80) and described her “constant hunger to learn more” (Sarah Int 1: Line 95). For Hermione, learning was the way that she was able to live out justice and TA generated those opportunities for her. She explained, “I think it’s really important to learn to live, to be able to learn things and live out what we’ve learned” (Hermione Int 1: Line 842). Aria explained how learning and self-improvement were essential for building connections with others. I asked Aria what was important to her and she answered that she’d share some of her values with me:

Self-improvement is really important value, constantly. Putting yourself in scenarios that cause you to confront things in a different way and challenge yourself, I feel like that’s really important for self-growth, but also some sympathy towards others. (Aria Int 1: Line 983)

Aria was at the beginning of her activist trajectory and TA provided a scenario for her to grow through by confronting and challenging herself. Aria was a full-time student during this project and in May she decided she needed a break and stopped participating at TA. She explained this decision to me in an email:

I think I need some time this summer to recoup, and to invest some time in on other personal goals/family commitments I need attend to. I thought I'd have the capacity to take it on, but this school year has had me a little worn out of energy, and while I'd love to see this project push through, (the content is stuff that I have a lot of passion in!) I think it best at this point if I backed out for now. (Aria personal communication July 1, 2014)

Afterwards, I talked to Aria about her decision to leave TA; she explained that in order for her to live with integrity to her values and beliefs she had to be honest about her needs and what was good for her. In this way, she saw her decision to leave TA as an example of an application of her values to the practice of self-improvement. In another way, Aria’s value of self-improvement reflects Larner’s (2000) claim that one strategy of neoliberal rule has created politics of self where we are all encouraged to continuously improve upon our selves towards an unachievable ideal. These ideals of
self-improvement and self-actualization also link back to the ways that the participants talked about themselves as learners that reflects the explosion of life-long learning (Biesta, 2005).

Each of the participants’ stories were unique, but aligned in their shared desire for a more socially just world. Each of them understood and expressed their shared desire for a more just world from their own particular vantage points. They talked about their motivation to influence social change as personal and intricately linked with their own learning and development. Although each of the youth talked about their awareness of injustice and their desire for a more just world, the ways they talked about what these meant, themselves, and their experiences varied greatly.

When I asked Elia how she came to TA she spoke about a love of gender analysis that grew from her frustration with existing limited media portrayals of gender, race, and culture. She spoke about how she came to view the world through a critical feminist lens with a desire for gender equity. She explained, “I wanted to look for opportunities where I could change like, the perception of gender representations and stuff” (Elia Int 1: Line 290). Stacy talked about her desire to help people make personal and relevant connections to the environment that would, in turn, change their behaviors. Stacy said:

I guess what I’m really interested in and motivated by is kind of how people interact with the environment and how they see it. And figuring out those … kind of bad habits that we’ve developed and finding ways that we can change them or figuring out, kind of how people connect to the environment, and how, [pause] what would make it important for them and how you can make that kind of connection to the importance to help change habits, right? (Stacy Int 1: Line 541)

When they talked about their motivations and goals for participation most of the youth drew on past experiences as contributing to their understanding and desire for social change. In their stories about why and how they came to TA, they described themselves as learners within an activist trajectory. They spoke about their trajectories as being driven by their desire to learn and grow as a
process of self and social change. I now turn to the stories shared about participation in and transformation of the social practices of the YGM.

5.2.2 Evolving social practices. When asked about the different ways they participated at TA, youth invariably talked about their peripheral participation in terms of time and the specific social practices in which they engaged. Figure 5.3 is an edited copy of the commitment form that all of the YGM youth volunteers agreed to in order to participate in the YGM. The form outlined the central aspects of their participation including the core social practices they would engage in during their commitment. The CAPs were not listed on the form, as this was a new aspect of the YGM program. I begin by describing the way the youth narrated their varying degrees of participation. I then address the different social practices of the YGM including: the monthly meetings, the training/orientation, the mentorship, and the workshops. I pay the most attention to the workshops because the youth described them as the most valued social practice of the YGM.
Participation was most commonly described in terms of time and attendance. Across the data, the young people narrated themselves as extremely busy, involved, and active. Most of them were balancing some form of postsecondary education, jobs, additional volunteer commitments, and active social lives. Through their stories, the participants highlighted the challenges of scheduling...
and logistics as barriers to their participation at TA that partially contributed to mismatched expectations and actual experiences. This illustrates the nuances of learning as the bridge between designated and actual identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Participation at TA was a bridge for some, but not all of the youths at TA, and, again for some, it generated more nuanced shifts in how the participants’ talked about what a “youth activist” identity meant to them (this is elaborated in Chapter Six).

A recurrent thread across the data were youths’ expressions of wishes and regrets for their varying degrees of involvement and engagement. Their stories were rich with the sentiment that they could never possibly “do enough” and the commonly associated feelings of guilt that Kennelly (2009) found commonplace amongst contemporary youth activists in Canada. There were originally 15 members of the YGM. At the start of this research there were eight active members, all of whom participated in this study in addition to the two educational coordinators. Over the course of this research, between April and September, three of the remaining YGM members withdrew from TA for various reasons. On average there were about four to five participants present at the YGM meetings and it was not unusual for last minute changes or cancellations.

Every participant talked about the importance of honoring their commitments and wished that they could have done more during their time at TA. Aliza said, “I wish that I could have done more workshops. Just because I’ve been so busy…And I also wish that I could have gone to every single meeting” (Aliza Int 1: Line 443). Sarah was explicit about the challenge of her schedule and commitment to TA, “I don’t feel like I’ve been able to commit as much as I had thought I would or wanted to. Yeah, just in terms of work and availability and timing” (Sarah Int 1: Line 344). Elia stated, “I just wish I had more time to volunteer or to do more workshop facilitation work, because that’s what I signed up mainly to do” (Elia Int 1: Line 706). I asked Brenda if his reasons for joining TA had changed or stayed the same and he answered, “I definitely see the value, I wish, actually that
I had not been so busy during the school year so I could have actually gone to more workshops” (Brenda Int 1: Line 711). Aria described her participation, “I’m just gonna put this out there, like, I haven’t been able to involve myself with TA as much as I wanted to” (Aria Int 1: Line 225). The youth recognized their own challenges with participation in relation to their peers and acknowledged this shared state of busyness almost as a given.

Within these sentiments the youth expressed a desire to do more and to spend more time at TA and with the group. These were coupled with an acceptance of this as an unrealistic ideal that was not likely to happen. During her first interview in June, Verity explained:

I know that this is impossible for a lot of people because their schedules, but I would like to meet more, as a group. I think there’s still a lot of people in the group that I don’t know very well and so I think more frequent meetings, attending more events together, that kind of thing. (Verity Int 1: Line 235)

The youths’ varying degrees of participation and time spent with at TA and with the group directly influenced how they learned through their evolving social relationships and practices. In the current neoliberal era time and availability are commodities that are linked with productivity as a value. These themes are evident in the participants’ stories, but their stories also contain kernels of hope for an alternative—time, place, future—where they are able to invest themselves and connect with others in a more fulfilling way. Another way that youth talked about their participation at TA was in relation to the specific social practices in which they engaged. The participants appreciated the variety of practices, as well as how the practices facilitated relationship building and allowed them to construct knowledge and identities that aligned with their values and ideals.

Most monthly meetings began with a check-in that included stating one’s preferred gender pronouns; this stuck out to many, including me, as a new experience. Aria explained, “Being in the YGM group was the first time I was exposed to the stress on identifying yourself with gender
pronouns” (Aria Int 1: Line 380). Amanda expressed her ongoing struggle with her participation at TA through her story of learning. Amanda explained:

[T]he first meeting that we had and we go around and introduce our preferred pronoun and that’s something I’ve never experienced before and it was very- that’s when I realized, like, before signing up for this project I didn’t realize, it felt like a big learning curve actually because I had no idea what these issues were and some other people in the program they were a little bit more well-versed in this issue because they’ve studied it a little bit. (Amanda Int 1: Line 897)

Amanda’s participation was complex. In this quote, she distinguished herself from the other YGM members on the basis of them being “more well-versed” than she. She also reflected on the learning curve she encountered at TA and insecurity regarding her ability to engage in the social practices of the YGM that included new vocabulary. Later in the interview, Amanda presented a contrasting story, “I think intersectionality is a super cool word. Like, I couldn’t use it like this before, but I totally can now” (Amanda Int 1: Line 1449). This was a key moment in Amanda’s story as it exemplifies how she encountered and took up particular discourse and vocabulary—intersectionality—over time through the social practices of the YGM.

Many youth talked about the generative nature of the particular types of dialogue to which they gained access. Elia described how she constructed aspects of her identity through the discussions she had with the YGM group. She said, “breaking down the stereotypes and like, the discussion around gender stereotypes and media violence has really given me a stronger sense of identity” (Elia Int 1: Line 1087). When I asked Aliza to tell me about the YGM group, she answered:

I also really liked the way that we learned together and every group is different with their learning. Especially when it comes to huge issues like reverse racism and talking about how that doesn’t exist and power and privilege. Those are HUGE conversations and it takes a special group to understand that kind of thing together and so I really value that kind of relationship with people. Anytime I have that kind of conversation with somebody, for me, it builds a kind of connection with them. (Aliza Int 1: Line 379)
Aliza and Elia noted that the types of dialogue they encountered as valuable opportunities for the construction of identities and relationships. TA created the conditions for youths to understand a more radical, institutional approach to oppression and discrimination.

![Group Brainstorm at a Monthly Meeting](image)

**Figure 5.4 Group Brainstorm at a Monthly Meeting**

Participants described the monthly meetings as essential to their relationships with each other, with the oldtimers, and the organization. Monthly meetings generally lasted two hours and took place on Sunday or weekday evenings at various locations around the community. All of the meetings began with a brief check-in where all of the participants in attendance shared something about themselves based on the collaboratively agreed upon format, such as new year’s resolutions or summer plans. Brainstorming and mind mapping were tools that were used in many of the meetings and workshops. Figure 5.4 is a photo of a group brainstorm completed at a monthly meeting that was a tool to encourage thinking about creative action projects. TA deliberately left the specific structure, topics, and location of the monthly meetings flexible in order for cohorts to make decisions and focus on issues that were meaningful and relevant to them.

Brenda talked about the monthly meetings as beneficial in terms of professional development and capacity-building. He explained:
I like those monthly check-ins. And what I liked was how we’d have these different activities at each of the monthly check-ins, I value a lot those kind of, I don’t know if you can call them professional development, but those kind of capacity-building type exercises. (Brenda Int 1: Line 762)

Brenda explained that the reason he joined TA was the opportunity to learn and practice skills. Many talked about the monthly meetings as essential for building relationships and getting to know each other. While youths expressed an appreciation of and desire for more face-to-face contact they also talked about the impossibility of the added time commitment. This was a recurrent theme across the data and appeared to be something they all were working toward understanding through their participation: that their engagement was afforded and constrained by factors outside of this particular context.

![Figure 5.5 Cultural Artifact: YGM Group at a Protest During the Training Weekend](image)

Many youths talked about the value of the weekend training/orientation as an extremely important component of their participation. The training took place before I became involved with the cohort, but it was something that many of the youths talked about in their interviews. The

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6 Faces blurred of non-participants.
training was two full weekend days in September and included anti-oppression and facilitation training by other local partner organizations, community and relationship building activities, and participation in a protest. Figure 5.5 is a photo of participants at the protest they attended during the training weekend, which they described as fun even though the rain was so terrible during the protest that they were soaked to the bone for the rest of the day. They laughed about how they hung their socks and various clothing items on the radiators and furniture to dry. Brenda described the training:

[T]heir training was really good. That weekend that we went to was really intense, it was really full-on. I don’t think many people are going to get that kind of an experience. To be exposed to, like, that many different kinds of ways of getting at changing the way people think. You know what I mean? ‘Cos that’s what they’re giving you: tools to help you get a message out. (Brenda Int 1: Line 938)

Sarah talked about the value of the training weekend because, “The weekend, it was great! Yeah, that was a good experience, because everyone kind of was fully committed in attending at that point” (Sarah Int 1: Line 328). Although Veronica, the educational coordinator, was primarily responsible for the training she enlisted the support of Hermione and a few additional TA staff and volunteers. As a long-term TA volunteer, Hermione often took part in trainings and events and she took an active role helping Veronica organize and lead the YGM training weekend. Hermione’s role in the youths’ training provided a degree of consistency and comfort for the group when Veronica resigned and Hermione took on the educational coordinator position in May.

The mentorship was an interesting and widely varied aspect of participation for the YGM group. Part of TA’s mission was to empower youth to continue to work towards social and environmental justice that would continue after they left TA; thus contributing to the continuation of social change movements and youth as social change agents. Mentorship was a mode of participation that aimed to support newcomers towards successful futures through the ongoing active organization of oldtimers (O’Connor & Allen, 2010). Figure 5.6 is the letter that Veronica
sent out to prospective mentors and listed the expectations for the mentor-mentee relationship. TA’s goal for the mentorship component was to help the youths extend their activist networks beyond TA and to support youths’ visioning of a future where their participation at TA would be consequential. TA viewed apprenticeship into extended networks and communities as crucial to the sustainability of social justice work. However, some of the youths made great connections with valuable mentors and extended their networks, while others struggled to meet their mentors, and some had no contact with their identified mentors.
October 30, 2013

Dear

**RE: Mentoring a Youth Participant in the Youth and Gender Media Project**

My name is Veronica and I am writing from Think Again, a youth-driven not-for-profit organization based in Vancouver. Founded in 1999, we encourage youth to take action towards social, economic and environmental justice. Our main activities include workshops, facilitation and leadership training, supporting youth-led social and environmental justice actions, and engaging youth volunteers.

I’m writing to ask you to consider being a mentor to a youth volunteer in Think Again’s Youth and Gender Media Project. Over the next nine months, fifteen youth facilitators of all genders will be leading workshops on gender representation, violence prevention, and the media across BC. To enrich their experience and build community, we are connecting each of the volunteers with a mentor in the community. Your work with xxxxxxx is so important and of particular interest to many of our volunteers who are students; your participation in this program would be such a great contribution!

If you’re interested, we ask that you agree to meet with your “mentee” three times over the next nine months, scheduled at your own convenience. A suggested structure for these three meetings is as follows:

1. Arrange an introductory meeting over coffee with your mentee to get a sense of your shared interests, goals, and backgrounds. Each mentorship will be unique!
2. Attend a community event with your mentee—a film screening, a gallery opening, public lectures, or other opportunities in the community.
3. Invite your “mentee” (on their own or with other youth volunteers) to your place of work to experience different ways that individuals and organizations work to enrich media production, to deconstruct gender stereotypes, and/or to prevent violence.

I will be glad to facilitate the initial communication between you & your mentee. We hope that you consider participating in this project as a mentor. Our volunteers have expressed great excitement at the opportunity to connect with people whose experiences, successes, and passions are directly connected to gender issues. Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions or concerns regarding the mentorship program, or the project more generally. Thank you again for considering our request!

Sincerely,

Education Program Coordinator
604 xxx xxxx ext. 302
veronica@thinkagain.org

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**Figure 5.6 Cultural Artifact: Letter to Potential Mentors from Veronica**

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7 Edited to maintain confidentiality
For Elia, the mentor component was important for making connections beyond TA, “building relationship outside Think Again, in general. Because I’ve had a really positive experience with my mentor and I know that the other volunteers don’t seem to be” (Elia Int 1: Line 329). I asked Aria about her experience with her mentor and she noted how her evolving understanding of social justice was enhanced through the mentorship. Aria explained:

It was like really awesome to meet her…She’s more culturally sensitive than she is concerned about pinpointing what is defined as a human right and what is not and that again takes me back to what I was saying, I feel like the more you get worked up in the lingo the more sometimes narrow minded you can become when interacting with different people and I actually notice that with me. (Aria Int 1: Line 487)

The significance of the mentorship for the youth seemed to be more about how the personal connection with an oldtimer or desired mentor could guide their activist trajectory into the future. TA supported this by having the youth identify community members that they were interested in and would like to have as a mentor. Interestingly, the youth who had little or no contact with their mentors talked about this in a matter of fact and somewhat neutral way. It was just something that did not pan out, but did not seem to have a significant impact on their overall participation.
As an educational organization, the workshop facilitation was the central practice of TA and it was key to the stories the youth told about their motivation and participation. All of the youth talked about the significance and meanings of the workshops that evolved over the course of their participation at TA. To become facilitators, the youth first took part in the facilitation training and then observed a workshop. After they completed these first two steps, the youth were expected to co-facilitate four workshops with a more experienced peer during their year long commitment.

Figure 5.7 is a photograph of Elia and Hermione co-facilitating the workshop that took place in a course I was teaching at a local university. They were brainstorming with the workshop participants in order to create shared understandings of terms related to gender and media. The participants spoke about the workshops as social action and their role as a “provocateur” (Kristen PA #1: Line 93) was to “prod” (Sarah PA #1: Line 92) the way that young people think through dialogue and action.
Aliza and Brenda described gaining access to high school students and classrooms as the most important aspect of their participation at TA. They shared a desire to work with kids and young people, which they found difficult due to the restrictive nature of schools. Brenda wanted facilitation experience, and TA was a way that he could negotiate the barrier of access to youth and schools, which he attributed to his being a 32 year-old man. For Aliza, facilitation was a skill she wanted to develop and she knew that needed to happen through practice. She explained, “The only way I'm going to learn how to facilitate is by going into classrooms and TA has given me the space to do that… I feel like that’s the most important part for me” (Alia Int 1: Line 938).

In gaining access to high schools, the young people also had increased opportunities to interact with high school students. For many of the young people, the interaction and exchanges with younger people were the most important and transformational aspects of their participation. The participants talked about being surprised, inspired, and encouraged by the high school students they encountered. Many of their comments reflected socially constructed ideas of adolescents as uninformed, uninterested, and unaware that were challenged through these real experiences and exchanges with high school students. Elia elaborated on how the workshops changed her perception of young people over time and through her participation. She said:

“It really encouraged me to… think more positively about, like, youth engagement and what youth can actually bring. Because we hear a lot of negative stories about youth and how they’re not really socially aware or they are ignorant and stuff, but that’s not always the case.” (Elia Int 1: Line 930)

Many talked about young people as informed and inspiring. Brenda stated, “that opportunity of working with people and seeing what amazing things can happen with young people is amazing. Like, it was really inspiring!” (Brenda Int 1: Line 657).

When I asked Sarah what TA meant to her, she told me a story about facilitation and the potential of peer-led workshops for building connections with others. Sarah explained:
To know that that kind of curiosity is in there for a lot of youth and that it does just take peers to bring that out and just be like: let’s sit and chat about politics. Rather than, you know, Facebook (laughs) or whatever. I just like to find that there’s other individuals out there like me. (Sarah Int 1: Line 272)

For Sarah, the idea of solidarity and knowing that she was part of a larger, albeit more abstract and less intimate community, was a crucial aspect of her participation at TA. Hermione spoke about moments of changing people’s thinking in workshops where “there’s a shift you can see” (Hermione Int 1: Line 447) as being the most inspirational part of her participation at TA. The participants expressed and constructed nuanced meanings of the workshops through the stories they told about their experiences.

Aliza and Verity spoke about TA as an alternative to traditional learning models and the educational system. Aliza explained:

**Kristen:** can you tell me a little bit maybe about what it means to you? Or give me a story that illustrates what TA has come to mean to you?

**Aliza:** Well, I think it’s really important for an organization like TA that goes into schools and facilitates workshops with youth

**Kristen:** Mhm

**Aliza:** It’s really important, I find, for those facilitators to also identify as youths themselves.

**Kristen:** Mhm

**Aliza:** I think that there’s so much education out there that is on a power imbalance

**Kristen:** Aha [inviting further explanation]

**Aliza:** You know what I mean? Where it’s like an adult teaching a younger person or a younger person teaching an elder or something, you know?

**Kristen:** Mhm

**Aliza:** There’s just so many power imbalances with just the word ‘teaching’

**Kristen:** Totally

**Aliza:** That I feel it’s so important to teach from a mentor level

(Aliza Int 1: Line 270-286)

Aliza felt strongly about the peer-to-peer educational model. She distinguished this from traditional models by describing it as having less of a power differential because youth teaching youth was more of a mentor relationship. Verity was also initially drawn to TA because of the youth-led facilitation framework, but this changed for her over time. She noted:
Sometimes I feel a little frustrated by just how ‘safe’ and introductory the gender and media workshop is, or how time consuming it is for activists to have to go into schools and explain things that seem so common sense to us. Wouldn’t it be faster to just overhaul the system so that these workshops weren’t necessary? But, then I remember that, just as facilitating these workshops has been a first step into activism for me, for the students in the class, this may be the beginning of their activist journey as well. I’m not ready to overhaul the system, but we’ve all got to start somewhere. We’ve done workshops for students as young as grade six and had really great responses. If I had been introduced to this stuff, even at the most basic level at age 11, I might be a much different person today. (Verity Int 1: Line 144-154)

In this story, Verity articulated the transformative value of learning through experiences in relation to becoming a different kind of person. This maps directly on to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) epistemological and ontological positioning where they argued that learning in a community of practice entails changes in identities. The theme of TA as an alternative to traditional educational models was salient across the data. Figure 5.8 is an excerpt from the YGM workshop curriculum and highlights the goals and collaborative nature of the workshop. This was also how TA positioned themselves within the field of youth engagement and was something that attracted many of their volunteers. From this perspective, youths’ expectations and their experiences were consistent.
The participants clarified their meaning and understanding of the workshop facilitation together during the PA #1.

**Kristen:** What is the broader meaning of it [facilitation]? Does it say something about your participation? Or, does it say something about you?

**Verity:** To me it means that you’re making something happen.

**Brenda:** Yeah, I was going to say the same thing actually.

**Verity:** So, you’re going in, for example, to facilitate a workshop and you’re helping kind of move forward that learning.

**Kristen:** Mhm

**Sarah:** I also feel like it’s talking about things that are, people know about or are exposed to, but just don’t talk about very often. So, I always have this image of like poking these people with questions. Like, they know it. They’ve experienced it. They’re just not talking about it amongst themselves and so our role is to go in there and be like: Hey, let’s talk about this! [Verity smiled and nodded as Sarah talked]

**Kristen:** So your role is a poker…

**Sarah:** a prodder

**Kristen:** like a provocateur?/

**Sarah:** //prodding, yes.

[Verity and Elia smiled and nodded] (PA #1 Line 78-95)
During this conversation we co-constructed a broader meaning of their participation by focusing on the workshops. First, Verity articulated the idea that the workshops in and of themselves were social action “making something happen” and Brenda echoed her sentiment. Verity articulated that the workshops aimed to “move forward that learning,” thus, linking learning along as a process of social change. Sarah clarified what it meant to her to be a facilitator, which was to prod people to engage in dialogue about social issues as things that “people know about and are exposed to.” The group confirmed Sarah’s construction of the facilitator as “prodder” with nods and smiles. Together, they co-constructed this story of their participation at TA, the workshops, and their roles as facilitators as a process of catalyzing change through learning. The workshop was a central evolving social practice whereby the youth engaged in self and social change. As Verity and Brenda explained, the workshops were action and provided the facilitators and participants an opportunity to take their “first steps into activism” (Verity Int 1: Line 149).

The youth talked about how they first came to think about and understand social justice as part of their activist trajectories. They told about their motivations and goals for joining TA, and many made explicit connections between personal and social transformation. Consciousness and action were made visible through their stories of themselves as busy, involved and eager to learn and “do” (Bruner, 2004). The youth explained the ways that the evolving social practices of the YGM facilitated their learning and the learning of others, which contributed to their shared goal of social change. Youths’ arrival stories and their participation in evolving social practices are interrelated in the following stories of their memberships and TA and the YGM as a particular place of learning.

5.3 Membership: TA and the YGM as a place of learning

Lave and Wenger (1991) have been challenged for not having a precise definition of a community of practice, but do clarify that it is not a “primordial culture sharing entity” (p. 98); it is
dynamic, co-constructed, and members hold varied interests and perspectives. It is not a sub-culture (Cox, 2005). Use of the term community does not “imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group or socially visible boundaries,” rather it is “participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means for their lives and for their communities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Shared understanding does not mean consensus, rather it is informed by an acknowledgement and recognition for each of their unique points of view. This view of learning as participation implies that learning is both a condition of membership and an evolving form of membership within a social community.

Important to understanding TA as a community of practice are the ways that participants talked about themselves, each other, and the work that they came together to do. The stories that youth told about their membership in other communities helps clarify how TA and the YGM became unique communities for some of them. Young people’s participation and membership at TA influences and is influenced by their other networks and communities. For some of the youth, TA was an extension and elaboration of their other communities, and for others it posed a direct challenge. These consistencies and contradictions directly affected youths’ stories of TA and the spectrum of membership therein.

5.3.1 Constructing communities. TA was intentional and overt about its desire to build community and connections; they actively organized youths’ participation with this goal in mind. One way they did this was by supporting youth volunteers to build relationships with each other and with people in TA’s extended communities through regular social practices, especially the monthly meetings and mentoring. Figure 5.9 is a photo from a march that I participated in with TA and their community partners, as well as some of the YGM cohort.
The previous discussion of youths’ arrival stories and evolving social practices are intertwined with their stories of community and membership. In this section, I illustrate the ways that youth talked about TA and their divergent memberships. I begin by sharing the stories that youth told to explain the various meanings of “community” and TA and the YGM as particular communities. I then use data to illustrate the ways that youth defined the roles and relationships they engaged in with the YGM. Specifically, I focus on how they constructed themselves, each other, and their roles through their participation at TA and the YGM.

During the interviews the participants used the term “community” in various ways. They talked about community as a value, an ideal, and as something that they sought out and hoped to create in their lives. There was an emotional undertone to the youths’ stories about communities that was often linked to learning and relationships. During PA #1, we talked through our own understandings of community and came to a shared definition of the YGM as a community. This discussion provides a point of reference for the nuanced and divergent stories of community and membership that follow.
Sarah: (faces and speaks directly to Kristen) I think I said in my interview that I wished that I’d got more of a sense of community from this group than I did. And that was partly just due to my availability, but I also get the sense that we’re all, I don’t wanna like tell everyone how they are, but just like, introverted, a little bit.

Elia and Brenda: // (light laugh) //
Sarah: And that we’re all like silently practicing //
Kristen: // Mhm //
Brenda: // (light laugh) //
Sarah: Cuz like you said, it’s a community of practice-
Kristen: Right
Sarah: Common things.
Kristen: MMMM
Sarah: And so when we come together I feel community
Verity: Mhm [agreement]
Sarah: I feel very supported in that we’re all aligned in our values that way, (looks to Verity)
Verity: (nod) [agreement]
Sarah: but don’t actively, be an active community doing these things together. Like, we’re all just out there doing our own things //
Kristen: // that’s actually //
Sarah: // and that’s how we’re a community of practice
Kristen: That really speaks to, someone said, it’s kind of like knowing that you all are working towards the same kinds of things
Sarah: Yeah
Kristen: in your own ways. Or, and you know, like, learning together and then however you might implement that or how that might translate to your daily life is unique.
Sarah: Yeah, totally, that’s how I see it. That’s how I feel.
Kristen: There’s no wrong —
 (general laughter around the table)
Brenda: Well I mean, if you’re feeling like you’re being supported that would kind of speak to that idea of ethics of care or whatever or polities of care where it’s like you come into a space where you’re maybe, so yeah ok, we’re not all like getting together and having tea and coffee, like, outside //
Elia: (light laugh)
Sarah: // yeah! //
Brenda: // of this place, but it’s a space where you can come and kind of feel supported
Hermione and Elia: (nod) [agreement]
Sarah: Yeah, like you can check out, but still know that we’re all in the background working towards the same
Verity: I think that’s inspiring in and of itself! Like, even if we’re, like you said, even if we’re not meeting up every day, but to know that someone else also cares about the same things you do //
Brenda: // (nodding) Yeah //
Sarah: // (nodding) mmm //
Verity: // and is actively working towards trying to change something in the world is quite comforting. You know, even on days when you feel like, oh well, I can’t do this today, you know: Oh! That person, they did something really inspiring. I just want to say that the fact that you [Sarah] had a meeting with the City to initially try to get a permit-
Brenda: //yeah//
Verity: that inspired me to call the Library!
Sarah: (laugh)
Verity: I was SO SCARED, but I was like, you know what, if they can do that then I can call the Library! (PA #1: Line 168-217)

During this dialogue, aspects of participation and membership that contributed to a developing community of practice were highlighted. First, Sarah took responsibility for TA not feeling like the kind of community that she had hoped for because of her conflicting work schedule. She then articulated what she perceived as central to the YGM as a community of practice: the alignment of values towards a shared goal that is grounded in feelings of support. Brenda endorsed Sarah’s description and added the notion of solidarity to this community by referring to an “ethics of care.” Verity articulated how the YGM community was comforting and inspired her to take risks. Hermione and Elia contributed to this discussion by nodding, laughing and actively listening. This particular description also illustrates how a community of practice can also be a site for zones of proximal development. For example, Verity felt confident to take risks and expand her learning through the relationships she had with her peers, as she described here with Sarah. All of the youth took turns taking on roles as mentors and apprentices with each other.

Youths’ stories about TA and the YGM as a particular community reflected the idea that community and “safe space” are neither universal nor the same for everyone, nor are they achieved once and for all. The complexity and fluidity of community and membership was evident in the variability of stories the youth told about the group and about themselves. Within these stories were expressions of contradiction such as in/exclusion, un/belonging, and dis/connection. Across the data were expressions of appreciation alongside critiques of TA and the YGM as a community, thus, highlighting the fluid, multiple, and contentious nature of communities and communities of practice. Communities are not achieved, rather they are experienced in fleeting moments of connection and reflection that carry some sort of significance to the member/s.
Central to defining the YGM as a place of learning and community was youths’ understanding that learning is inherently risky and involves making mistakes. Creating “safe spaces” was part of TA’s rhetoric. Creating a “safe space” was a stated intention at the beginning of all of their activities and events. In turn, the participants talked about how “safe spaces” were essential for learning as exemplified in Figure 5.10. Youth expressed appreciation for the ways that they felt safe enough with each other to try on and mess up new roles and practices. When I asked Verity about the YGM group she explained, “it also made it feel very safe for sure and not in the kind of negative way that I was talking about safe before, but just comfortable” (Verity Int 1: Line 333). In this statement, Verity was clarifying her use of “safe” as a critique of the workshops as being too basic and not critical enough. Contrarily, she spoke here about the value of the YGM as a safe place in that it was conducive to learning.

Aria described a general understanding across the group that everyone had good intentions and that humor was an effective tool for dealing with inevitable mess-ups. She explained:

I felt like with the YGM group, from what I saw, we all kind of had a perception of what terms are politically correct and sometimes in meetings we would talk about them and stuff like that, but we were also able to hold sort of a sense of humor and sarcasm with it in a way

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*Figure 5.10 Cultural Artifact: Volunteer Testimonial*

Edited for confidentiality
that we could also correct ourselves when we would use something maybe un-politically correct. (Aria Int 1: Line 383)

Stacy talked about TA as a place of meaning making where she felt free to make mistakes. She described TA:

>[I]t’s such an open environment it’s a place that you don’t need to be worried about making mistakes or using the wrong kind of language or something like that because it’s kind of generally accepted that people know that you’re not trying to put anyone down or hurt someone on purpose. You’re just trying to grasp meaning for yourself. (Stacy Int 1: Line 768)

These excerpts illustrate how youths defined aspects of their membership as learners and the YGM as a place of learning. They spoke to the value of a place where they could engage in social practices and relationships that generated learning, which was oftentimes messy.

Youths talked about the ways that their participation at TA took them out of their “comfort zone” and challenged them to grow in unique ways. Aliza described the group as:

>It is very chill. I feel like I really enjoy learning with that group of people just because it expanded my comfort zone in a way where the room was, you know, I didn’t know some of these people which is very new for me. (Aliza Int 1: Line 355)

I asked Sarah if she felt like TA had shaped her future and she spoke to a similar experience as Aliza that resulted in her learning that there are others out that think and feel the same way that she does. Sarah told this story about the YGM:

>I think it’s the first peer group, like I’ve said, that there were others out there like me, or just the really cool dialogue you get and just like different people and it’s the first time I’ve kind of gone out and done that on my own. I didn’t know anyone going in to it; it was at the suggestion of a co-worker, but still, I think, outside of my comfort zone. (Interview Line 997)

The young people spoke about TA and the YGM as an experience outside of their “comfort zones” as a valuable aspect of their participation because of the unique learning it generated.

Alongside and sometimes within their stories of appreciation for TA as a community, participants expressed dissatisfaction and unfulfilled desires about TA and the YGM as a
community. One criterion for membership that TA has is that participants must be “youth-identified.” This notion of youth and “youth identified” was a contentious thread that wove through Brenda’s stories. He negotiated the categorical definition of youth in order to gain access to this community. At the beginning of our interview, Brenda wanted to clarify this aspect of his participation. He stated:

Brenda: I’m really uncomfortable with the term “youth identified”
Kristen: OK
Brenda: I’m also really uncomfortable with the term “youth”
Kristen: Ok
Brenda: I just don’t really, I’ve never identified as youth
Kristen: //Oh, ok//
Brenda: //to be honest like, even when I fell into the classic definition//
Kristen: //Yeah, ok//
Brenda: //of youth. It was just something I never identified with.
Kristen: Ok
Brenda: I don’t know why. Um, and so with me, I don’t know, I consider myself to be young, but I don’t consider myself to be like a child, but I don’t consider myself to be old.

(Brenda Int 1: Line 19-31)

Brenda explained that he did not agree with “youth” as a concept and that he never in his life identified as a “youth.” Implicit within his explanation is a critique of traditional definitions of adolescence/youth as transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. He described having a “visceral reaction” (Brenda Int 1: Line 68) to being “youth identified” because it was contrary to his lived experience, which is central to sociological constructions of youth.

When I asked Amanda about her role within the group, she spoke about her mixed feelings about TA as a community:

I’m becoming more comfortable with the group ‘cos we’ve seen each other a couple more times now. Even though the meetings are pretty sporadic. ‘Cos it’s once a month so it’s very, like, the relationship building process is very slow and unlike any other groups that I’ve been a part of. And plus people come and go sometimes like, some people are there and some people are not there. So, it’s definitely, like, that sense of community is not as strong as I expected it to be. (Amanda Int 1: Line 897)
Sarah echoed Amanda’s experiences, “I think that we’ve all been just dipping into different areas. I don’t feel like a cohesiveness around this project” (Interview Line 301). This idea that more frequent contact, activities, and engagement would enhance their relationships with each other and the creation of the community was another strong thread across the data. Although the youths expressed a desire for these things they simultaneously told stories about their lives and schedules that made this desire seem impossible. These young people were juggling intense schedules that hindered their participation at TA from being what they “wished “ it could be. This seems to illustrate both a contestation of and compliance with the neoliberal value of productivity that contributed to youths’ peripheral participation.

5.3.2 Evolving roles and relationships. Lave and Wenger (1991) explained that, in a community of practice, roles are a way of engaging, rather than a structure of engagement. They elaborated that membership involves an interactive process of taking on multiple and simultaneous roles—oldtimer and newcomer—that imply different responsibilities, relations, and interactions. Of central importance to this work are youths’ stories about their relationships and roles within the YGM and TA community. The youths, as newcomers, talked about their evolving roles and relationships with the oldtimers and their peers as a source of continued motivation and commitment. For some, that meant leaving TA and for others it entailed focusing on their personal goals in respect to their participation.

The young people talked about the importance of oldtimers in creating safe spaces—or the community of practice—as a model to which they aspire, and as essential to their learning. Through their stories they defined “safe space” as a place of learning where they felt comfortable enough to take risks because they trusted and believed the best of each other. For Stacy, the oldtimers primary role was establishing the group as a collaborative and safe space. She explained:
Having good coordinators is kind of what helps make the group so comfortable and open. So, yeah, I would say that we have had really great coordinators, ’cos without that kind of initial interaction and introduction to the group I don’t think it would be what it is now. (Stacy Int 1: Line 318)

Aliza talked about Veronica’s role in creating a learning space, “Veronica did a really good job at making sure there was space for all of us. Especially when we were learning about really intense topics. I feel like everyone had the space to talk, that’s really important” (Aliza Int 1: Line 951).

Access to safe space, then, became a value that the oldtimers prioritized and modeled for the newcomers at the monthly meetings and workshop facilitations. One way that the oldtimers apprenticed newcomers to create safe spaces was by creating “community agreements” at the outset of every workshop (see Figure 5.11). The newcomers, youth volunteers, actively took up safe space as a value over time.

![Community Agreement Created in a Workshop](image)

**Figure 5.11 Community Agreement Created in a Workshop**

The youths talked about the experiential learning that took place at TA and how that influenced the way they thought about their roles both within the group and as workshop facilitators. Amanda talked about learning facilitation skills by shadowing Veronica. “I did those
workshops every single day with Veronica and she’s *just so*, such an *amazing* facilitator and she’s *so flexible* she just like changed when she saw the audience we had” (Amanda Int1: Line 1067).

Brenda had contrary experiences with Veronica as the oldtimer. Continuing the negative thread regarding his age, he told this story about facilitating with Veronica:

> One time there was this weird, awkward experience that Veronica and I had …We were at B- [high school] doing a workshop and it came around to discussing, like *the line*. TA is a group of *youth*, she says, working with youth around issues of blahblahblah. And then she turned to me and said, in front of the whole class: we might not all look like we’re youth, but we’re about the same age. And it was this really weird moment of like: why did you even say that? Like, what was that about? And I felt really awkward. (Interview Line 1136)

Brenda was describing an exchange that took place at the beginning of a workshop when Veronica was working to create a safe space by pointing out their similar “youth” status. This highlights the inherent contradiction of the notion of “safe space,” which is that there is no singular definition of safe space because what is safe for some will inevitably be unsafe for others. Later, Brenda also expressed his appreciation for Veronica and Hermione in creating an inclusive and enjoyable environment. He explained:

> And so that [training] weekend was awesome because we had kind of created a space where at least I felt comfortable to blunder through it. And I do really think that that was because of the hard work of Veronica and Hermione [ed coordinators] I think they did a really good job. And plus everybody was able to contribute their knowledge. (Brenda Int 1: Line 799)

Brenda clearly articulated the ways that he felt in/excluded and un/safe, as well as the ways in which he valued and learned from oldtimers, which were not always pleasant experiences. A significant moment in Brenda’s participation took place when he addressed his issue with the “youth” categorization with Hermione, which is discussed more thoroughly in his narrative in Chapter Six. Given the positive conversation he had with Hermione, Brenda felt more connected to TA and continued to facilitate after the YGM was over. His story is an example of the inherently dynamic and social nature of communities and the central role of relationships in the ongoing negotiation of community.
The young people narrated their membership by talking about their relationships with their peers and the group as a whole. Veronica described the YGM group as: “incredibly keen, super well-educated and really exceptional learners, like, [they] pick up things very quickly and are also really emotionally intelligent. Like, [they] feel compelled to be involved” (Veronica Int 1: Line 247). When I asked Veronica what she thought about the relationships amongst the YGM group she responded, “I think the thing that I notice with the YGM is that they all have their own things going on and they're so embedded in their own lives” (Veronica Int 1: Line 568). This is a simple example of how one’s membership to multiple intersecting communities and the constant state of busyness influences participation.

Aliza articulated how her learning occurred through her participation in social practices and relationships:

It takes a special group to understand that kind of thing [themes of oppression] together and so I really value that kind of relationships with people because it, anytime I have that kind of conversation with somebody, for me, it builds a kind of connection with them. (Aliza Int 1: Line 382).

Building connections and relationships were Aliza’s key values. TA and the YGM became a community of practice for her because the social practices enabled her to build the kind of relationships she valued. Brenda noted that being able to build relationships with the YGM group was a fun and valuable part of his experience at TA. He explained:

**Kristen:** Can you tell me a little bit more, maybe a story that would illustrate what TA means to you?
**Brenda:** Ok, this is not gonna answer your question at all, but what I really enjoy about it has been meeting the other people on the team despite the fact that I am so bad with names and I still can’t remember most of their names, but they’re really really fun people. (Brenda Int 1: Line 757-764)

I asked Sarah how she would describe TA to someone who knew nothing about it and she answered, “It’s people who either are aware, or are really interested in becoming aware and then through that spreading the awareness to their peers” (Sarah Int 1: Line 196). Sarah spoke about the
YGM and workshops as powerful encounters of like-minded people that shared values regarding combating oppression and working towards a more socially just world.

Significantly, when I asked the participants about their identities and relationships with the group many of them commented on the difficulty of building deeper relationships with their peers that extended beyond TA. Elia said, “I wanted to make connections with other volunteers as well, but it’s kind of hard I think because we do have monthly meetings, but not much time to get to know each other at a deeper level” (Elia Int 1: Line 809). When I asked Amanda about her role in the YGM group, she explained that she felt that building relationships took more time than she was used to. When I asked her why she thought that was so, she replied that she wasn’t sure, but thought it was because everyone was so busy. Amanda’s description of her relationships mirrored how she talked about her learning at TA, which illustrated a mismatch between her learning expectations and her actual experiences. Later, Amanda elaborated upon her learning that it: “goes back to how, just how confusing this is, I feel, and I don’t know if I’ll ever figure it out” (Amanda Int 1: Line 1424). Brenda talked about the impact of his age and the conflict he had with TA around being “youth identified” as situating him on the periphery of the YGM.

All of the young people spoke about the group and each other affectionately and appreciatively. They all spoke of a sense of kinship that generated feelings of safety and understanding. Their narratives of participation included stories about their peers and the specialness of the group, which they described as unique and expanding their “comfort zones.” Across all of the data were stories of a shared value of access to “safe spaces,” such as the YMG, where they were able to take risks in order to learn and grow together. Through their stories, the participants told how their histories contributed to their motivations and aspirations that hinged around their ideal of social justice.
Youths talked about themselves and the roles they engaged in and transformed within the group. When asked about their roles within the group many of the youths talked about their identities and how those translated to the YGM. Stacy noted her role as being the “goofy nerdy one” (Stacy Int 1: Line 239). Elia narrated herself as someone who is organized and detail oriented, she explained that she wanted to “make sure that the answers that we give to the students are accurate, right? That we’re not sharing a different number (laugh), yeah, attention to detail” (Elia Int 1: Line 854). Hermione described her role and relationship with the YGM as:

Hermione: Some of these youth in the YGM Program are older than me
Kristen: Yes
Hermione: So yeah, I think that that’s really cool (Slight laugh)
Kristen: How does it feel?
Hermione: When I’m, like, we have our monthly gatherings I don’t really feel like I’m leading, or I kind of don’t want to be.
Kristen: Mhm
Hermione: When I co-facilitate with the volunteers I really, I do just feel like … we’re a couple of friends going and facilitating
...
Hermione: I can’t speak to their experience with that, but for me I do feel like I am with a group of my peers and
Kristen: //Mhm//
Hermione: //and like we’re doing this together
Kristen: Yeah.
Hermione: and definitely see it as, like, don’t see that hierarchy, I don’t feel that.
(Hermione Int 1: Line 1978-2004)

In this excerpt, Hermione, the second oldtimer of the YGM, clarified how her desires and actions contributed to her narrative of the role oldtimer, which was grounded in her value of egalitarianism. When I asked Verity about her role with the YGM group she described herself as a role model. She explained:

I’m not the oldest in the group, but I do feel sometimes like a little bit of a, not a mentor, but I like kind of helping to guide the conversation help clarify things for people you know, in meetings and that kind of thing. And then also I felt very comfortable doing the workshops. I didn’t feel super challenged by the idea of facilitating with a classroom and that kind of thing. It was something that I went into thinking like: I can do this really well. I guess for some of the people that were a little bit more hesitant I think I was able to role model a little bit. (Verity Int 1: Line 274)
Verity’s story illustrates the fluidity and sociality of roles; although she was a newcomer to TA, she felt like an oldtimer in some of the relationships and practices of the YGM. Over time, the young people built relationships with each other through their participation and membership. They each took on roles of supporting and challenging each other during their time together. While it is clear that many of the participants wanted deeper relationships, the relationships they did have were meaningful in ways that enabled them to feel confident, safe, challenged, and in solidarity even when they were not physically together.

The participants’ stories about their learning as participation at TA were situated along an activist trajectory. Each of their activist trajectories and the meanings generated through them were unique; they overlapped and diverged in interesting ways. A key element of membership for the YGM group was their commitment to social justice through their activist trajectories. The stories the young people told about what social justice meant to them linked back to Kelly et al.’s (2004) definition of teaching for social justice with the central concept of “taking a stand.” Their definition of “taking a stand” encompassed both the landscape of consciousness and action through their emphasis on embodied experience. Thinking about youths’ narratives of learning as an activist trajectory attends to the ways their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and ideals contributed to their desire to take action towards social justice (Bruner, 2004). Brenda placed value on action, such as registering dissent about a particular issue, rather than the outcome or effects. Sarah linked social justice to “awareness and education” and explained that it would look like “free healthcare for all, um… no -isms like, it's kind of the ideal, social justice to me is like, ideals that we're just working towards, but we probably will never attain” (Sarah Int 1: Line 478). In her description of social justice, Elia focused on critical analysis of society as a means of “freeing ourselves from social expectations” (Elia Int 1: Line 1018) and that this “freeing” could reduce oppression for all social
groups. Aria talked about social justice as a dynamic process, and explained that she was currently focusing on self-reflexivity and inquiry “as a means to kind of improve, like, society” (Aria Int 1: Line 789). For Stacy, social justice was about “working towards creating a world where everyone, no matter what their story is, where we can all get along and peacefully co-exist and um, really be a community” (Stacy Int 1: Line 438). TA and the YGM became a community where they pursued their shared goal of a more socially just world by engaging in and transforming social practices whereby they built relationships that enabled them to learn from one another.

5.4 Summary

TA and the YGM, as a local place of practice, aimed to create the conditions for learning and potential conscientization. Oldtimers apprenticed newcomers—the YGM group—to become activist educators as workshop facilitators on various social and environmental justice issues. TA’s workshops aimed to get participants to critically reflect on particular issues and make linkages between the micro and macro levels of influence whereby they became empowered to imagine and create more socially and environmentally just communities. In a pay it forward fashion, TA trained youth volunteers as activist educators—workshop facilitators—to engage workshop participants in a process of consciousness raising that entailed self and social change. Additionally, TA also supported youth volunteers’ divergent activist trajectories through a wide-range of activities, including: facilitation training and skill building, mentorship, monthly meetings to learn about and participate in various social justice topics and activities, and youth-driven creative action projects.

The data presented here illustrates the ways that participants described themselves in relation to YGM as an evolving community of practice. Their stories of participation overlap, intersect, and mutually influence their stories of membership and vice versa. Think Again, as a local place of practice, created the conditions that enabled the YGM to become a community of practice for some of the youths, but in a more distal than proximal way. In many ways, the participants articulated that
learning as participation in social change was a challenging project that necessitated solidarity and community. Even though the relationships they created through their participation did not progress to a more personal level, the relationships they created provided feelings of comfort and support that facilitated their learning along an activist trajectory.

The young people depicted themselves as active learners who were in the process of becoming activists. Think Again was a unique locale, a place for pause, on each of these young people’s activist trajectories. For some, it was the beginning of their activist trajectories and for others it was an important juncture for deepening their knowledge, identity, and values as activists. Central to their participation was the participants’ exploration and negotiation of the meaning of an activist identity. Their stories were grounded in social justice as an ideal and a motivating force, which guided each of their unique activist trajectories towards various forms of action. All of the youths talked about TA as a particular learning opportunity that would benefit their trajectories. Specifically, all of the youths spoke about their participation at TA as a catalyst for self and social change, which is integral to any activist trajectory. I brought together the young people’s stories about their participation and membership to construct this narrative of learning as an activist trajectory. Reflecting the sociocultural framework of this study, the stories that shape this co-constructed narrative of learning as an activist trajectory do not imply an agreed upon, singular, or fixed narrative, rather the meaning that grounds this narrative is inherently social, situated, and dynamic.
Chapter 6: Participation Narratives: Constructing “Politics of Possibility”

The focus of this chapter is the micro level of interaction and, specifically, narratives of participation that I crafted to describe participation at Think Again (see Figure 6.1). The micro contextual layer renders visible the ways in which youth encountered and negotiated the macro and local levels of influence through their participation. Of particular interest at this level are the mediational means (such as artifacts, semiotic systems, relationships) afforded to youths’ through their participation. Extending the example provided in Chapter Five, the role of funding led to the creation of the mentor component of the YGM and the micro level of analysis attends to how the participants experienced the mediational means afforded by the mentorship.

This chapter draws on the data corpus to address two research questions: 1) How does youths’ participation at Think Again support and/or challenge the broader narratives of youth?; and 2) How do participants narrate their lived experiences and participation at TA? This analysis was guided by the following question: To what extent did participation in TA create a politics of possibility (Holland & Gómez, 2013) and catalyze youths’ emerging knowledge, identity, and values as activists? A central aim of this analysis was to examine the ways in which youth actively constructed stories about their current activist trajectories and possible social futures within a framework of participation. These co-constructed stories bring to the fore the places of possibility that emerged through the intersections of neoliberalism and youths’ participation.
Although there were 10 participants in this study, the narratives included in this chapter were generated from my interpretations of the experiences of five core participants. These five participants were highly engaged in TA through the graduation, participated in all of the forms of data generation, and worked on a creative action project. A sixth narrative was constructed for Hermione, the educational coordinator who joined the YGM group at the start of this research project. All six youth narratives were constructed from my interpretations across all of the data generated with each participant.

It is important to note that although the interview transcripts were presented to each participant, the personal narratives were not co-constructed with the participants and, thus, represent my interpretation of their participation, stories, and narratives. I maintained the informal tone and loose grammatical structure of the youths’ speech in order to provide a sense of their voices. The narratives are told from the first person perspective of the participant. Each participation narrative has two sections: a description of their respective CAP and their narratives. The participation narratives are bookended with images. Immediately following the second bookend image is an interpretation of the analysis that is presented in this chapter in the form of participation narratives.
6.1 Narrating Youth Participation

The following narratives are arranged chronologically based on the creative action projects (CAP) Sarah and Aliza did a collaborative CAP. I described their CAP followed by Sarah’s narrative and then Aliza’s. Elia’s CAP and narrative is third and Verity’s is fourth. Next is Brenda’s narrative; he did not complete his CAP, but did an elicitation interview about it as a work in progress. The last narrative is Hermione’s, the educational coordinator, and focuses on her experiences with TA.

6.1.1 Sarah and Aliza’s creative action project: US: Un/limiting ourSelves. Sarah and Aliza worked together to create a public art event for their creative action project. Sarah took the lead in planning and carrying out the event and I encouraged her to collaborate with Aliza based on the overlap in their goals and desire to create public art. We had planning meetings, attended various networking meetings, gathered materials, built the mural structure, and worked together to provide ongoing encouragement and support throughout the process.

Sarah negotiated a free spot for the art project at a city-sponsored arts and crafts fair that was happening in her dream locale, a public plaza in the Central West End, a predominantly LGBTQ neighbourhood located on the west side of downtown. At a planning meeting Aliza, Sarah, and I created an invitation and social media post that described the event as follows:

**US: Un/limiting ourSelves**

Our goal is to work against the limited identities that society sanctions and assigns. Come join us: write, draw, paint, and make wearable art to express our many selves; and work to create a web of continuously shifting identities! (Reflexive Journal)

We set up the US project on the Saturday of the arts and crafts fair and were there from 12-6 PM. The event had three distinct components: 1) an invitation to reflect on identity by writing identity statements on muslin that began with “I am…” that Sarah and I later sewed together to create an

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9 I use Arial font for all cultural artifact data
evolving web of identities and hung in the plaza; 2) an invitation to interpret and visualize identity on a large mural structure; and 3) an invitation to create anti-oppressive wearable art as buttons.

Sarah applied for a grant from a city youth agency for materials and art supplies. Although she received positive feedback she was not awarded the funds she requested. We were able to carry out the event with minimal support from TA and donations from local businesses and organizations. In her initial grant proposal, Sarah proposed:

What I am proposing is simple, yet has the potential to demark lasting effects at multiple levels of society – starting with the individual and eventually garnering systemic/institutional attention. I want to spur dialogue with as many individuals as possible, on the subject of our individuality. That is, I want to collect as many ‘I AM’ statements as possible, and display them for as many people as possible. … The hope would be that this launch day would draw an array of Vancouver residents and visitors of all ages. I am motivated build on the effectiveness of Public Space and Art in general as forces that inherently spur discourse. As interactions occur by participating or inquiring members of the public, their identity will be validated and we will work towards compiling a new library of accepted identities. (Reflexive Journal)

Sarah and Aliza talked extensively about their different goals and purposes for their combined project. Sarah was interested in the notion of “passing,” defined as those identities that individuals are prescribed and forced into by social norms and expectations that do not recognize the fluid, multiple, and contentious nature of identity. Although there is power and privilege in being able to “pass,” Sarah was primarily interested in the negative consequences of passing. Aliza was primarily interested in using wearable art as a tool for anti-oppression and community building. They came together in their desire to engage the public in dialogue and art about anti-oppression, build community and challenge the status quo.
6.1.2 Narrating Sarah. People have told me that I’ve always been somewhat intuitive and socially aware. I remember being like six or seven and meeting some of my dad’s dates and being like, she’s kind of…whatever and my dad being like, wow, you are right. It’s kind of funny, but I’ve just always been interested in people and I pay attention to them. My older brother and I used to play with Legos for hours and if I happened across the coveted piece I would always give it to him. Making him happy was way more satisfying than building the best castle or whatever. Compassion is so important and I work hard to treat others compassionately. I think that is part of what our world is missing.

I am a learner and I seek out opportunities that will help me grow and learn. It is what fuels me. I love to talk to people and engage with people and I have this drive to connect with as many people as possible. We did this personality career survey at work and I was highly inquisitive green. And it’s so true: I want to know! I want to know all the time and I want to be as informed as possible. And sometimes being informed is about being able to be professional or feel confident.
In order for me to feel confident, especially when facilitating, I need to prepare and cover all of the bases.

I am also a perfectionist, to a fault. I basically killed myself during undergrad to the point where I was diagnosed with a chronic medical condition. I’m trying to learn from that and to be honest about what’s right for me, rather than doing what looks good on a resume or whatever. That’s why I’m not writing the Graduate Record Exam or taking an extra course. I want to enjoy the summer as much as I can. But, I’m still working full-time, volunteering and preparing my grad school applications, so there’s that.

I know I’m lucky to have a job even close to my field of interest, but it’s an administrative position which is kind of soul sucking. I work for a large non-profit organization that is a resource center and provides a wide array of services to diverse populations. Mainly my job consists of bookkeeping, scheduling, and processing paperwork. I wanted to do more facilitation work at my job, but I needed experience. My co-worker encouraged me to join TA and I was like, but their workshops are during work hours and she told me that work would be flexible. And while that was true it still didn’t help me get to the workshops. I just couldn’t afford to take a full or half day off to facilitate. For me TA and facilitating was really about pushing myself into weird places I never thought I would or could, like public speaking and facilitating in some form. I never saw myself in that role.

I’m very much in my own head so TA has really been about building my own self-awareness. Right now I’m practicing being honest about what I know and don’t know and what I’m good at and not good at. I want to educate myself and reach out to other people that maybe don’t have an in-depth knowledge, but don’t want to admit it. There’s a difference between saying and doing. I’m just at the point where I’m starting to do. I’m becoming an advocate. The YGM group and TA was a space for me to be around people that share my curiosity and love of learning. This is the first
time I’ve been part of a group where we have these kinds of conversations and just be in a group of likeminded people. I got the sense from most of our group that we all just wanna know more about diversity and meet new and different people.

I don’t feel like I’ve been able to commit as much as I had thought I would or wanted to. Just in terms of like work and availability and timing. So that’s made me feel a bit removed and distant from the YGM group. I’m still glad I did it. I definitely learned and grew from the experience so I’m happy. I ended up getting a lot of facilitation experience at work because of my participation, which was really my main purpose for joining TA. I got to co-facilitate a group that was focused on employment-related skills for “at risk” young people and once that group was over I was allowed to co-facilitate a group on social entrepreneurship. Both of these were great experiences that I feel good about and that I think will help me towards my goal of becoming a counselor.

To me social justice is about ideals that we’re just working towards, but will probably never attain. I’m really excited about raising awareness and just prompting people to think about things differently. To be like: this is cool and it’s ok to talk about. I think that’s the only way we’re gonna make diversity and tolerance acceptable is by educating ourselves and modeling. I think TA is great exposure to that and then showing and teaching that kind of tolerance in schools and with younger kids.

My creative action project was very personal and it was a way for me to not just think it, but move towards expressing it. The goal was to work against the identities that society sanctions and assigns. We (Aliza, Kristen and I) created an event called, US: Un/limiting ourSelves. I’m really interested in the idea of “passing” which comes from the idea of being able to pass as the dominant race, sex, gender and so on. To me, passing implies failure because it means we are “trying to be” and fit into narrowly defined “norm or acceptable (passable)” identities, rather than just being. When
we are trying to pass we are reinforcing yet another binary or criteria in the multitude of prescribed identities. I wish that we could stop trying TO BE and we each just WERE.

We set up a space at an Arts and Craft Market and invited people to write their identity statements on pieces of muslin and then put it in a jar and afterwards they could reflect and paint on the mural structure we had and/or make buttons with Aliza. I wanted to reach as many people as possible and I just envisioned like passers-by either being like: “Oh, it’s just another bunch of those activist groups or whatever” or really kind of straight ahead people approaching it and being intrigued, even if they’re not going to contribute to the art.

I choose this journalllll, (see Figure 6.3) which is very emmmpty, as the artifact that represents my CAP because it speaks a lot to my, like, I think when I first brought this idea to Kristen and I was like, I’m all about ideas and abstract thoughts and I am always thinking and I’m very insular and I never put anything into action. That has been every journal I’ve ever started. Despite knowing how cathartic it can be for me and how I love writing and I love poetry, but I never make the time for it as strictly as I would school work or whatever. This one is the only one where I kind of was like: “don’t put guilt on yourself for not filling the pages.” And so I have three or four things in here, but they’re super meaningful. Tying it in to this project, like, this is the first time that, with a little bit of encouragement from Kristen, that I put something into action and I think that’s really, for a lot of us at Think Again that may be the harder part for our personalities; that shift to actually doing it. I think a lot of people were like: “I can’t believe I could do that, you know?”

I was reflecting on the CAP a bit and there were stages along the way that felt super empowering. Getting rejected for the grant and from certain people, but then getting connected to others and meeting with the city and even building the structure all felt empowering. It didn’t feel as good on the day of the event. I thought that maybe once we hung up the web of identity statements (see Figure 6.2) I’d have more of a feeling of success or accomplishment. What I did get from
stringing up the statements was that people who came by wanted to contribute and that made me think that maybe if we had done the project in a different setting, like by ourselves or not in such a kind of contrived setting of an arts and crafts market where people are more focused on consuming, rather than creating, then maybe we would have been received differently and I would have felt differently. It just needs more. It needs a little bit more confidence and development and a different setting and... I compare it to what I think a public art installment is “supposed to” look like. I definitely have that “supposed to” perfectionism thing. I mean, I don’t even know if there’s a standard for public art installations, but there was something that I can’t put my finger on that was missing. The big thing for me was that this was the first time, with a little bit of encouragement, I put something into action and I think that’s really what I got from Think Again.

I can’t really travel long distances at the moment with my medical issue and in a lot of ways I feel hindered from totally growing into my potential. Someday I’ll go and spread the dogma elsewhere: self-awareness!!! TA gave me an opportunity to gain some teaching and group therapy-type experience, which was so valuable because I wanted to see if I was cut out for it. I’m applying for my Master’s degree for 2015 and I really hope I get in. I want to work with young people and marginalized populations. My dream is to eventually have my own private practice.
The narrative of Sarah’s participation was centered on learning as a process of self and social transformation. Through her participation, Sarah constructed reifying, endorsable, and significant stories about herself (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Sarah shared the stories her family tells about her as having always been attentive and compassionate. A survey at work endorsed her inquisitive and curious nature. Her membership to the YGM as a likeminded group of people who wanted to learn, grow, and spread awareness was significant. Sarah told stories that are reifying, endorsable, and significant stories about herself that support her journey towards actualizing her desired identity as a mental health counselor. This also brings to the fore how Sarah’s participation at TA was meaningful as it contributed to her desired social future (O’Connor & Allen, 2010).
Sarah’s activist trajectory was one of personal growth and raising awareness towards a goal of acceptance and appreciation of diversity, which also reflected her values. TA was a significant juncture in Sarah’s activist trajectory where she constructed knowledge about social issues and methods of action that shifted her from a place of thinking to doing and becoming an advocate. While she narrated her participation as peripheral, she attributed her membership to the YGM, as a community of practice, as central for negotiating the inherent risks involved in her shift towards action (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Sarah’s CAP was personal and reflected her experiences as an individual with a chronic condition who frequently “passes” as able-bodied. She explained that passing can be applied to any individual on the periphery of society that feels pressure to try to make it in the accepted center. For Sarah, passing always implied failure because it denies one’s unique and dynamic “beings,” and limits people through a binary of normative/dominant—other identities. This parallels some of what Sfard and Prusak (2005) referred to as designated identities that are “institutional narratives,” which are particularly difficult to alter (p. 18). As a metaphor for her participation, Sarah’s CAP was about creating a space where people could “be” their many and multiple selves; or in Sfard and Prusak’s (2005), terms they could co-construct and change designated identities.

Sarah’s participation narrative reflects the nuanced influence of neoliberalism on youth participation. While Sarah’s motivations for joining TA were driven by her ideals of social justice and a love of learning she was also driven to participate given academic and work goals. Also evident in Sarah’s narrative are the burdens of responsibility that Sarah has taken on for her own and society’s well-being and success. The neoliberal ethos of individuality, competitiveness, and achievement had severe consequences for Sarah and she developed a chronic medical condition during her undergraduate career because she “pushed herself too much.” Through a market-focused discourse lens, TA was a volunteer opportunity that would make Sarah a competitive
graduate school applicant. Through her participation she also gained evidence of her facilitation skills that enabled her to successfully acquire a desired role in her workplace. At the same time, these neoliberal influences intersected with the social practices and relationships of TA that generated “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) and for Sarah this was especially evident in her CAP.

Through her CAP, Sarah’s participation became valuable as it generated a deeply personal process for her that was about engaging with others and working towards greater social connections. Sarah was initially motivated to join TA for individual gain and promotion in her workplace, which she accomplished prior to her CAP. The CAP was a distinct shift in Sarah’s participation narrative whereby she actively embodied social justice, in Kelly et al.’s (2004) terms, and became an activist. This is an inherent contradiction to neoliberal ethos and exemplifies how places like TA are important because of these generative moments.
6.1.3 Narrating Aliza. I grew up in a suburb of Vancouver, but now I live in a house in East Vancouver with a bunch of my friends. I am an only child and I have an interesting relationship with my parents. We don’t always agree or see eye to eye, but I know that they want me to be happy and succeed in life. I have always had to step up and advocate for myself. My mom and I are always able to come together when we boil it down to what I need in order to be healthy and happy.

I was 12 when I came out. There were no real safe spaces for queer youth in my high school. No clubs or organizations or anything like that. I had to seek them out. I actually made my parents drive me to and from the city so I could attend meetings at a Queer Youth Organization. I, like, demanded it because I knew I needed it. I realized that I had no queer influences in my life and that was really important for me. I feel like if I’m not connected to that community, then I’m not
connected to that identity. The queer community has been probably been the biggest influence in my life.

For me everything comes down to community; it’s a value, but it is also a belief, a practice, and a goal. Art and activism are two of my favorite things. I love to paint and it is one way that I take care of myself. I did this painting (see Figure. 6.4) over the summer while I was feeling kind of down and really stressed out. I’m really happy with how it turned out. I am passionate about anti-oppression work. I believe that we can make the world a better, safer place by creating connections and community. Wearing art is a way that I enact my identities. It’s how I create safe spaces and live anti-oppression. Say I’m on the bus and there’s an act of racism, but it’s not safe for me to speak up or act. I can still create solidarity and allyship by wearing a button or something that states my values. That person might see my button and that connection happens even without me saying or doing anything. It’s like, almost a quiet way of supporting the person that’s getting shit on. I love rainbows, I loved them even before the whole queer thing, and I wear rainbows every day. Maybe a kid that isn’t out yet sees me and then they know that I’m a safe person for them.

I’m always looking for opportunities that help me grow. That was how I thought about TA. Veronica was also at TA and I really looked up to and admired her as an artist. I actually didn’t know Veronica at first I just would look up poetry on the Internet and just listen to her and then I met her in person when she was releasing her book. That’s the great thing about having local artists, is you get to meet them and you get to actually build connection with someone that inspires you on a different level.

It was really great to work with Sarah and Kristen on the US event for our creative action project. I had so much going on with school, other volunteer commitments and my personal life at the time that I was kind of stressed and burned out by that point and it was really good to have somebody else take the lead. I knew I could do the button-making project; I do that in my everyday
life. My part of the US event was making anti-oppressive buttons and is a piece of a bigger project that I’m working towards. I want to keep building on it and make a collective online database of button designs and templates. That way it wouldn’t be just my ideas and designs, but it would be what a collective of people have to say about anti-oppression. Then I can make a bunch of buttons and give them out for free and people can wear them. When people wear their statements, they’re representing themselves and that’s a way to start conversations. The conversations are the most important part. That’s how I think we can make the world a safer place.

When I commit to something I really commit to it. I hate being late and I hate having to miss things even more. I wish that I could have gone to every single TA meeting, but that was just impossible. I’ve just been so busy that I only got to facilitate like, four workshops. I really wish I could have done more workshops because I really wanted to practice facilitating and get more comfortable doing that. I feel the same way about the CAP. Sarah was so passionate about the project and she did such an amazing job! I’m super happy with how it turned out, but I wish that I had felt better and had more energy to contribute to it. That’s why I choose the sap from the cherry trees that I collected that day for my cultural artifact (see Figure 6.5). I needed to take a lot of breaks throughout the day and I’d go pick the sap from the trees. I love that stuff, it is so beautiful, and it just instantly makes me feel better. Then I’d be ready to come back and help people make buttons.

When I think about the future, I think about what my community will look like. That’s always somewhere in my mind. So, I think about TA as a way to build connections and resources that will help my community. To me, a community is something that evolves and grows over time. It’s people that you care about and that care about you. It’s because of that care that you are able to accept, challenge, critique and question each other, but you do it from a place of compassion. My
community is the queer activist community and takes me how I am and also will have these tough conversations with me. I’ve built my community up over the years and it’s where I learn and grow.

I just think that if we did that more—listened and talked—we could really connect with people that are different than us. Just like when we go into classrooms with TA, we’re making connections with people not knowing their experiences, not knowing where they’re coming from, and not knowing what they bring to the table. We just assume the best and open ourselves up to new people. I think that’s a cool thing about TA; it builds my knowledge on certain topics and I get to hear other people’s stories. So, I hear their stories and by listening I build connections. Those connections then add to my community.

I learned a lot from putting on workshops and going through TA and the TA training. Those things are not just for workshops – they were so important for our CAPs and other stuff. You don’t have to be facilitating in front of a classroom to use facilitation skills. You can just use them in a one-on-one conversation with somebody. That brings it back to connections and community. Everything is connected and for me community is the connector (laughs).
The narrative of Aliza’s participation was centered upon her values of connection and creating community. Aliza was 12 years old when she came out as gay and advocated for herself and demanded access to queer influences and resources. Aliza told reifying and significant stories about her actual identities as an activist and artist (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Aliza was drawn to TA for two reasons. First was the opportunity to work with Veronica. Building a relationship with Veronica was one way that Aliza could gain access to a potential zone of proximal development and to a desired social future as an activist/artist. The second reason reflected how community was an ideal and a value for Aliza that underpinned her actions and behaviors. Aliza literally wore her identities and values on her rainbow sleeves, clothes, jewelry, and especially on her anti-oppressive buttons.

Aliza’s participation at TA was shaped by her experiences as an activist and membership to the queer community. The way Aliza talked about her CAP paralleled the way her participation in TA contributed to her activist trajectory, which had begun long before she joined TA. She was confident that she could do her CAP because it’s what she does in her daily life, but it was important in that it contributed to a bigger project. Similarly, her participation at TA contributed to her vision.
of a socially just world through a network of intersecting communities. She viewed her participation as valuable and meaningful because it provided resources and connections for her other valued social communities. Aliza’s participation narrative highlights the way that TA strengthened her other intersecting communities of practice, which were other activists groups, a parallel to Holland and Gómez’s (2013) call for broad social movements as a means to effect social change. For Aliza, TA generated “politics of possibility” whereby she broadened her activist community and included people from different communities with divergent social justice agendas.

![Image of a group of people in a meeting.](image)

**Figure 6.6 Elia and Colleague Introducing the Film “Double Happiness” at her CAP**

**6.1.4 Elia’s creative action project: Double Happiness: A free screening with post film discussion.** Elia drew on her relationships and memberships to other communities to implement her CAP and partnered with a women’s resource center and a cinema/film organization. She and a friend hosted a film screening and dialogue of the film *Double Happiness* (see Figure 6.6). *Double Happiness* was filmed in the 1994 in Vancouver and starred Sandra Oh as Jade. It is a coming of age story about a Chinese immigrant family and their daughter’s (Jade) struggle for bi-cultural identity, independence, and family values. Elia described the project in her email and Facebook invitation as follows:

> The main reason why I wanted to screen a film on the experience of Chinese Canadians is because I’m tired of seeing white-dominated movies and TV shows. I wanted to see something that better represented my identity and cross-cultural
experiences as a Chinese Canadian and give an opportunity for others to do the same. I hope the discussion to follow will allow for people to talk about some of the themes in the film as well as share their experiences (such as some of the joys and challenges) growing up as a Chinese or a person of colour in Canada. Finding a film like ‘Double Happiness’ that speaks to many of my experiences means a lot to me and I hope it will for you and others as well. (Reflexive Journal)

Elia saw the CAP as an opportunity for her to explore and share her personal experiences with others through film and dialogue.

About 20 people of various ages, cultures, and races attended the event. Elia gave the following prompt to the audience before starting the film: She gave us this prompt: “Think about how you’re feeling about what you’re seeing as you watch the movie” (Reflexive Journal). After the screening, Elia and her co-host organized the audience in a circle and facilitated a dialogue for about 30 minutes about the themes and issues brought up in the film.

6.1.5 Narrating Elia. I was born in Vancouver, but my parents are from China. I have a younger brother, but we are total opposites and don’t really get along. I went to China this past year and it was a really powerful experience. I realized that I have taken many things for granted in Vancouver such as ease of language (English), knowledge and familiarity with customs, and a sense of belonging, but also that I live in quite a Eurocentric city. It made me feel a bit more connected to my roots especially through my relationship with my cousin who taught me more about Chinese customs, values, and culture. Ever since that trip I feel more connected to the Chinese community, and I’ve been exploring things that are related to my Chinese culture.

I used to watch a lot of TV and read books and watch movies, and I didn’t see myself represented. There was a very narrow representation of what a girl should look like. The media representations that I saw were very Eurocentric, you know, white blonde girl with blue eyes, and if I did see Chinese girls or Chinese women they were a very stereotypical representation: small eyes and slim and all that.
When I was younger, I think in grade six, I actually wrote a fictional short story about this Chinese girl who lived with her grandmother in California. I wrote it from my own perspective and her views were similar to mine. This girl wanted to be popular, but she wasn’t because she was the only Chinese girl in the school. I wanted to fit in and be cool and be one of the white girls in the school because I thought they had it all. You know, they were popular and well liked, and I also wanted to be blonde and have blue eyes and have a white football player boyfriend. I didn’t really honor my own culture or cultural background. I think that was because I didn’t see myself anywhere.

It makes me sad that I wrote a story that didn’t honor my own culture and my own background because I should be proud of it. Instead I wanted to be this white girl with a white boyfriend named Tommy. I shared that story with my Gender Studies class in university, and I think I will share it throughout my life. It’s important and I think a lot of young girls of color can probably relate to it. I like the clip we use in workshop facilitations from the film Missrepresentation. There’s a line that really hits home for me: “You can’t be what you can’t see.” I grew up not seeing myself in any of the films, TV and media and that had a huge impact on how I viewed myself, which led to me ignoring my Chinese background and culture. I wasn’t conscious of that until much later in life and that is partly why I love analyzing media from a feminist perspective.

I first started thinking about social justice and activism during my Sociology 101 class in university. I loved it so much I ended up changing my major from business to Sociology with a minor in Gender Studies. That was a pretty big deal. My education has really empowered me to take a stand. I feel like I have a responsibility to stand up if something problematic is being said or, like, questioning people’s dialogue because I think if you don’t speak up you’re essentially agreeing with what the person is saying. When I don’t stand up, then I’m not living up to my values or using my education. Silence is consent.
I’ve always been really curious, and I’m a life-long learner. I am so passionate about social justice issues, that’s what I love to think about, talk about, and spend my time doing. For me, social justice is about deconstructing social norms that we see, hear, or experience so that we can free ourselves from social expectations that can be harmful and hurtful to different social groups. I believe in being the best person that I can be and that means making an impact in the community from my heart. That means relating to people because without connection you can’t really share and understand other peoples’ experiences and perspectives.

I was looking for opportunities to do some hands-on social justice work and maybe change the perception of gender representations. I really wanted to apply my social justice and anti-oppression knowledge and experiences and be a social agent of change. A couple years ago I went to a TA volunteer orientation meeting, but I didn’t join because of the time commitment and lack of structure. I was also really only interested in workshop facilitation but didn’t quite feel ready for it. Then when I heard about the YGM project this year and the cohort structure, I thought it was the perfect fit and I finally had enough time for it.

Part of the reason I joined TA was to help me decide what I want to do for a career. I wanted to some facilitation experience to see if that was something I could be good at and maybe something that I could do as a job in the future. I’m a bit of a perfectionist and a stickler for details. I found myself researching and checking the information and statistics we presented in the YGM workshops. I just wanted to make sure we were sharing accurate information. I would hate it if we were wrong, even if it was just an accident. I loved connecting with youth and creating a space to share their experiences, knowledge and thoughts on gender issues. I was so inspired by the things they brought to the discussion. The mentorship was also really amazing for me. I was able to develop a relationship with someone that I’ve admired and been interested in and I got to learn more about the work that she does.
I just wish I had more time to volunteer and to do more workshop facilitation. There were a lot of opportunities for me to sign up for workshops, but because of the lack of time and energy, I think I could have done more. I also really wanted to get to know the other volunteers and make good connections with them. That was kind of hard because we never had enough time to get to know each other at a deeper level.

I actually put that I am an activist on my LinkedIn and Facebook profiles. My tagline is: an activist from the heart…I want people to know that about me. I think that breaking down stereotypes and the discussions around gender stereotypes and media violence has really given me a stronger sense of identity. I really want to create change in my community. That’s partly why I did a film screening and dialogue for my CAP. I wanted it to be about my personal experience and I also wanted it to spark intercultural dialogue and understanding.

I selected two different artifacts as representations of my CAP: a picture of a yin yang and a copy of a letter I wrote to my father in Chinese. I thought about like, um, why I wanted to screen Double Happiness and a large part of it stemmed from my relationships and the conflicts within the relationship with my parents, especially my dad. I wanted to look for a film that I guess, represented the intergenerational, intercultural dynamics in that relationship when um, Chinese Canadian, or a child who was born and grew up in North American culture and has to mediate the tensions and the relationship with his or her traditional parents. I felt that I wanted to do something that spoke to my personal experiences for my creative action project. Yeah and this yin and yang symbol represents my relationship with my parents. I think through the film and through my personal reflection I’ve realized that um, though my parents and I are kind of opposites in terms of our values, experiences and our ways of thinking—so o the yin can be my parents, I guess, and like the yang can be me—we still are kind of interdependent on each other.
Even though I wanted it to be about my personal experience, it kind of caught me off guard at how emotional it was. It was really cool to see how my connections and networks really helped me plan and pull off this event. Even the flier was a collaborative effort and I’m really happy with how it turned out (see Figure 6.7). This also helped me realize that I do have a really great community even if I don’t see or talk to them on a regular basis. It was really nice to have friends and people from different ages and backgrounds there.

My CAP was a transformational experience, and I’m so grateful for this opportunity. I definitely grew and learned a lot through this process. I’m proud and happy with how it went. It actually spurred me to talk to my dad about our relationship. It got me thinking that maybe there should be a workshop to foster understanding between immigrant parents and their children. I’m still not sure what I want to do for a career, but I feel like TA really gave me an opportunity to learn more about myself and what I’m good at, which is really great. I’m thinking about going to teach English in China now that I know I can do the facilitator thing, and I really want to develop my Chinese identity more.
The narrative of Elia’s participation was grounded in her desire to apply her largely theoretical compassionate feminist activist identity to practice. Elia’s activist trajectory was about maintaining integrity with her actions and her academic knowledge, her identities as a feminist activist and her social justice values. TA was an opportunity for Elia to make a shift from thinking to doing. She told reifying and significant stories about her actual identity as an activist from the heart, which she endorsed through her communities on Facebook and LinkedIn (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Elia told stories about her cultural identity as a designated identity, as something that she was working on and wanted to develop.

Contrary to many of the participants’ experiences with their mentors, Elia had a very positive experience with her mentor. Elia had known of and admired her mentor prior to TA and requested to be matched with her. Veronica contacted the mentor and she agreed to the commitment. Elia

Figure 6.7 Flier from Elia’s Creative Action Project
was eager to learn from her mentor and was persistent about communicating and scheduling meetings with her. Elia viewed TA and in particular the facilitation and mentorship as an opportunity to explore possible social futures. In this way, it is clear to see TA as a context that was actively involved in the organizing work to enable access—only for some participants—to valued futures (O’Connor & Allen, 2010).

Unique to Elia’s participation narrative was how the mentorship component, as an example “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) emerged differently across the YGM group. Mentorship, when viewed as a “strategic maneuver” by TA reflected neoliberal values of sustainability and workforce preparation while simultaneously positioning them competitively for funding and resource opportunities. On the other hand, and in Elia’s case, the mentorship illustrated TA’s commitment to and attempt to build a larger activist community, “an us,” towards the goal of a broader social movement (Holland & Gómez, 2013, p. 146).

The film that Elia chose for her CAP was Double Happiness, a coming of age story about a young Chinese-Canadian woman and her challenges with her family and culture. Elia spoke about the significant impact of media on her identity as a young girl and how learning has provided her tools to de/re/construct those experiences. The CAP provided an opportunity for Elia to use her personal experience as a foundation for intercultural dialogue. Elia also used the CAP to advance her own identity work through her focus on cultural values and identity through her choice of film and topic. In Kelly et al.’s (2004) terms, Elia’s CAP was an example of “taking a stand” that included critical analysis, personal reflection, and direction action. The CAP and her participation at TA instigated a powerful shift in meaning of Elia’s activist and feminist identities as they intersected with her emerging cultural identity.
6.1.6 Verity’s creative action project: Let’s read-efine YA lit! Verity was inspired by the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign, which began as a Twitter campaign, and later included more social media forums, for diversity in children’s and young adult’s (YA) literature. The goal of the campaign was to call attention to the lack of diversity in children’s literature and create a larger movement to promote literature by and about diverse individuals. Verity contacted the folks at #WeNeedDiverseBooks for permission to use their resources, which they gave along with encouragement. She then partnered with the teen librarian at the public library and created her project, which included a workshop, book club, and possible extensions for social actions for their teen advisory committee that focused on diversity in young adult literature. Additionally, Verity created a list of books that included books by diverse authors and books about diverse characters that could be distributed at the various library branches and would be linked to the teen page of the library website.

Verity created an original outline for the workshop. Hermione and I met with her several times to provide support and encouragement and help refine the workshop. The workshop was structured around the following four objectives:

Objective 1. For the participants to gain a deeper understanding of diversity and why diverse representations are important
Objective 2. For participants to have a chance to share the impact that books have made on them, and understand how representation can affect how we relate to books and each other
Objective 3. For participants to gain an awareness of the systemic problems within the YA and Children’s Literature publishing industry
Objective 4. For participants to leave the workshop with a list of concrete ways that young people can take action on this issue and help to promote diverse books. (Reflexive Journal)

The book club component of the project was scheduled a week after the workshop where the teens would read and talk about their book of choice from Verity’s diverse book list (see Figure 6.8 of materials books for the book club and workshop). The library also created a web-based database with Verity’s book list in order make it a living resource that youth and folks could add to. One teen, the lead teen librarian, and I attended the workshop. Afterwards, we—the librarian, Verity and I—talked about the workshop and how well Verity did. We also discussed the lack of teen’s in attendance as an unforeseen effect of the teacher’s strike as the librarian explained that many of their teens had been attending alternative programs and activities to make up for missed school. Thus, the library had been uncharacteristically slow for September.

6.1.7 Narrating Verity. I was in grade five or six when I had my very problematic beginning in activism. I was inspired by those World Vision commercials on TV and felt so strongly that I needed to save the poor children of Africa! I decided to start a group at my school called, the acronym was KHPK, and it was Kids Helping Poor Kids. We held a pancake breakfast every year to raise money for the year, and so we would kind of just do that in one fell swoop. I kind of initiated it, but I really didn’t do a lot of the actual work that was required that was mostly my mom, but my name was on it. That was the first kind of time, and at the time people made like a really big deal about it. People made such a big deal of it, and I got interviewed in the newspaper.

After that I became the president of a comparable club at my high school that was called PAM, Political Awareness Movement. I became the president of that in grade 12 in addition to
directing a play, which was a really bad decision because at that time in my life I had no delegation skills. I would not trust people to like, do things; I was that person in your group project that would just do everything because they wouldn’t trust anyone else to do anything.

My first foray into activism is embarrassing, and I think about it a lot when I’m working in schools or with young people. I wish some teacher or adult would have sat me down and said: Look, this is why what you are doing is wrong, it’s bad. I kinda feel a responsibility to do that now. To explain to kids the ethics behind issues and why certain types of activism and campaigns are actually wrong. It makes me want to put up warning signs on how to not have a white savior complex. It’s really subtle, but so important with activist work that there is explicit attention to power dynamics so that we don’t just go into situations with the attitude like: I know what’s right and I’m here to save you. Cuz, ya know, that’s really dangerous and oppressive, but just in a different way.

That’s part of why I joined TA. I really wanted to make an impact with the students and young people who participated in the workshops. I see now that obviously that’s something that I wouldn’t be able to see immediately. But I kind of had that hope that I would be that person that, a student would come up to me and be like: wow! You changed my life. That was what I was initially looking to get out of it. A lot of the workshops that we did though, the students were really familiar with the topics already or we were with a group that didn’t talk. I didn’t really kind of get that immediate reward that I was looking for. Over time, I ultimately came to see the value in the workshops as social action and as a place where we were able to build skills and confidence that enabled us to go out and do our own thing. So more focused on our own learning and transformation rather than the workshop participants. I think that’s hugely valuable just for an organization to do even just that; is to be a place where young people can gather and figure things out and try to develop projects or make a change.
I’ve also really enjoyed being able to meet people like me who are kind of at the beginning of their activist journey. In that way, I think of TA as an opportunity or launching point, and it shows you all of these different options of ways you can get involved and issues you can take action. TA kind of gave me that initial spark to get going. I’m a really independent person, but it was really nice to go to events and share experiences with other people. That’s a really big part of what TA was for me, it was a communal experience of learning through all of this stuff. Even though we don’t spend a ton of time together, I know that we’re still kind of thinking about this and moving forward together. I know I’m not the oldest in the group, but I do feel sometimes like, not a mentor, but I kind of help guide the conversation or clarify things for people in meetings. I also felt very comfortable doing workshops and think I was able to be a role model for others. Another thing that I really enjoyed about TA was getting to work with Veronica. She is such a huge inspiration for me, and I admire her so much. Not only is she an amazing writer and activist, she is just so good at welcoming and making people feel comfortable.

As a writer and lover of young adult fiction a metaphor for my activist trajectory is like a superhero in the movies who is just realizing his powers and he does something unexpected and then he just stands there looking at his giant hands being like, what? I’m still learning so much and I feel like I have this unwieldy power. I feel clumsy in the way that I potentially deal with things and I worry about that. Then I try to think about how I could carry that differently, and instead of looking down at my hands, once in a while look up at the rest of the world and take a step forward even if it does involve some risks. Trying not to worry about learning everything first before you jump in. That’s something I’m still working out.

It’s really hard to live up to my own standards of what it means to accomplish something. I choose a couple of documents as artifacts that represent my creative action project (see Figure 6.9). The first was my original project timeline printed on recycled paper that have essays of mine that
I’ve submitted for class um, and the other was the email exchange that I had with the librarian that was like my pitch for the project and her response. I basically wanted to kind of show a comparison of what I had initially thought the project would be and then what it eventually became.

I really tried to relax and just roll with the momentum for my creative action project. I’m lucky that what I study—English and Gender Studies—is “so close to what I like live and feel and, and breath every single day.” It’s what I’m most interested in and my friends would tell you I talk about them all the time. So partnering with the library to create a workshop on diversity in books was in a way a representation of me and what I am passionate about. When Hermione first suggested I contact the library I was totally apprehensive, but I am so glad that I did. I’m still elated that the library was so awesome to work with and the folks at the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign were totally on board. I could not have imagined it any better. I think this project was successful, and I feel good about it because I do value teamwork and working with people you can trust. It was really fun and I think having Kristen and Hermione there to, um, assist with the development of the workshop itself was extremely valuable because that was the part that was most new to me. This experience kind of proved the value of working with others as also kind of emotionally worthwhile helps me resist my impulse to do everything by myself.

I was a tiny bit disappointed that there were so few people at the workshop, but I feel like this is just a starting point and it doesn’t have to stop there this doesn’t have to be the only time I talk about or do this kind of thing so it doesn’t really feel like the end. So, yeah, I’m really proud. I know that at the beginning of TA I talked about how I was reluctant to identify myself as an activist because I feel like I hadn’t done anything yet; this feels like I actually did something. Now I’d tentatively call myself an activist and that’s pretty cool. I’m totally thrilled with the entire project. Another really cool thing is that now I have these connections to the Library and to the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign. Being a teen librarian or building a Canadian counterpart to the
#WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign would be total dream jobs! I do think that being a part of TA has been a really valuable experience, and I’m glad that I did it. I would consider being involved with it in the future or will probably do something similar.

I’m beginning to see how I might be able to blend my values and my passions towards a potential career or future opportunity. I love books and I appreciate those books that generate a community of readers. For example, a book might be aesthetically good, but I’m really impressed by books if there’s really great community that builds up around it or a lot of people that talk about it or connect to it on a personal level. I want to be the kind of author not so much that people would say like: “oh, this author’s a genius,” but rather: “I really connected to this.” Being able to create that for other people is really important for me. Whether that’s through a book or a space, but being able to build community and make people feel welcome and that they have a place.

Figure 6.9 Verity’s Cultural Artifact for her CAP Interview

The narrative of participation crafted for Verity illustrates how books and stories are tools for creating connection and community. Verity described her activist trajectory through her participation at TA and in the stories she told about herself. She talked about the power of stories
in shaping our perceptions and identities, and she used books and stories to communicate and connect. Verity told a reifying and significant story about her identity through Harry Potter. She explained that if she were a character in Harry Potter, the sorting hat would place her in “Hufflepuff” house. The traits of a Hufflepuff include hard work, loyalty, patience and fairness. Whereas, she explained, her friends would argue that she would be sorted into the “Ravenclaw” house whose traits include wit, learning and wisdom. Verity’s values of fairness and loyalty guided her activist trajectory. By talking about herself through stories, Verity articulated her actual and designated identities and participation in TA as a bridge between the two (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

TA served as a critical point in Verity’s activist trajectory where she shifted from telling stories about activist as a designated identity (hope, wish, someday) to telling stories about herself as an activist. After her CAP, Verity tentatively spoke about herself as an activist—reflecting an actual identity—because she felt she had done something, which was how she defined activist. The tentative nature in which Verity took on this identity highlights the fact that identities are inherently dynamic and contextual as is reflected in her metaphor of an activist as a superhero with giant hands that became tools over time and through practice. During the PA #1, Sarah and Brenda both noted how they had observed Verity’s transformation over the course of the year, which they described as a sort of “coming into her own.” Adding these observations to Verity’s own “tentative” shift in her identity as an “activist” highlight the embodied nature of social justice that comes about over time and by “doing” (Kelly et al., 2004).

Verity exemplified her activist trajectory through her CAP, which was about building connection, and community through art/books. Verity came to see her participation at TA as valuable through her CAP, which she relied on and applied her workshop facilitation skills in overlapping valued social communities: the library and the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign. For Verity, TA actively organized and created the “politics of possibility” whereby she negotiated access
to valued social communities and desired futures (Holland & Gómez, 2013). Evident in Verity’s narrative was a sophisticated critique of the structures of domination, especially schooling, that shaped TA (Holland & Gómez, 2013). In her CAP, Verity drew on valued aspects of her participation, especially the facilitation and workshop experience, in order to create a CAP that challenged structures of domination by maintaining a focus on action and drawing on a broader social movement (Holland & Gómez, 2013).

6.1.8 Brenda’s Creative Action Project: A work in progress. Brenda was open about his aversion to the creative action project from the outset. He began by deciding he would make a film that would be beneficial to TA. He met with the staff and they decided he would create a short 3-5 minute film about creative action projects that could also be used in workshops. He attended and filmed parts of all of the YGM volunteers’ creative action projects. He had planned on doing brief interviews with everyone, but found it difficult to stay motivated and he was critical of his own work. At the elicitation interview, Brenda stated that he didn’t think he would finish the film, but that the might do something else or make a different film later on that would be useful to TA.

Figure 6.10 Brenda Filming Sarah and Aliza’s US: Un/Becoming ourSelves event for his CAP
6.1.9 Narrating Brenda. Growing up gay in Alberta was not easy. Before I came out of the closet, even to myself, I was constantly harassed and bullied. That really impacted me. I’d say because of my experiences growing up and feeling like shit about myself, I have a heightened awareness of other people’s pain and oppression. I had some dark years where I struggled to find my way. I traveled a lot and met my husband in Mexico. I was 25 when we got married. I try to know and learn as much as possible and speak from my own experience, that’s important to me.

I’ve always felt very deeply that the world is an unjust and fucked up place; it’s taken me a long time to figure out my place and role in social change. I mean, the activist community is not the most welcoming especially for a middle-class white dude, yeah. I don’t necessarily see activism as necessarily being a catalyst for social change, but it’s also just the idea that registering dissent is powerful and important. When we moved to the West End, I started to get more involved in the queer community and randomly going to marches and stuff. Sometimes, I would go to protests that would have absolutely nothing to do with me. I wanted to be there, so I’d just go and stand there and scream and get mad and be in solidarity with people.

I used to think I wanted to be like a public intellectual/activist. My master’s thesis was about activism and I had this ideal of being able to, like, be an activist scholar. I had planned on pursuing my PhD after my master’s, but I’m not feeling that so much anymore. My undergrad and grad projects were all through a lens of resistance and activism and I was doing all this research and going to protests, but I still wasn’t feeling like I was a part of something. I really look up to leaders of movements and causes, but I don’t want to be them. I don’t want to be that person on the stage that’s like, at the center of it all. That was actually something that I needed to get over, like, maybe the extent of my involvement was learning about this stuff in school and going to protests and standing in a crowd. I like being in service of people. In a way, I feel that’s a way of getting around a lot of the problematics is by being in solidarity, you’re supporting instead of leading, which to me
is also a safer space. I’ve learned from my membership to other communities the value and importance of the background work. Setting up chairs and cleaning bathrooms are just as important as being the face of a movement. Well, maybe not as important, but pretty damn close.

I was looking for a way to be more active and I wanted to have a commitment to a cause that I believed. A friend of mine from school told me about TA so I applied right away. At first TA rejected my application because I’m a grandpa, seriously, because 32 is too old! Then they were like: oh, join us. You’re youth-identified! I was like: no, I’m not and they were like: well, whatever. So, I showed up and decided that I would do go ahead and do it. Anyway, it was so awkward and that was the first time I was branded as “youth identified,” it was also the first time I’d ever heard that term before I had a visceral reaction to it. What the fuck does that even mean, youth-identified? I have never and would never call myself a “youth.” That set the tone for my whole time with TA; I felt like an outsider or interloper.

Then I had a weird facilitation experience with Veronica. It was so awkward it was funny. I mean, we were just starting to facilitate a workshop and Veronica just says to the class we were facilitating: we may not all look like youth; and then she just looked at me and paused, but we are all youth. I was like, riiiiight. To these high school students we are both old, ha! In the end I can say it has changed the way I think about my age and not in a good way. I reflected a bit about my experience with TA after my first interview with Kristen and besides the age thing it has been an amazing opportunity. So, I decided to call Hermione to talk to her and I was like: congratulations on the job, I’m kind of jealous cuz it’s a dream job, but I want you to know what’s happened. I told her that I’ve been made to feel uncomfortable because of the fact that I’m 32 and like, apparently, that’s really old and I told her about this incident with Veronica. So, I had this conversation with Hermione and she was like: yes, that is really awkward and we’ve had a few other people talk about this with us too and she said that she would talk to Jacelyn [TA Executive Director] about it.
Anyways, she came back to me later and was like: it’s about ally-ship. And I was like: yessss. I can say that: I am an ally. So that was great! I love what TA does, and I’ve really enjoyed getting to know and work Hermione who I feel is a really special person.

I’m really grateful for the training that TA does, which was really intense and good. I loved the way they created an environment that was safe enough to blunder through these really complex issues and ideas. It was really messy, but really cool to have really great conversations around gender, around sexuality, around oppression, around all these different things over the weekend. It was such a unique experience where we learned so many tools to get the message out and to change the way people think. So that was awesome. I also wish I could have done more, but I was so busy. School was really intense and my thesis kicked my ass.

I absolutely love facilitating the workshops. I hadn’t been in a high school since my own shitty experience back in the day and I was totally blown away by the students and everything. It was amazing to see what would happen working with young people – it was really inspiring! I’d loved to do something like this for a job. I’m even thinking about teaching. I’ve got a friend in Seattle and a friend in Alberta, and we’re talking about how we could do this kind of thing in schools in those places. I could never have gotten to do this kind of work without TA, so that has been invaluable. I also really enjoyed meeting everyone, and the YGM group is really great.

The CAP was really not my thing. It actually created a lot of anxiety for me, and I didn’t finish it. I might finish it later, but I don’t know. I took this class on film and research and I really loved it. I thought this would be a good opportunity to practice those skills. I met with all the TA staff and we decided I could make a short film about the CAP and about action in general. I only wanted to make something that would be useful to them otherwise it would feel like a waste of time. I choose the bag that I used to carry the film equipment in as the artifact that symbolizes my CAP.
It was a gift from a friend’s wedding that I really love and it says: Have a Nice Day on it and makes me smile, which is the opposite of how I felt whenever I looked at it with the cameras and stuff in it.

A few things contributed to me just fizzling out on this. It was originally Amanda’s idea, but then she quit. The revisions on my thesis were a bit unexpected, and so I pushed everything else in my life to the side. I’m a perfectionist and the film equipment I have access to is so shitty. I mean, really, I don’t want to make a shitty film that TA isn’t going to use. What’s the point of that? I went to a few of the folks’ CAPs and they were all pretty cool. But when I watched the footage that I shot at the US event (see Figure 6.10) I realized just how shitty the equipment was and how bad the film might be. Then I also just started to lose interest in this whole thing. I want to facilitate workshops. That’s what I’m interested and that’s what I want to do. So my film for the CAP we’ll see, whatever, but I doubt it. The only thing that is motivating me to do it is that I told TA that I would do it, and they are excited about it. I don’t want to disappoint them, and I do want to practice filming, so we’ll see.

It’s funny, but I came full circle with TA. They were hiring for the educational coordinator position and at one time that would have been my dream job, but the whole age thing kept me from applying. Then Hermione called me and told me I should apply, and we had that conversation about the age thing and cleared the air and that was really good. I had this other job at the university and the pay at TA was shit so I didn’t apply, but now I’m kind of regretting that decision. I love the work so much. I’ve actually thought about becoming a teacher. The cool thing now, though, is that I’m going to go back to being a volunteer and facilitate workshops, which is what I always wanted to do. Who knows what will happen in the future, but this definitely looks good on my resume!
The narrative of Brenda’s participation centered around feelings of in/exclusion and finding a place within the activist community and TA more specifically. TA’s loosely defined criteria for participants to be “youth identified”—which he was vehemently averse to—resulted in him feeling like he was on the periphery or an outsider. Implicit within Brenda’s resistance of “youth” as a social construct was a critique of what it means to be young person living in a neoliberal era included having access to valued participation opportunities. This speaks back to Morimoto and Friedland’s (2013) claim that youth engagement actively re/produces social and economic disparities due to the resources necessary for youth to gain access to these opportunities. Brenda’s activist trajectory contributed to his identification as an ally who works in solidarity with others and this paralleled his participation at TA. At the end of his commitment to TA, Brenda took on “ally” as an actual identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) within the YGM group because of conversations he had with Hermione, Kristen, and others in the YGM.

While Brenda told of his peripheral membership to the YGM community of practice as an “interloper” he also told positive stories about the social practices and relationships he gained access to through his participation. The facilitations were the most significant aspect of participation for
Brenda, and in the end he chose not to complete a CAP for various reasons including his concerns about the quality of the movie he could produce and his realization that the workshops were his ideal form of action. Brenda viewed learning as transformation—“changing the way people think”—and the workshops were exactly the kind of social action that he wanted to do. He decided to continue to facilitate workshops with TA after graduation, and was excited to do so. In this way, the workshops and facilitation skills Brenda gained access to through TA organized a potential valued social future as a critical educator.

Similar to Verity, Brenda offered an overt critique of the “structures of domination” that influenced TA. His narrative highlights the nuances of how neoliberalism has influenced youth participation, generally speaking as well as specifically at TA. Brenda told stories about his desire to be a part of something bigger, “an us” or a broader social movement that was working towards the ideal of social justice (Holland & Gómez, 2013). At the same time he recognized the value of a TA as a volunteer opportunity that would result in individual benefits. TA was attractive to Brenda because he gained skills and a line on his resume that would make him more competitive in the workforce. Brenda’s participation narrative illustrates how neoliberalism generates significant feelings of burden and anxiety through various modes of governmentality. For Brenda, these feelings related to the “youth” classification and what that means in today’s society; as well as his uncompleted CAP, which made him feel guilty and anxious. Facilitation and the workshops generated “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) for Brenda and it was in those local places of practice that he found an opportunity to work in solidarity with youth towards social change.

This research generated an intersecting community of practice with the YGM. Brenda actively took on the role of co-researcher and participated in all of the data generation as well as both rounds of the participatory analysis. While we were preparing for the PA #2, Brenda shared
with me that he told a friend about our participatory analysis, and she had critiqued it as being neoliberal and exploitative. Brenda defended this practice—and me—by explaining that he was gaining valuable research skills and future opportunities for collaboration. These were meaningful skills and opportunities to Brenda because of his membership to other another valued communities, academia, and one that we share. Currently, academia is a context that prioritizes neoliberal values of individualism and market ethos through an emphasis on competition and achievement. Brenda’s decision to collaborate with me is one way a “politics of possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) emerged through the intersections of his love for research and learning with his desire to gain skills and experience that would make him more competitive in academia.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 6.12 Hermione Painting on the Mural at the US CAP Event**

### 6.1.10 Narrating Hermione

My family immigrated to Canada from Bangladesh when I was a year old. Two years later my dad died suddenly and unexpectedly from lung cancer. Suddenly, there we were alone, with no family, in a foreign country, my mother became a single mother and all of that was layered on top of the typical immigrant experience. I learned about injustice, inequality, barriers, and struggle from a young age. My mom is a teacher, and education is
very important to her. My brother and I had opposite reactions; he acted out, while I tried to make my mom happy and proud by doing well and achieving.

I went to a really progressive school on the East Side of Vancouver that was extremely rigorous and focused on leadership. High school was great—I really loved it! I’d say I began my activist journey in my social studies nine class with an assignment called: Take a Stance. I took a stand that sweatshops should be banned from a human rights perspective. That was when I first became aware that all of these issues exist and that you can do research and take a stance. We started taking stands on different issues, and I realized that other people may fundamentally disagree with me and actually take what I think is the wrong stance. That was a powerful realization: that a person believes this is okay just as passionately as I believe this is wrong. That’s when my critical thinking process began.

After that, I started joining a bunch of clubs and naturally took on leadership roles. We were required to do 30 hours of volunteer work a year, and I loved that. Then towards the end of high school, a US organization piloted a youth program at our school to encourage young people to create social enterprises. I joined that program and decided to host a summer arts event with youth from my high school and the surrounding community. My reasoning was that I wanted to celebrate the arts, but also because a lot of my friends—these amazing artists and thespians and filmmakers—were deciding what they wanted to do with their lives, and everyone was going into totally out of the blue things like business. It was so random. So, it was a celebration of the arts, but more than that, it was to celebrate passions. It turned into a pretty big event, and we had to rent a venue and do all of these crazy logistics. I was 17 at the time and that got me into the community organizing and networking side of things.

Around that same time, I was at an event where TA came and did a workshop, and I immediately knew I wanted to be a part of it. I talked to the facilitator afterwards and started
volunteering with TA right away. Pretty soon afterwards I got to travel to Northern BC to co-facilitate a ton of workshops, it was like facilitation boot camp, and that was really cool. That was my time facilitating with TA, it was a super intense learning curve, but the Educational Coordinator was amazing. I already loved what TA did and loved the organization, but I began to see those moments when someone’s thought process shifts while I was facilitating. That was the first time I saw and felt tangible change. That is actually what TA symbolizes for me: moments of tangible change. That is the significance of my entire experience at TA; it is one of those moments of tangible change in the narrative of my life.

I started university at the same time I started my work with TA. I was learning about social justice and activism in my classes while I was experiencing those things at TA. That really shaped my perspective on what meaningful education is and what it means to truly be learning to live. I think that there is a type of learning that we do that is very traditional and academic, and then there is learning that goes beyond that which is about learning things and being able to live out what we’ve learned. I think that’s something that I bring to the group, and I encourage folks to think about it that way. This group consists of a lot of folks who are in academia or postsecondary education, so I think moving out of the theories and engaging the public by having an art event or film screening is living what we’ve learned. That’s something that I value and something that I do based on my own experiences.

Working with the YGM group has been really interesting. I was there for their training and got to meet them when they were at the beginning of their journeys with TA. Then, when I took over for Veronica in May, I got to assess where they were in terms of how comfortable they were with facilitation, how comfortable they were with the content or even the general theme of gender and representations in the media. Seeing that although they were going through this process together, they each had their own journeys and of course they would because they’re each unique.
They all have their own schedules and some were able to facilitate more and some weren’t. It felt like I was hanging out with a group of friends, and I felt like my role was to support them, but it was more like helping out a peer.

I came in when the action part was really getting started. I got to be there for that whole process of them coming up with their creative action projects, working through them, making them happen, overcoming their own fears around them. That was really cool to see and I loved attending their creative action projects (see Figure 6.12). During my time with TA, this is the first time where I’ve seen such an emphasis on action. I think social justice is very personal. What I loved about the action projects was that they were so personal to people, that people were overcoming things, barriers and internal struggles that they have to do it. And that transformation is just as important, if not more important than the actual action that took place. Because our actions are always in, or not always, but in many ways always separate, separated from ourselves. You know, like, I did this or that this year and that was my action. So, we leave things behind and we put things aside and our actions are separated from us. When we start to live what we’ve learned, our actions are a part of us and they stay with us, they’re things that when we walk to the grocery store, that action walks with us. I think that’s where change happens.

I think over time TA has been leaning more towards taking action. That’s really cool to see that TA has evolved, and I think that evolution has occurred because of the YGM program. They were the first cohort model, and because of its success we now have other cohorts. I also think the shift towards action is because of the learning from the program as well. Seeing the youth take action now, even for me moving forward into the next year when we think about funding and when we think about projects we’re thinking along the lines of action and how we can promote action and support actions through the organization. So that’s been really cool to see from an organizational point of view and how we’ve learned from the youth as well.
Something I’m focused on now is to try to sustain a meaningful relationship with TA and the YGM group. Figuring out how they can continue to be involved and what that looks like for them and making space for that to happen. I think that’s one of the risks with continuing to have new cohorts, because we have such a small staff capacity that when we focus on a new cohort, we tend to lose connections with previous ones.

I’ve learned so much from TA, but I think most importantly it has allowed me to live out justice. For example, my choice to wear a hijab. I wore the hijab up until eighth grade, and I stopped wearing it because I was getting bullied because of it. I started wearing the hijab again last September. My lens, as a Muslim, I personally don’t believe a woman needs to wear a hijab in order to go to heaven or be modest. My reason for wearing the hijab was to challenge myself against these gendered expectations of how I should look. I went to a spoken word event, and someone said that being Muslim today is a radical act. That really struck me, so wearing the hijab is as much a commitment to my faith as it is to justice.

I hope to always be learning. The day that I’m not learning things, something’s gone wrong. Over the past few years so much of the work that I’ve done has been about community organizing, educating, critical thinking and more about shifting values and thinking. It’s very important work that I want to continue to do forever, but I’m really feeling a need to do something more tangible. I want to directly connect my actions to concrete solutions or changes that alleviate the suffering in some way. Before we start anything we say in Arabic, but it’s translated: “in the name of Allah the most compassionate and merciful.” Keeping with those values I am craving more direct advocacy work. I want to become compassionate and merciful by working one on one with individuals who are facing injustice. I just don’t see any other ... way to, to live.
The narrative of Hermione’s participation was centered upon the idea of *living* justice. Hermione’s activist trajectory was informed by her early experiences of injustice and her spiritual beliefs and values. She told stories about how she learned how to think critically in order to understand others’ with opposing viewpoints. For Hermione, TA was another way that she shared her passion for learning as a means for living justice. Wearing the hijab was another, and creating an arts event to celebrate and promote passion yet another. Hermione’s stories reflected her desire to be compassionate and merciful, which also reflected her values as a Muslim. Through her participation, Hermione was constructing an identity as a just person.

Hermione explicitly spoke about the value of “lifelong learning,” which was implied across most of the other youths’ narratives. This pursuit of learning as a lifelong endeavor is an aspect of what Biesta (2013) has argued is the current “learning age” (p. 61). Biesta’s critique of this shift towards learning as lifelong and “life-wide” reflect a naturalistic view of learning—that we are always, inevitably learning—and an individualistic view of the learner as a work in progress.
this framework, learning is a form of self-improvement and reflects the form of governmentality that Larner (2000) referred to as a “politics of self” in which citizens are encouraged to actively work on and improve themselves (p. 13). Although Hermione equated learning with being alive, it was complicated by her desire to live out justice. This complication illustrates how neoliberalism unfolds through the contestation of dominant and oppositional forces (Larner, 2000) in that Hermione valued learning because it generated the tools necessary to live out justice.

Within Hermione’s narrative was her story about creating and promoting the arts, which provided an implicit critique of neoliberalism. As she and her friends were preparing for university many of her friends, whom she described as artists, were deciding to study business, which perplexed her. This reflects Statistics Canada’s (2011) report that business, management, marketing and related support services have become the most common post-secondary majors. This is an example of how pervasive neoliberal market values have shifted students and families’ views of higher education away from learning towards a focus on studying “practical” subjects that will make them competitive on the job market (Giroux, 2002).

6.2 Summary

Vadeboncoeur at al. (2011) argued that: “Identity is the moment-to-moment negotiation of an individual” acting with cultural tools “in relationships with people in social practices that both reflect and constitute the social relations and institutions” (p. 230). Following this, an analysis of identity construction must consider identities as complex, relational, and contextual negotiations and not as individual attributes or traits. The narratives presented here are situated within the narratives discussed in the two previous chapters and serve to illustrate the contextual layers of participation that contributed to the meanings youths made of themselves, each other, and TA.

As evidenced in these narratives, learning as participation was a deeply personal and transformational process. The youths’ participation narratives carried traces of consciousness,
thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires that moved them to take action (Bruner, 1991). Evident across each of these narratives were traces of participation as generating new knowledge and skills that contributed to their evolving identities as activists, allies, and advocates which were grounded in values and ideals of a more just world. The youths’ shared value for a more socially just world shaped their participation towards that ideal or goal. TA provided access to a potential community that aligned their common value of learning as transformation. These shared values do not imply a singular definition or meaning, rather an essential aspect of value construction is youths’ internalization of said values. They worked together to construct knowledge through dialogues, creative action projects, and co-facilitations. The participants talked about how they constructed beings over time and in and through their participation at TA. In this way, their participation provided a crucial bridge for the youths to construct and challenge actual and designated identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005); particularly their identities as activists. Through their narratives each of these young people talked about what is important to them, who they are, who and how they hope to be in the future. This aspect of their narrative unfolded on the landscape of consciousness that fueled their participation as it unfolded on the landscape of action.

All of the participants in this study had some level of post-secondary education. Not coincidentally they also shared a love of learning and talked about it as a process of self and social transformation. Across all of the youths’ narratives—except for Hermione’s—was the theme of responsibility and for social change which was associated with feeling of guilt, remorse, and self-critique for their varying levels of participation. All of these narratives were rich with stories of their not doing as much as they “wished.” This highlights the ways that neoliberalism has effectively shifted the responsibility for individual and societal well-being from public institutions and groups to individuals (Kennelly, 2009). Further, the stories presented here reflect Kennelly’s (2009) claim that neoliberalism has regulated young activists in Canada through burdens of guilt and responsibility. In
this way, neoliberalism has significantly shaped activist trajectories—and participation narratives—through various structures of domination (Holland & Gómez, 2013). Evidenced across all of these participation narratives are stories of how youths encountered these structures of domination in local places of practice that intersected to create “politics of possibility.” These possibilities were woven through the narratives of participation: narratives that project imagined social futures.
Chapter 7: Towards Re/Narrating Youth: Places of Learning as Places of Possibilities

For this research, I engaged with a group of young people who participated in a youth-led activist organization. I was interested in documenting both how Think Again could be described as a community of practice, and the limits of the community building process. The narratives created offer accounts of young people who are active, engaged, connected and seeking out opportunities to better themselves and society. These narratives simultaneously drew upon their histories, present moments, and their imagined futures, and following Sfard and Prusak (2005), their identities. Building from a dialectical perspective, I examined the ways in which the neoliberal context influenced youth participation at the macro, local, and micro levels. This perspective enabled me to situate the social practices of the participants and to see the ways in which their contributions were both afforded and constrained by the context.

The first four sections of this final chapter include discussions of four key findings as moments of possibility: 1) co-constructing “youth” counter-narratives; 2) alternative places of learning; 3) learning as participation; and 4) neoliberal compromises. The fifth section provides a review of three methodological contributions of this study. The sixth section offers a reflection on the research experience as transformative relational practice. The final section addresses practical implications and limitations of this research, as well as directions for future research.

7.1 Co-Constructing “Youth” Counter-narratives: The Danger of a Single Story

An aim of this study was to hear, gather, generate and share youths’ stories in order to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant deficit youth narratives (i.e., “millennial youth”). Over time, I came to understand that the inherent contradiction of this endeavor, and aim, was insurmountable. To produce a single counter-narrative would reify the idea that there is an actual
single “youth” narrative and set up a false dichotomy. In actuality, there are many youth narratives, the meanings of which are multiple, relational, and situated. Dominant narratives effectively “other” individuals and experiences that do not fit within the narrow narrative depiction. This tendency illustrates the “danger of a single story” as told by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (http://www.ted.com). For example, the single story of the “adolescent” as constructed by scholarly discourse is based on the white, middle-class, Western, male experience (Lesko, 1996) and effectively renders all experiences that do not fit within this limited frame as other; gendered, racialized, and/or classed experiences are othered. My revised aim highlights how the participants’ stories challenged the dominant narratives of youth circulating at the time of this study in order to illustrate the multiple, partial, nuanced, complex, and messy nature of youths’ descriptions of their participation in TA.

The general public, media and scholars have drawn on disparate sources to construct a pejorative and widely disseminated narrative of the “millennial youth.” These limited depictions have given rise to the call for scholarship that attends to the ways that “conceptual orthodoxies about youth transitions misrecognize patterns of generational change as instead symptoms of transitional failure, and highlights the ways in which new generational patterns foreshadow new life patterns that enable young adults to live well in changing times” (Woodman & Wyn, 2013, p. 266). Yet the traditional markers of adulthood—such as economic independence, a clear career path, marriage, and/or parenthood—not only persist but also tend to be valued as “endpoints” for development. In reality, the current neoliberal context has contributed to changing social, political and economic conditions and a much more blurry line between youth and adulthood. This study responded to Woodman and Wyn’s call by focusing on the stories of participants and constructing narratives of their socioculturally situated participation. In other words, attention was paid both to the narratives the participants co-constructed and the resources and conditions that enabled them.
My experiences with the participants, along with the co-constructed narratives in this study, provide views of active, concerned, engaged, and committed young people that challenge the narrative of millennials so popular in North America today. The lived experiences of these young people were everything except the overly simplistic and generalized “millennial” narrative. Apathy was antithetical to the culture of this group of young people. The participants described themselves to be—and I observed them as—compassionate beings actively caring about and working towards social justice. Rather than arrogant and narcissistic, I found these youth to be humble, compassionate and generous. They were conscious of their own limitations and learning curves and were actively working to improve upon themselves. Theirs was not a solely selfish motivation; it was grounded in the understanding that their personal transformation was intricately linked to social change. The YGM group was anything but lazy and irresponsible. Their tightly packed schedules were filled with multiple volunteer activities, jobs, school, friends, family, art, culture, and so on. Not only were these young people extremely busy, they seemed to be compelled by a sense of responsibility and curiosity to be actively engaged in their communities. This was more than a sense of duty; it was something that was important to them—they valued social justice and community-based work. The narratives in Chapter Six provide further evidence against the dominant “millennial youth” portrayal and tell a richer and more diverse story of what it means to be a young person navigating the complex cultural terrain of neoliberalism (Holland & Gómez, 2013).

Alongside their focused and significant work, palpable and inescapable, was the covert and pervasive nature of dominant narratives, experienced, in particular, in the reciprocal learning process generated by the workshops held in schools and community settings. As workshop facilitators (or peer educators), the participants differentiated themselves from the young people for whom they facilitated workshops, which were often high school students. Yet, most of them used the term “youth” to describe themselves and the YGM group, as well as the younger groups they
encountered as facilitators. The participants’ stories supported the dominant deficit youth narratives; they talked about being surprised by how motivated and insightful they found high school students to be. In many ways, their roles and experiences as workshop facilitators uncovered their own implicit biases and mis/understandings of young people and prompted them to reflect upon and challenge their own understandings about “young people.” Our community became an opportunity for conscientization whereby the participants in this study engaged in self-reflection and critical analysis in order to better understand and change how they themselves thought about young people (Freire, 1970).

7.2 Alternative Places of Learning: “Moments of Tangible Change”

Conceptualizing TA through a community of practice lens provided an opportunity to examine, with young people, alternative places of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that, as an integral component of social practice, learning involves the whole person in relation to the community and implies becoming a “participant, a member, a kind of person…with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations” (p. 53). At the heart of their theory is the understanding that all learning is inherently social, rather than attributing learning to an individual’s innate ability and capacity. This critical perspective argues that individualistic theories of learning blame marginalized people for their marginality and re/produce social inequity (Lave, 1996). Thus, a community of practice framework holds potential for considering alternative places of learning that may generate new possibilities and social futures, rather than reproduce the status quo.

Situated learning attends to the inherent imbalances in power and expertise by explicitly acknowledging the significant role of oldtimers in organizing the participation of newcomers toward particular valued social futures (Lave & Wenger, 1991; O’Connor & Allen, 2010). The oldtimers at TA actively organized the newcomers’ participation trajectories toward a valued place in the community and the broader vision of a more socially just world. The mentorship component was
organized with the intention of introducing newcomers to valued relationships with old-timers and work experiences that incorporated media de/construction, gender analysis, and/or violence prevention. TA strategized this experience to generate youths’ ability to envision ways that the skills they developed through their participation could be applied in various settings and future careers.

Mentorship was about cultivating social relationships and practices that would be consequential beyond TA and was largely unsuccessful amongst the YGM group. This highlights the tenuous nature of communities of practice, their fragility, made visible when a situated approach is taken. There is no guarantee that a community of practice will be created, or that a community will be sustained, even when the conditions of participation are organized toward that aim.

Through their stories and participation at TA (presented in Chapters 4 and 5), the youths co-constructed a foundation for alternative places of learning distinct from traditional schooling. Drawing on their educational histories, they talked about the power differential between teachers and students, mused about the teacher as disciplinarian and teased out the nuances between imparting as opposed to co-constructing knowledge. Through reflections on their own schooling and life experiences, the youths described their educational histories as including systemic in/exclusion and negative teaching/learning experiences. They linked their macro level critiques of the institution of schooling as perpetuating the status quo with personal stories to illustrate how their past experiences motivated them to try to change schools for the better.

These shared stories reflect how current and future learning places and practices need to incorporate safety from oppression, for example, from racism, sexism, and homophobia, as crucial to learners’ engagement and participation. “Safety” must be continually renegotiated, reflected upon, and it is never achieved for any group once and for all. Acknowledging that safety must be held as a tension, that what is safe for one person may be unsafe for another, means that a community must include places for negotiation, conflict, and is neither defined as a socially or visibly
bounded group, nor is it based on consensus or co-presence (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The term community implies “participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (p. 98). This thread was evident across the varied stories the youth told about TA and what it meant to them in relation to their lives beyond TA. While each participant was simultaneously engaged in multiple communities of practice that entailed particular forms of knowledge, identities to be taken up, and values, in general, there were multiple interpretations of significant knowledge, challenges to how to identity as a member of this community was defined, and differences in values and how values were prioritized. Discussion, contention, recognition, rejection, and acceptance were continually negotiated with different outcomes for participants. Participation became meaningful at these complex intersections because all participation and membership was interrelated and lived through experience.

Together, they constructed a vision of an ideal place of learning as one that valued youths’ autonomy and freedom to choose how they learned, where youths’ learned from each other, and -isms were explicitly addressed and challenged. The overlap of their educational histories could be seen in the ways they conducted themselves at monthly meetings: raising their hands to speak, asking if they could ask questions, and becoming passive when the educational coordinator spoke for extended periods of time. In several ways, the youth critiqued TA and the workshops as reproducing the status quo; many felt that the workshops were too basic and glossed over the difficulties of taking action. This critique alludes to the inherent challenge and risk involved in making the shift from thinking about to taking action and the value of support and structure to make that shift. Yet, the fact that participation in the YGM was highly structured added to the school-like feel of TA and curtailed relationship building, which is essential to the transformational
learning described. This tension between the need for structure and action-oriented outcomes with building connections and relationships had a significant impact on youths’ participation at TA.

All of the participants in this study believed in the educational potential and importance of TA for young people. The workshop facilitations were one way that TA targeted a broader youth audience, but the youths that volunteered at TA came to TA already holding a basic social justice orientation. While a community of practice framework is grounded in a critical stance and attends to issues of power and privilege within it, it does not appear to highlight questions around access to participation in communities: who did not hear about TA?; who was not able to attend the meetings?; how was participation hindered given the ways in which the social practices were implemented? In effect, more than which members were lost in the process of participating in the YGM, rather, who was denied access to it? This potential theoretical limitation underscores the following discussions about the costs and benefits of youths’ participation at TA and illuminates a shortfall of this study, which is: what are the costs and benefits of not participating? Although TA did not comprise a community of practice for everyone, it did provide an alternative place of learning where this group of young people furthered their vision of what meaningful learning is and how and where it can emerge. Youths’ learning in the YGM carried traces of their past, present and future educational imaginings that rendered visible the extreme difficulty of invoking a “politics of possibility” necessary to conceive of alternative places of learning.

7.3 Learning as Participation: “First Steps into Activism”

Youths’ participation at TA was situated within a pedagogical trajectory of becoming activists through social action. TA’s organizational mission and aims coalesced around this broad learning objective. Learning as participation conceptualizes learning as an integral aspect of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), thus, participation always involves social activity or action and connection (Handley et al., 2006). Participation brings the “possibility of mutual recognition” and
opportunities to negotiate meaning, but does not necessarily entail equality, respect, or collaboration (Wenger, 1998, p. 56). Participation is not a universal unidirectional trajectory of achievement or acquisition of knowledge and identities. The concept of negotiation attends to the ongoing process of resistance, rejection, clarification, and acceptance involved in constructing an activist identity. This group of young people narrated their participation at Think Again as a moment—a particular place of learning—along their unique activist trajectories. Importantly, all participation is considered incomplete and never fully internalized or externalized (Lave & Wenger, 1991), thus an activist identity is never “achieved” or finalized.

As with all trajectories, the youths’ participation trajectories ebbed and flowed; while some paused indefinitely, others gained intensity. Most of the participants in this study narrated their participation as peripheral, which speaks to the general lack of cohesion and connection that was expressed by the YGM group. Evident across all of the data were stories the youths told about themselves as learners and learning as a value. Indeed, all of the participants in this study sought TA as a learning opportunity. In Chapter Five, I shared stories the youth told about learning along an activist trajectory that encompassed the interrelated processes of self and social change. Thus, learning at TA was a deeply personal social change project that intersected with what the participants brought to TA, their multiple networks and the corresponding knowledge, identities, and values. These contributed to the need for ongoing negotiation of power and roles not clearly delineated or prescribed. They all took turns leading, modeling, following, and supporting each other’s journeys in different ways. The youths’ stories entailed powerful metaphors for their activist journeys that converged around the idea that becoming an activist involved a process of embodiment over time and through social relationships and practices. This embodiment, thus, resulted in changes in how youths perceived the world, their own experiences, and themselves in and of the world.
None of the participants in this study ever questioned the value of social justice and activist work, rather their participation was more about exploring who they were and who they could become in relation to the broader activist community. The stories and narratives generated through this research practice help elucidate what it means, feels and looks like to be an activist in neoliberal Canada for the young people in this study. Together, we explored many different renderings of what social justice is and means, including: what it means to be an ally and in solidarity with others, advocacy, tolerance and acceptance, environmental activism, art as activism and artist activists.

The YGM group co-constructed stories about the benefits of being an activist that entailed expressions of hope, joy, inspiration, excitement, and determination. Through the social relationships and practices of the YGM the participants became critical pedagogues and learned how to “change the way people think” through which they experienced and witnessed “moments of tangible change.” They also shared stories about the costs of being an activist, which included feelings of alienation and struggles with family members over opposing values and ideals. The youths told many stories about their personal challenges with what an activist is and does that reflected the idea that to be an activist involves understanding that you can never learn enough, know enough or do enough. A commonly expressed value of self-improvement and lifelong learning described by many of the youths reflects a deficit-perspective through the idea that everyone needs to continuously work to improve upon themselves (Larner, 2002). These stories carried traces of burden and guilt that Kennelly (2009) associated with youth activist culture in Canada and situated responsibility solidly on individuals for making themselves and the world better. This perspective, while fuelling action on their part, was at the same time disempowering because it reinforced the illusion that individuals are fully agentic beings operating independently of structural and contextual constraints. Within this notion are traces of the “good citizen” who is an empowered, vocal, and active social change agent; an ideal that is difficult to live up to.
These stories juxtapose the individual as responsible agent with collective action integral to an activist identity and social change. This juxtaposition results in a chasm of responsibility between the individual self and the social collective that is flooded with feelings and experiences of isolation, guilt, resistance, anger, hope, sadness, self-doubt, and confidence. Holland and Gómez (2013) sought to bridge this chasm with a politics of possibility. As they and Harvey (2005) argued, social change will not come about through local and micro interventions. The world has evolved, within the web of neoliberalism, as a globally networked community and as such, any revolutionary or potentially transformative social movement must take place on a broad scale and bring together people with different interests across distal geographic locations. In ways unforeseen before recent technological advances including social media platforms and mobile cellular devices, young activists are reaching out to connect with others and seeking out opportunities, like TA, to be a part of something bigger than themselves in order to engage in meaningful social justice work.

In this dissertation, I have shared many stories and created narratives in an attempt to reveal the possibilities that can emerge when youths are positioned in narrative relation to one another. What has emerged is a complex depiction of the ongoing negotiations of what it actually means, looks like, and feels like to be a young activist today. Although TA failed to provide participants with access to a community where they built long-term sustainable relationships, it proved to be an important place and valuable opportunity for them to experiment and practice what it means for them to be an activist today. To be a young activist today means to have the courage to take a stand for what you believe in, to invest time to learn and practice how to effect social change, and to continue to strive to build connections in a society marked by isolation and alienation.

7.4 Neoliberal Compromises: Youth Engagement as a Site of Contestation

In this dissertation, I have argued that the neoliberal context significantly influenced youths’ learning and participation. Indeed, neoliberalism compromises even the most radical, political
and/or innovative context. Think Again was an explicitly political organization that engaged young people as critical pedagogues through a learning model focused on a particular vision of activism and social change. This vision was influenced by the broader funding and policy structures as well as the organization’s values that shaped the program. Participation at TA was organized with values of youth civic engagement and critical pedagogy in mind, the structure worked to in/exclude certain youth from participating. In so doing, these layers of influence—policy, discourse, funding, curriculum, and pedagogical structure—actively constructed a particular place of possibility for youth activism, and by default a particular youth activist identity, that was situated in the contemporary neoliberal context. The youths encountered this at TA and negotiated it continually through their participation at TA. The experiences of participants in TA enable a view into this complicated struggle, one that exposes how TA both resisted and reinforced neoliberalism.

The stories that participants told about their initial motivations for joining TA reflected the complex cultural terrain of neoliberalism (Holland & Gómez, 2013). Most of the youths’ arrival stories were grounded in the understanding that TA was an opportunity for them to gain skills and experience that would make them more competitive in the educational or workforce domains. This reflects the argument outlined in Chapter Two that, in a neoliberal era, all social activity must have a marketable outcome. While the youths made many references to the idea that TA would look good on a resume, in equal abundance were their stories about a desire to build relationships, connect, and expand their communities. These parallel motivations stress the effects of individualism on humans as inherently social beings who are actively pursuing ways to feel connected, important, valued, and capable of contributing to concerns larger than their own. Think Again was a potential place for these young people to survive—by building their resumes—and thrive—by connecting with others—in the current neoliberal era.
Another profound way that neoliberalism had affected TA was visible in the recent shift to a cohort model interrelated with funding and resources. The implementation of the cohort model reflected a move on the part of TA to continuously evolve their programming in order to remain relevant to young people and be seen as innovative and competitive to potential funders. Within this framework, youths committed to a year of volunteering with a group of 10-15 other youths. Each cohort operated as a distinct entity—they had their own trainings and monthly meetings—and overlapped at occasional TA events or workshops. Generally speaking, there was little to no interaction between cohorts; in my time with TA, I only met youth volunteers beyond the YGM group when I attended fundraising events open to the general public. While a cohort model seemed conducive to developing communities of practice, there were few opportunities for the cohorts, conceived of as separate communities, to work together, to grow into each other, and to become a larger social network. Some of the youth were drawn to TA because of the potential for building relationships with their peers in the cohort, yet the desire for deeper connections remained largely unfulfilled for the YGM group. Further, the current implementation of the cohort model foreclosed any opportunity for TA to mobilize a broad sweeping social movement by sectioning off groups by focal interest or time schedules. In her interview, Hermione explained that she wanted to improve the cohort model because she believed ongoing engagement and sustainable networks were essential to the success of TA and effective social change and were not possible in the current organizational structure.

In addition, the analysis presented in Chapter Four illustrated the ways that the market-focused discourse of neoliberalism has shaped the everyday practices and structure of TA. TA relied largely on grant funding from a wide range of sources. Every grant proposal had unique requirements and expectations, all of which relied on some form of evidence of the “effectiveness” of TA. Most evaluations of youth engagement—key to many grant applications—rely on
quantitative measures of participation, such as attendance, graduation, and direct volunteer hours accrued. Quantifying participation at TA in this way would have ignored that all of these youth were enrolled in some form of higher education, and most of them held jobs and/or had other volunteer commitments, as well as full personal and social lives. This conflict results in a pressure to quantify the performance of organizations and participants in ways to become competitive for grants and funding that may not necessarily coincide with TA’s radical political agenda and, further, seem to contradict it. Specific examples of the influence of a market-focused discourse were the volunteer contract that participants were asked to sign at the outset of their commitment, along with the heavily structured meetings, described by participants as “all business,” that left no time for hanging out, which is essential for building relationships. In fact, the solidarity that could have emerged as a result of engaging in a community with some shared goals and value commitments was effectively dampened by these features, as well as others, such as scheduling the bulk of the facilitations during the day and the lack of mentorship connections for most participants. In a sense, as noted by several participants, participation in this community was lonely.

This isolating structure changed when participants engaged in their creative action projects. For many of the participants, the CAPs were a pivotal point whereby TA transformed from an opportunity motivated by neoliberal values and ideals, such as individual gain and accomplishment, to a more personal and process-oriented experience. The CAPs were unstructured; youth were given the broad directive to design and implement a social action in their community. The CAPs were a unique pedagogical aspect of their participation in that they were given a vague objective expected to be relevant to them and/or their community. Hermione and I offered all of the youths ongoing support throughout the CAPs and we encouraged them to work together. The youths’ initial responses to this task ran the gamut, including expressions of: confusion, being overwhelmed, excitement, resistance, boredom, and ambivalence. Their responses were not surprising and were
similar to my own students’ reactions when given intentionally broad and vague assignments. Open-ended tasks stand in stark contrast to the standardized and outcome-oriented curriculum prevalent across educational settings in North American. The CAPs illustrated a local site of contestation that created fissures in neoliberalism and generated “politics of possibilities” (Holland & Gómez, 2013) because they were deeply personal, involved risk, and entailed taking action.

Youths’ participation at TA was marked by an undertone of pressure and anxiety that came across in their stories of perfectionism and self-criticism. By and large, the YGM group was trying to figure out how to live and who to be within this neoliberal context. This gives rise to my claim that to be a living breathing human situated within this context is to be compromised by the confluence of neoliberal values, practices, and ideology. Thus, even when motivations are grounded in a critical social justice project it is, and always will be, informed by feelings of pressure, accountability, and quantifiable outcomes; neoliberalism is the air we breathe.

7.5 Evolving Methodological Contributions

This research was grounded in the critical research tradition and drew upon situated learning, sociocultural and narrative theory. A goal of this research was to gather, construct, and share youths’ narratives that could speak back to—and possibly counter or rupture—dominant narratives. Two related commitments formed the foundation for this research design: first, a commitment to recognizing youth as active agents within and across sociocultural contexts; and second, a commitment to learning from and with youth as they co-constructed narratives about their participation in TA. While this study was not a participatory action research project, it was informed by participatory and collaborative approaches to research. It was my aim to work with participants as collaborators and co-researchers as much as possible. To this end, I incorporated two approaches for analyzing data with participants, based on the work of Fine (2014), and elaborated a participant-driven interview that drew on artifact-mediated research methods.
7.5.1 Participatory analysis. The first method of participatory analysis focused on the experiential interviews through group dialogue and a creative writing exercise as described in Chapter Five (see Appendix F.1). Within this dialogue and writing exercise, we co-constructed a refined understanding of how and what learning as participation at TA meant to the participants. These exercises provided a unique opportunity to examine meta-levels of data inquiring if and how TA functioned as a community of practice while engaging in dialogue with participants about that very issue. As a researcher and co-participant within this community, it was my hope that this collaborative approach would further my understanding of TA and of the social relationships within the YGM group. It also served as a method of member-checking my initial findings across the interview data.

This form of analysis may be useful for research with a number of different kinds of participants, including youth, educators, youth workers, counselors, and scholars. The use of dialogue and creative methods to generate participant insights and feedback to the data collected previously was significant to my conception, organization and interpretation of the data. The kind of feedback I received and the participants’ interest in this form of analysis showed the extent to which they longed to have opportunities for useful and important work, as well as to make a contribution, even if only to my research. In addition, however, it is also possible to imagine this sort of participatory analysis may not be appropriate for all participants and research topics. For example, some participants may feel less comfortable discussing what was shared during their individual interviews and/or sharing their creative writing reflections publicly. Even for the participants in this study, time was an issue, something to be taken into account if and when participatory analysis methods are used.

The second method of participatory analysis focused on the video data of the monthly meetings (see Appendix F.2). Analyzing video data with two participants provided a much more
nuanced understanding because we had three unique perspectives and interpretations, rather than my singular lens. This method of analysis allowed me to gain insight on events during meetings and social encounters. Together, we discussed what they saw in the segments of videotape that were shared, and we had an opportunity to relive the moments of experience in order to reflect upon them. The video data provided an opportunity to observe how youth negotiated meanings through their social interactions along with a meta-analysis after the fact. This analysis helped me understand the social relationships and practices of the YGM.

As noted above, for this group, participatory analysis appeared appropriate and offered another opportunity to reflect on and contribute their perspectives and experiences. Perhaps more potentially problematic than the analysis through dialogue and creative writing, as noted above, reviewing videotapes of meetings may not be appropriate for all research participants and/or topics. Both forms of analysis worked for this research because of my relationships with the participants and their relationships with each other. Specifically due to the youths’ perspectives, I gained a richer understanding of how the YGM became a community of practice for some and not for others. As depicted in Chapter Four, this method of analysis was crucial for understanding the pervasive effects of neoliberalism on TA and youth engagement more generally.

7.5.2 Cultural artifact elicitation interviews. In this study, both the text-based and artifact elicitation interview methods evoked emotional responses, past remembrances and future imaginings, rich descriptions, and sense making through storytelling. The data gathered from the artifact elicitation interviews was primarily textual data; I focused on the stories the participants told about their artifacts. I invited participants to tell me about their artifacts and followed up with probing questions aimed to solicit information about the meaning of the artifact in relation to their creative action project. The goal of this interview was to examine youths’ meaning making in practice: the participants’ acting with mediational means (cultural artifacts) across the contextual
layers of their participation (the creative action projects). My approach shifted the interest from the image or artifact as a static representation of meaning to a view of cultural artifacts as mediational means. Pahl and Roswell (2011) described their artifactual literacy framework as an interest in “people’s everyday entanglements with objects—the things they hold dear and can narrate in other contexts” (p. 133). Drawing on this idea, I used cultural artifacts to elicit stories from participants about their creative action projects that occurred within TA and community settings. This focus on artifacts in relation to participation shifted agency to the youths and foregrounded their processes of meaning making and identity construction. In this way, the participants’ cultural artifacts were cultural tools that constituted and expressed ways of knowing and identities in the making that moved with youth across their various communities.

Aliza’s cultural artifact interview illustrates the potential of this method. Aliza’s cultural artifact was a handful of cherry tree sap she gathered during her CAP event. I took photos of her picking sap from the bark of trees. That day and during the interview, she explained to me that gathering the sap was a practice of self-care. She was having a hard day and found the sap calming and peaceful. During the CAP, Aliza asked me, “did you know that this sap will eventually turn into amber?” as she showed me the glimmering pieces of gold she had gathered in a plastic cup. I sat down on the curb with her and rolled some pieces of sap around in my hands and felt their warmth. I held one up to my eye to look through it. We pondered how many years and lifetimes the transformation to amber would take. We hugged. During her interview, Aliza forgot the cup of sap, but showed me a picture of it on her phone and talked about how the sap helped her enjoy and get through the day of her CAP. She shared challenges and stressors that she had been facing and talked about how she managed her emotions and anxiety. Art and community were her major outlets.
After the interview, she invited me to her house to see a new painting she had been working on (see Figure 6.4). While there she brought the cup of sap out to show me; I asked her to hold the sap in her hands while I took a picture (see Figure 6.5). Aliza’s cultural artifact, an artifact that moved across and intersected communities, as well as the pictorial representations of it, our shared experiences, the data, and my own reflections, analysis, and interpretations of these layers of meaning, all contributed to the construction of Aliza’s participation narrative. To better achieve the potential of the cultural artifact elicitation method in the future, I will draw on scholarship from visual semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) and multimodal literacies (New London Group, 1996).

### 7.6 Research Experience as a Transformational Relational Practice

Lave (2011) described research, and critical ethnographic practice specifically, as “a long-term, uneven struggle, an ongoing, open-ended, and partial process to explore and develop a theoretical/empirical stance that addresses ethical/political issues in rigorous terms” (p. 33). Her approach to research is based on a view that research evolves over time through ongoing critical struggles with previous work in relation to present stances as a means to continuously revise theoretical and empirical work. In other words, a research practice is grounded in the understanding that there is no end or conclusion because “the lived-in world is in process and in change and that this changing process is historical in nature” (Lave, 2011, p. 152). This notion of research as situated activity brings to the fore the importance of examining ourselves, as researchers, and research as part of a relational historical process. Drawing attention to the always partial, relational, and situated nature of research as practice reflects not only the unity of theory and method, but also intentionally ruptures of the metaphor of researcher as objective authority and the research product as finite Truth.
Writing about art and literature, Greene (1994) addressed similar concerns about the incomplete, relational, and situated nature of texts—the most common product of any research practice. Like all tools, language is limited, and its effects are partial. This recognition is liberating because it acknowledges that no experience or life exists within a single narrative. Greene’s view of humans as “members of communities, as persons in process, always on the way” directly aligns with the epistemological and ontological commitments of this study (p. 217). Her work is particularly helpful for thinking about how texts function as a tool for meaning making, which she described as “an event, a happening along a route of becoming” (p. 217). This idea that meaning is an integral aspect of becoming reflects the dynamic and situated nature of both. Texts, and imaginative works, are relational and have the potential to illuminate layers of our experiences and lives while enabling an opportunity for meaning making. For this research, the crux of Greene’s (1994) argument is that that we can break through the crisis of representation by working to construct unique narratives and stories that open up possibilities through a relational approach that depends upon, recognizes and engages others in ongoing conversations while seeking experience and meaning. This is the impetus of this work, to make connections with likeminded scholars, educators, youth workers, artists, activists, and young people so that together we can work to imagine alternative ways of being and knowing. Consistent with the language used throughout this text, Greene (1994) highlighted the transformational power of narrative:

> Works of art, of all human creations, are occasions for exploration, not for completion.

> Indeed, they remind us that history and the human story can never be completed. So literature, with other works of art, can become a harbinger of the possible. (p. 218)

Following both Lave and Greene, this dissertation serves as an open invitation and request for others to engage in community through ongoing conversations. Together, we continue to make sense of the world and our experiences in order to render visible places of possibility.
My own reflexivity was an important tool for this research. During this research, I kept a journal to reflect on my subjective experiences and perceptions; I continuously considered and critically reflected upon how my own social locations, biases, and experiences influenced the conditions of this research. I explored and brought to light my own evolving narrative constructions—dual landscapes of consciousness and action—that shaped and were shaped by my relationships and experiences of this research. My own interests were central to this research. I was and remain doggedly curious about how and why people think, feel, act, do, and value as they do, and how thinkings, feelings, actions, doings, valuings are shaped by their social and historical contexts. This curiosity both fueled and continues to fuel my desire to relate and connect with others and has informed my personal and professional journeys. When Vygotsky (1997) proposed that “through others we become ourselves,” he was locating human relationships at the center of sociocultural theory (p. 105). Relationships and social relations are vital for the construction of knowledge, identities, and values, as well as the meanings enabled through and about those constructions. This belief grounds my research practice, which is at its core, about how people make meaning through their relationships with others.

As a critical researcher and educator, my work is organized toward a more socially just future by creating spaces for communicating across difference. An important nuance of this aim is that these spaces, as with all communities and relationships, are inherently conflict-ridden, contentious, and plural. My goal is never to achieve a shared opinion or consensus; rather it is to engage in a dialogic space where a plurality of perspectives and experiences are valued. What this looks and feels like varies drastically across settings and contexts. Since moving to Canada from the US for graduate school I have struggled with what seems like a Canadian liberal ethos, particularly as I have experienced it in the classroom context where it most often manifests as politeness and political correctness. This, in my opinion, forecloses opportunities for challenge, critique, and dissent. My
socialization into Canadian classrooms entailed the realization that it was considered rude to offer an opposing viewpoint or stance. Doing so only further alienated me and failed to engage my peers and students in the kinds of dialogue and debate that I was longing for.

An example of this took place early in the term during the first course I taught in the university teacher education program. The discussion topic for the day was race and culture. I asked my students to prepare for a reflective writing exercise. I prompted them to reflect upon and write about their own social locations in relation to their biases and prejudices. I turned from the board to face the class and found them all staring at me. I asked them what was wrong. A student told me that this was Canada and that racism was not a problem here. He explained that I could not possibly understand because I was American. The rest of the class supported this student and effectively shut down my attempts to engage them in a critical dialogue about the ongoing contentious indigenous-settler relations, Canada’s role in slavery and the US Civil War, or the Japanese internment camps in BC. My initial shock and dismay wore off and made room for inspiration and determination. I have come to find that experiences like this one, and there have been many, are de rigueur when engaging in education for social justice.

Facilitating dialogue across difference is extremely difficult. To me, the difficulty speaks back to the vital need for all people to have opportunities to do so. Think Again's mission was also grounded in the desire to create spaces for difficult dialogue and communication across difference. When I began working with TA I was not sure if ours was going to be a good fit. On the surface the youth involved at TA seemed like relatively privileged, engaged, and successful young people trying to do good in the world. They seemed to fit into my understanding of typical liberal Canadians. My initial observations of TA were challenged as soon as they came into my classroom as visitors to facilitate a dialogue with my students. They gracefully and ardently worked to facilitate productive dialogue with my resistant students. Before my very eyes I saw these courageous young
people operating on the strength of their convictions in the face of direct opposition. My heart raced for them, my face burned with frustration, and I was so disappointed and felt responsible for my students’ behavior when several of them openly resisted the activities that the TA facilitators had organized for their presentation. In this moment of witnessing and solidarity, I began to understand my own experiences and struggles as a critical educator differently.

As I reflect upon the relationships and shared experience of this research, I can clearly see how my own and TA’s shared social justice agenda organized this research practice. I see how the roles of teacher, student, peer, facilitator, educator, and activist coalesce in new ways. Although I have always said that I am a critical educator, I have never said that I am an activist educator, but that is changing with this research practice. I am starting to see, feel, and think about teaching as activism; similarly to how the youths from TA talked about the workshops as action. The youths’ stories about what it means and feels like to be an activist today have helped me understand my experiences as a teacher who works to facilitate dialogue across difference as activism. Sometimes I feel burdened, guilty, incompetent, isolated, angry, and utterly discouraged. I often think that I can never know enough, be good enough, or do enough to catalyze that transformational learning I strive for. What I have learned from the youth at TA is that these feelings and thoughts are part of what it means to be an activist today and that there is power in solidarity, even from afar; and these lessons are invaluable.

My participation in my academic/teaching community intersected with my participation and membership in Think Again and helped me think more broadly about education and learning today. Over time and through social relationships and practices, I came to see and understand this group of youths and TA, and ultimately, myself, differently. It has renewed my stance that relationships and community in all their discord, conflict, and strife are essential to any and all self and social transformation. The open-ended and conversational nature of the initial interviews generated rich
data and created a solid relational foundation. The interviews were one-on-one shared experiences where youth told and showed me who they were, are, and wanted to be. They told me stories about what and who was important to them; they revealed their beliefs, goals, and hopes for the future. I was struck by how the simplicity of this approach facilitated meaningful connections and deeply felt narratives. The interviews, the monthly meetings, and all of the creative action project activities provided opportunities for relationship building. These shared experiences—constitutive of and by social practices and relationships—generated a community of practice for me. That newly created foundation generated this narrative construction and entailed new knowledge and skills, shifts in my identities, and was consequential to and valued in my other intersecting communities of practice. Together, we made something happen for all of us.

7.7 Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

This dissertation supports the call for research on and about places of learning for social justice based on a sociocultural framework of participation that leads to the creation of these places. From this perspective, learning as participation entails “becoming recognized, and recognizing oneself, as a member” of a community of practice (O’Connor & Allen, 2010, p. 161). That there are no benign contexts in the contemporary neoliberal society surfaces issues of access to and exclusion from opportunities for recognition. Kelly et al.’s (2004) conceptualization of teaching for social justice provides a foundation for teaching and learning that pays due attention to the social context through critical analysis, the importance of self-reflexivity, recognition, and ongoing action.

Here, I have elaborated the work of Vadeboncoeur et al. (2011) by applying it in the context of a youth activist organization, TA (see Figure 7.1). This allows me to attend to the contextual layers and lived experiences of youth participation and responds to Fine and Weis’ (2012) call for critical bifocal research. This discussion is grounded in the critical aims of this research outlined in Chapter 1. This framework also draws heavily from Holland and Gómez’s (2013) work on activism...
in the new cultural terrain of neoliberalism. Holland and Gómez (2013) argued that focusing on the “here and now” and a “politics of possibility” entails a different way of thinking about politics, constructs alternatives to the status quo enacted in the present, and facilitates “processes of becoming in place” (p. 132). They laid out ten criteria for catalyzing the critical mass necessary for social transformation; these could be used as ways to attend, as well, to the notion of consequentiaility raised by O’Connor and Allen (2010). Drawing on Holland and Gomez’s (2013) criteria for social transformation and data from this study, I outline the foundation of my framework for youths’ participation in activist organizations.

The top contextual layer of Figure 7.1 and calls attention to the ways in which institutions and social relations are obtained, for example, through the process of seeking, acquiring, and maintaining funding. A foundational aspect of youths’ participation in activist organizations is the recognition of structures of domination alongside critical reflection and analysis of the status quo. Also important is the identification and implementation of a “politics of possibility,” which requires a belief in and implementation of alternative political and social realities, such as capacity building with young people to prepare them for visits to high school and university classrooms to engage students in conversations around oppression and discrimination. Another feature of youths’ participation in activist organizations is ongoing attention to imagining and creating alternative valued social futures. For example, organizing the facilitation workshops, engaging moment-to-moment with young people, and considering ways for these conversations to continue. This was an area of weakness for TA and way a concern for Hermione as she remained committed to working with TA to ensure youths’ participation would be sustainable over the long-term.

The middle contextual layer of Figure 7.1 focuses on the ways in which the macro and micro layers converge and influence local places of practice. Even though the YGM was considered to be successful in a number of ways, when the funding ran out after the third YGM cohort, the program
ended. Funding, then, influenced the overall structure and organization of Think Again, including the content and availability of workshops. This, in turn, limited the potential for socialization and transformation through critical reflection, dialogue, and action. Vital to any social transformation project in the neoliberal era is an orientation and commitment to creating “an us” through community building. Because of the complex neoliberal cultural terrain the “us,” must extend beyond local communities of practice and build a broader social movement across interests and geographic locations. As found in this study, local practices must prioritize participant time and practices necessary for building relationships and community. For the YGM group this would have entailed them spending more unstructured time together, rather than the tightly scheduled monthly meetings. Also important is extending participation beyond the community and affecting changes in youths’ daily lives and practices. In this way, learning at TA enabled youths to embody their knowing, being, and valuing through their daily activities. This aspect attends to the value of participation rendered visible when it becomes consequential in other valued communities. This is an area that needs further attention through multi-sited research in the future.

Providing young people with opportunities to engage in and transform social practices that support their ability to negotiate hegemonic structures in ways that provoke a greater sense of well-being is an invaluable aspect of participation. All of the social practices of the YGM were organized towards this goal through their dual focus on empowerment and action. Aliza exemplified this twin emphasis with her daily practice of wearing anti-oppressive art that enabled her to subvert oppression and build community. Sustainable and evolving social practices that cultivate individuals’ identities as activists, such as the role of workshop facilitators and the creative action projects at TA, helped support youths’ in making the shift from thinking about to taking action. At this angle, we are able to attend to the embodied aspect of social justice work.
The final elements of participation are grounded in a critical reflective practice as a means to continuously assess and evolve their work in order to maintain a transformative edge. This transformative edge is vital for effective social movements in the rapidly changing contemporary era. Participation towards this productive edge emphasizes critical reflection because all youth activism emerges through ongoing struggle with oppressive neoliberal forces and can be thought about in two ways. First, in order for youth activist organizations to catalyze transformational potential, they must explicitly engage in praxis in order to shield themselves from co-optation and re/producing structures of privilege and power within their social change efforts. Second, youth activist organizations must engage in ongoing reflexive dialogues whereby they review and revise objectives with attention to the present stance and state of affairs in order to constantly reassess and adapt action strategies. One way that TA actively engaged in this work was through participant feedback at all of their workshops and by seeking out feedback from volunteers about their lived experiences of participation, as was presented in TA narrative in Chapter Four.
### Macro: “Structures of Domination” (Holland & Gómez, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Institutions</th>
<th>Social Relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e.g., youth engagement, schooling</td>
<td>e.g., YGM: TA staff and Youth volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linking ideology, policy, funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., global: CRC, national: CFYE, local: CYS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>granting institutions: national, provincial, and local</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Potential socialization & potential transformation]

### Local: “Local Places of Practice” (Holland & Gómez, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Practices</th>
<th>Social Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e.g., monthly meetings and workshops</td>
<td>e.g., peer-to-peer, mentors &amp; youth volunteers, ed. coordinator and youth volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zones of proximal development</td>
<td>internalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community of practice</td>
<td>(resist and reinforce)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Potential socialization & potential transformation]

### Micro: “Politics of Possibility” (Holland & Gómez, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individuals Acting With Mediational Means</th>
<th>Learning: Knowing, Being &amp; Valuing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e.g., Cultural Tools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7.1 Participation in Youth Activist Organizations: Think Again**

This study contributes to the literature on youth development and, in particular, highlights the significance of the construction of places in which young people can engage in critical reflection and dialogue about their lived experiences with a goal of taking creative action. The stories that emerged from this youth-driven organization may help us build a deeper understanding of what transformational learning can be within and outside of classrooms. Opportunities like TA are crucial for young people to push against and change designated identities, such as “millennial youth” or “struggling student” to actual identities such as “social change agent” or “activist” (Sfard &
Prusak, 2005). Evident across the youths’ participation was the significant transformational learning that emerged from the creative action projects.

Oldtimers actively organized three pedagogical features that contributed to the “politics of possibility” evidenced in the youths’ creative action projects: a loosely structured yet relevant objective, time and resources for conceptualization and implementation, and support through mentorship. The creative action projects and these three pedagogical tools could be applied to similar places of learning. These places of learning could emerge in classrooms, youth centers, after-school programs, residential facilities, juvenile detention facilities, truant mentorship programs, and most contexts that aim to facilitate youths’ learning and development. I propose that places of learning such as Think Again should be considered valuable opportunities for young people.

A limitation of this study provides clear direction for future research that utilizes a multi-sited approach to studying youth participation. Without utilizing a multi-sited approach, I was limited in my ability to consider the consequentiality of youths’ participation at TA. To do so, I would need to travel with the participants into their other communities of practice. A multi-sited approach would also enable an analysis that attends to the spatial practices of youth activism. Working within the critical research paradigm, my objectives are to connect theory and practice towards social justice aims. From this study and scholars before me, it is clear that any social change effort requires a broad long-term commitment. This study is a step in that direction. I will maintain my commitment to a long-term partnership with TA as a foundation for future research and my expanding communities of practice.

Finally, I critically reflect upon the community of practice framework to illustrate how theory and method always limit, as well as open up, opportunities for new ways of thinking about and representing research. For example, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is intentionally ambiguous, embraces tension and conflict, and is non-linear.
Yet, it situates analytical primacy on changes in participation viewed through a lens of growing involvement through an apprenticeship framework. While TA—as reflected in the descriptions offered by the educational coordinators—was explicitly geared towards growing and sustaining participants’ involvement, it appeared to be one-sided, as the same was not reflected across the participants’ stories. Few expressed a desire to create or maintain a long-term membership to TA. This may have been exacerbated by the participation structure of TA, which had a delineated beginning and end with a yearlong formal volunteer commitment, and the splintering effects of the cohort model; both were influenced by neoliberalism. The fact that the participants in this study, by and large, did not become oldtimers at TA had little impact on their stories of their participation, which were rich with new knowledge, growing skills, their changing views of themselves and each other in and of the world. From this vantage point, an analytical view of LPP lends itself to a focus on outcomes—growing involvement—rather than the process of engagement.

Further, the concept of “community” came up in all of the participants’ elicitation interviews. Most of them offered an unsolicited story about what community meant to them; and if not, I directly asked them what community meant to them. All of the participants’ stories about community were rich with emotional themes that were grounded in relationships and experiences of connectedness. Participation for this group of young people seemed to generate some of these feelings and connections necessary for personal and social transformation, but tended to catalyze individualized personal actions, rather than mobilizing them together toward a broader social action. From this perspective, participation at TA was a valuable step in youths’ activist trajectories, but their trajectories did not prioritize the reproduction of TA as a local community of practice. Rather, participants’ trajectories were geared towards a broader vision of a valued, more socially just, future. What TA provided these young people was a place to envision a more socially just future and experiment with roles and learn how to work towards that future. Both the community of practice
framework and research design limited the potential for thinking about the youths’ participation at TA through their divergent stories about community and desired social futures. A different approach could have used their stories about valued communities as a way to think through what TA meant to them instead of analyzing meaning through the LPP lens.

This dissertation, as narrative, exposes how neoliberalism reinforces a single “youth” narrative, effectively curtailing the construction of alternative narratives. This research maintained the relationship between society and young people in order to elucidate how places of possibility can and do emerge even in youth programs created during neoliberal times, albeit in limited ways that are shaped by the values advanced by governmental policies on youth engagement. For young people, learning to become activists entails changes in how they know, how they view themselves in relation within a valued community, and how these changes enable them to take action. This is a transformational learning process and involves risk and vulnerability that is heightened by the current ethos of individualism. My writing of this narrative is strongly influenced by my conviction that it is relationships and creative processes that afford possibilities for communicating across differences in ways that can facilitate powerful meaning making. This work points to the significance of narratives and relationships in creating fissures in the neoliberal conditions. Narratives are tools that enable us to build relationships with others and to make meaning of our learning in relation. Through these relationships with others we are able to face the risks involved in imagining and creating new narratives. These ideas are central to this conceptualization of youth participation and activism as action that contributes to the construction of new narratives. Building social movements that challenge oppression and work towards justice relies on our ability to connect and build relationships with others. It is these relationships that will support creative risk-taking in places of learning and the kind of critical engagement that can create new opportunities and possible futures. As this moment comes to a close, the imagined social future unfolds.
References


Fine, M., & Weis, L. (1996). Writing the “wrongs” of fieldwork: Confronting our own research/writing dilemmas in urban ethnographies. *Qualitative Inquiry, 2*(3), 251-274.


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Appendices

Appendix A:

A.1 Youth Consent Form

Kristen P. Goessling, M.S., Doctoral Candidate
The University of British Columbia
Faculty of Education
Vancouver BC V6T-1Z4

“Youth (18 + years) Consent Form”
[Re/Narrating Youth: A Critical Qualitative Study in an Urban Activist Organization]

Principal Investigator: Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur, Ph.D., Associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia (telephone 604-xxx-xxxx or e-mail: xxxx@ubc.ca).

Co-Principal Investigator: Kristen P. Goessling, M.S., Doctoral Candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia (telephone 503-xxx-xxxx or email: xxxx@alumni.ubc.ca).

This research is being done as part of a doctor of philosophy degree and will be part of a published dissertation. This research will be used for academic publications and presentations, including: print and electronic academic journals, journal databases, books, and conference presentations. This research will also be shared with the community collaborators, participants, and the university research team.

Invitation:

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are a volunteer in the Gender and Media Representation project at “Think Again” (TA).

Why are we doing this study?

We are doing this study to learn more about how youth come to understand themselves and their experiences in new and different ways. Specifically, we think about TA as a context for learning and becoming social change agents. We want to know more about how participation in TA supports the construction of new knowledge, identities, and values. Think Again may use the findings from the study to adapt and evolve their program format and structure according to the youths’ perspective.
What happens if I say “Yes, I want to be in the study”?

If you say ‘Yes’, here is how we will do the study:

- This project will last about six-months, from the winter of 2014 to the summer of 2014.
- The majority of this project will take place during the already scheduled meetings and programming of TA.
- During the project I [Kristen] will want to talk with you about your experiences. I will also want to talk to you after you have completed your creative action project to learn more about how you thought about and designed it.
  - We will schedule these talks at a time and location of your choice.
  - I will videotape these conversations so I can watch and write them out later. I will give you a copy of our conversations so that you can check them and make corrections if needed.
- I will attend, participate, and observe monthly meetings, activities, and workshop facilitations. I will take notes about my observations and participation during these activities.
- I will keep a personal journal about this project that I will not share with TA. I will write down what I learn each day. I will also summarize talks that are shared with me.
- If you agree to take part, I will ask you later for reactions to what I think I have learned. That is, I will want to check with you, to make sure I have it ‘right.’

Will being in this study help me in any way?

- You may benefit from this project in positive ways. You may feel excited or good about yourself from creating and sharing your work and idea with others. You may also benefit by learning about research.
- The TA community may learn about how TA influences your life and future. This study may help TA adapt the program to better fit the needs of youth volunteers and ignite social change.
- A final project report will be shared with you and TA after the project is over. A copy of the final report will be emailed to you. If you would like the report to be sent somewhere else, please include a different mailing address in the space at the end of this form.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

- We do not think there is anything in this study that could harm you, but you may feel uncomfortable at times. You may feel bothered with how much time the project takes. Some people have emotional reactions during interviews, or when reflecting on and expressing themselves creatively. Some of the questions we ask may seem sensitive or personal.
• You do not have to answer any question or do any activity that you do not want to.
• You may quit the study at any time without any penalty.
• Please let the researcher [Kristen] or the TA educational coordinator [Veronica] know if you are upset or uncomfortable at any time.

**How will my identity be protected?**

• Your name will not be on any of the study materials. Only a special code number is there. I will keep your code number and name locked up in my research office at UBC.

• All of the videotaped interviews will be destroyed after I have written them out.

• All of your identifying information will be removed from any report that I share with TA and they will keep the report in their secure office.

• I will not use your name or any identifiers in any report, article or presentation.

• I will follow TA policy for reporting any information that you share with me about any abuse and/or neglect of a child or an elderly person (or risk of this happening) or if you tell me that you are feeling like hurting yourself or someone else. Law requires that I report this to a designated social worker at the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

**Will I be paid for my time?**

No, you will not be paid to take part. There are no costs associated with in this project.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about the study?**

If you have any questions or want more information about this study, you may contact Kristen Goessling at telephone 503.xxx.xxxx or email xxxx@alumni.ubc.ca or Jennifer Vadeboncoeur at telephone 604.xxx.xxxx or e-mail xxxx@mail.ubc.ca.

**Who can I contact if I have complaints or concerns about the study?**

If you have a complaint, grievance, or concern about your treatment or rights please contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-xxx-xxxx or if long distance e-mail to xxxx@ors.ubc.ca or toll free 1-877xxx-xxxx.

**Consent:**
Your participation in this project is voluntary. You can stop being in the project at any time. If you want, you can also ask me to delete all your stories and facts from the project.

• **Your signature below indicates that I have given you a copy of this form to keep.**
• Your signature indicates that you agree to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant               Date

Preferred Address and/or Email

The extra copy of the consent form is for you to keep
A.2 Youth Consent Form (No Pseudonyms)

Kristen P. Goessling, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
The University of British Columbia
Faculty of Education
Vancouver BC V6T-1Z4

“Youth (18 + years) Consent Form”
[Re/Narrating Youth: A Critical Qualitative Study in an Urban Activist Organization]

Principal Investigator: Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur, Ph.D., Associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia (telephone 604.xxx.xxxx or e-mail: xxxx@ubc.ca).

Co-Principal Investigator: Kristen P. Goessling, M.S., Doctoral Candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia (telephone 503.xxx.xxxx or email: xxyy@alumni.ubc.ca).

This research is being done as part of a doctor of philosophy degree and will be part of a published dissertation. This research will be used for academic publications and presentations, including: print and electronic academic journals, journal databases, books, and conference presentations. This research will also be shared with the community collaborators, participants, and the university research team.

Invitation:

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are a volunteer in the Gender and Media Representation project at “Think Again” (TA).

Why are we doing this study?

We are doing this study to learn more about how youth come to understand themselves and their experiences in new and different ways. Specifically, we think about TA as a context for learning and becoming social change agents. We want to know more about how participation in TA supports the construction of new knowledge, identities, and values. Think Again may use the findings from the study to adapt and evolve their program format and structure according to the youths’ perspective.

What happens if I say “Yes, I want to be in the study”?

If you say ‘Yes’, here is how we will do the study:
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• The majority of this project will take place during the already scheduled meetings and programming of TA.
• During the project I [Kristen] will want to talk with you about your experiences. I will also want to talk to you after you have completed your creative action project to learn more about how you thought about and designed it.
  o We will schedule these talks at a time and location of your choice.
  o I will videotape these conversations so I can watch and write them out later. I will give you a copy of our conversations so that you can check them and make corrections if needed.
• I will attend, participate, and observe monthly meetings, activities, and workshop facilitations. I will take notes about my observations and participation during these activities.
• I will keep a personal journal about this project that I will not share with TA. I will write down what I learn each day. I will also summarize talks that are shared with me.
• If you agree to take part, I will ask you later for reactions to what I think I have learned. That is, I will want to check with you, to make sure I have it ‘right.’

Will being in this study help me in any way?

• You may benefit from this project in positive ways. You may feel excited or good about yourself from creating and sharing your work and idea with others. You may also benefit by learning about research.
• The TA community may learn about how TA influences your life and future. This study may help TA adapt the program to better fit the needs of youth volunteers and ignite social change.
• A final project report will be shared with you and TA after the project is over. A copy of the final report will be emailed to you. If you would like the report to be sent somewhere else, please include a different mailing address in the space at the end of this form.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

• We do not think there is anything in this study that could harm you, but you may feel uncomfortable at times. You may feel bothered with how much time the project takes. Some people have emotional reactions during interviews, or when reflecting on and expressing themselves creatively. Some of the questions we ask may seem sensitive or personal.
• You do not have to answer any question or do any activity that you do not want to.
• You may quit the study at any time without any penalty.
• Please let the researcher [Kristen] or the TA educational coordinator [Leah] know if you are upset or uncomfortable at any time. If you would
like to speak someone else regarding the study you may contact the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-xxx-xxxx (see additional contact information below).

How will my identity be protected?

- You have requested that your real name be used on all of the study materials.
- All of the videotaped interviews will be destroyed after I have written them out.
- As you have requested, your identifying information will be included any report that I share with TA and they will keep the report in their secure office.
- As you have requested, I will use your name and/or identifiers in any report, article or presentation.
- I will follow TA policy for reporting any information that you share with me about any abuse and/or neglect of a child or an elderly person (or risk of this happening) or if you tell me that you are feeling like hurting yourself or someone else. Law requires that I report this to a designated social worker at the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Will I be paid for my time?

No, you will not be paid to take part. There are no costs associated with in this project.

Who can I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have any questions or want more information about this study, you may contact Kristen Goessling at telephone 503.xxx.xxxx or email xxxx@alumni.ubc.ca or Jennifer Vadeboncoeur at telephone 604.xxx.xxxx or e-mail xxxx@mail.ubc.ca.

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Consent:
Your participation in this project is voluntary. You can stop being in the project at any time. If you want, you can also ask me to delete all your stories and facts from the project.

- Your signature below indicates that I have given you a copy of this form to keep.
• Your signature indicates that you agree to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant                     Date

Preferred Address and/or Email

The extra copy of the consent form is for you to keep
Appendix B:

Experiential Interview Protocol

Interview preparation and Renewal of Consent:

- As a research participant you have rights! Your privacy and confidentiality are of paramount importance.
- This is completely voluntary
- You do not have to answer any question you do not want to and you can end the interview at any time
- You can take breaks or continue the interview at a later date/time
- Please let me know if you are upset or uncomfortable at any point in the interview or afterwards

Demographic Information

- Can you think of a pseudonym that you would like me to use in place of your real name?
- How would you like me to describe you in writing and reports? As many or as few as you prefer, I just want to make sure I write about you how you want me to!
  - Age
  - Gender/pronouns
  - Race
  - Cultural identifications
  - Sexual identity/orientation
- Invitation for personal history/autobiography/life story:
  - Tell me about yourself…and how you became aware of social injustice and oppression…and how that evolved over time…how that brought you to “TA”
- Tell me about “TA”…how would you describe it to someone that doesn’t know anything about it?
  - How did you come to volunteer at TA?
  - Have your reasons for volunteering at TA changed or stayed the same? How so?
  - Can you tell me a bit about what TA means to you or maybe tell me a story that best illustrates it?
- Tell me a bit about the YGM group…the other volunteers…the mentors…the coordinators…
  - Did you know any of the other youth before your came to TA?
  - How do you view your roles within the group?
  - What goals did/do you have for this experience?
  - We all have unique skills, experiences, and insights that we bring to situations, such as this group at TA. What do you think are some of the things that you offer the group?
- Tell me a bit about what has been the most meaningful component of this project to you…
  - What have you gained from it?
If you could change anything about it at all, what would it be?

- What does being a social change agent mean to you?
  - Do you consider yourself a social change agent?
- How do you define social justice?
  - Wikipedia defines social justice as: “the ability people have to realize their potential in the society where they live…” social justice is generally used in a wider way with reference to a set of institutions which will enable people to lead a fulfilling life and be active and contributors to their community” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Justice)
  - A youtube clip “What does social justice mean to you?”: [http://youtu.be/z754lhcX6qw](http://youtu.be/z754lhcX6qw)
- I’d love to hear more about your interest in gender, violence, and media representation?
  - Can you tell me a story or some way that you have personally been affected by the ways in which media represent gender?
- Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? What is important to you?
  - How would you describe yourself? (identity)
  - What would you say are your core values?
  - How do you your values influence the way you live now?
- Can you tell me a bit about your hopes and dreams for the future?
  - How do your values influence your hopes for the future?
  - In what ways (or not at all) do you think TA has shaped your future?
- Is there anything that I missed or that you’d like to share with me?
Appendix C:

Elicitation Interview Protocol

Interview preparation and Renewal of Consent:
Remind participants of informed consent and that they can end the interview at any time, they don’t not have to answer any question they do not want to, they can quit the study at any time without penalty. Also let them know that they can take breaks or continue the interview at a later date/time.

1. Storytelling
“Did you bring your creative action project (photos, artwork, poetry) for us to talk about today?”

“Great! Please tell me about your creative action project.”

Only asked if needed to elaborate on original telling:

2. Content
A. How did you decide what to focus (topic, theme, social issue) on?
- Have you ever done anything like this before? Tell me about it.
- Do you think you will do anything like this in the future?
- What parts of yourself do you feel like your creative action project represents?

B. What’s Missing
“OK, tell me about what you couldn’t capture this time, but would love to get for next time.”
“What needs to happen in order for you to do that?”
OR
“OK, is there anything missing in this artwork?” “Tell me about what is missing?” “What needs to happen if order for you to feel satisfied with your artwork?”

3. Process
“Please tell me about the process of making your creative action project.”

- Conceptualization: Inspiration-Ideas-
- Decisions: Mode-Form-
- Goal: Personal meaning and intent

4. Reflection
A. How do you feel about your creative action project?
B. What was your favorite part?
D. What did you learn from your creative action project?
E. What thoughts and feelings are coming up for you as you talk about your creative action project?

[Interviewer – keep asking “why is that important to you”.
On-going encouragement and support: “This is great!” “I love how you used the sunlight in this one!”]
Appendix D:

Interview Data Transcription Conventions

I: Interview
P: Participant
Time stamp every 2 mins (approx.)

New lines for interruptions (even non-verbal): //

P: blah blah blah//
I: //um humm
P: //blah blah

Laughter or non-verbal expression in: ( …)

Positive and negative intonations for both I & P in: […]

Long pauses […]

Emphasized or stressed speech: *italics*

Phonetically spell out words that are drawn out annnnnnnnnnnnd, ummms

EXAMPLE:
I: Alright, so we've done informed consent...

P: Um Hum [in agreement]

I: We're going to do that signature later, but the participant has agreed and is informed and aware of her rights...and...first thing I would like, to kind of, square away is, how would you like me to refer to you in writ/in writing//

P: //Um Hum

I: A pseudonym, a fake name

P: Oh sure, Ummm, Let's saaaaay Veronica//(laugh)

I: //(laughing)//Vero-nica/ okay, so we've got Veronica here and/

P: (laugh)

I: How about demographic information?
Appendix E:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description/Details</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note how particular details relate to the issues for analysis—status, knowledge/expertise, and relationships, initiation of discourse or contact, and completion of discourse or contact.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Include a subjective and more personal description of what you observed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Include insights or speculation about what you are observing.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/Time</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The physical, human, and social environment.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants Present</th>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities/Behaviors/Roles/Tasks (Social Practices)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Sequence of events and behaviors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Planned and unplanned activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Observing what does not happen</td>
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<tr>
<th>Conversations/Interactions (Social Relationships)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Include patterns of interactions:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Frequency of interactions,</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Direction of communication patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Nonverbal communication</td>
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Appendix F:

F.1 Participatory Analysis #1

The goal of this level of analysis was to refine and co-construct understandings of the data with the participants. The focus of this activity is on the dynamic process of the group.

Aims:
To discomfort dominant stories—opportunity to co-construct counter narratives
To identify places of intersection and commonality
To identify places of difference and contradiction
To identify places of solidarity—“places of catalytic possibility”

To come to a new shared understanding of the data together.

1. Emergent analysis of In-depth interviews

- Co-constructing an understanding/interpretation of the data
- You are the experts
- Each of you took part in a similar interview with me. I used the same general questions and each one took their own unique turns, but they generally followed a similar structure.
  Thinking back to our interview, what are some things that stuck out to you?

What do you think might be some common narratives, stories, or themes across the data?

- Narratives (broader or more general)

- Stories (specific or shorter to provide example or context)

- Themes (feelings, concepts, terms, ideas)
2. I have done close readings of all of the interview transcripts with an eye for emergent narratives, stories and themes. Two key Narratives that I have found are:

- **Narrative 1**: The value and role of community
  - *Stories*:
    - Understanding self and others
    - Belonging
    - Acceptance
    - Challenge
    - Conversations-speaking & listening

- **Narrative 2**: Social Justice as a learning process
  - *Stories*:
    - Learning in school, classes, community organizations, travel, and life experiences
    - Ongoing process of awareness raising
    - Deeply personal and emotional understanding of the world as an unjust place
    - Process of internalizing knowledge into something that is personal and meaningful

**Themes:**
Importance of dialogue, opportunity to “do” and “act”, value of integrity, high expectations of ourselves, importance of relationships, and a sense of responsibility, ethic of care

What do you think about these findings? Are you surprised? Do you think I’ve got it right? Am I totally off-base?

Which one do you think is the most important for us to focus on?

3. Give prompt for reflective writing exercise (about 10 minutes)
   - Ok, Write a letter to someone (alive or dead) telling them how you hold “Group selected narrative” in your body

4. Come together and share experiences
   - Read letters
   - Cross-group dialogue

5. Make connections and highlight how their different perspectives, experiences, and understandings provide new intersections of meaning
   - Try to synthesize and “reframe” the newly co-constructed meaning of the data:
     - How did they construct the emergent narrative?
## F.2 Participatory Analysis #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Info: Date/ Timestamp</th>
<th>Description of Interaction (Objective descriptions): What happened-What is seen/heard?</th>
<th>Reflection (Subjective descriptions): Thoughts, feelings, ideas, understandings of the interaction-what is the participant’s perspective, emotional state/tone, and group dynamics?</th>
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