

Faculty-Student-Service User Collaboration: Community-based Action Research Regarding Service User Involvement in Mental Health and Addiction Policy

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Abstract

Growing out of a 2015 Social Work course at Memorial University (Newfoundland), this panel explores the issue of Faculty–Student–Service User Collaboration in Community-based scholarship regarding population groups typically excluded from research and policy development. This course produced two successful forms of collaboration between the professor, his students, and several community groups. First, in order to facilitate direct drug/service user engagement in research and policy-making, Dr. Smith—whose research emphasizes engaging people with lived experience in all aspects of mental health and addiction policy and practice—founded a local organization for people who use drugs. Detailing the establishment of the Drug User Group, the panel interrogates both the role that Dr. Smith's students played in promoting the group, and how this project effectively served to inspire several students' final projects. Encouraging his students to create activist-oriented 'zines'/booklets as opposed to traditional essays, in the second case, several of Dr. Smith's students actively collaborated with local grassroots organizations, producing several exceptional 'zines,' encompassing the issues of (1) psychiatric survivor rights, (2) the importance of directly engaging mental health and addiction service users, and (3) the legal rights of sex workers. Consisting of a reflection on the impact of politically engaged action research regarding 'user involvement', this panel consists of an introduction by Dr. Smith detailing the collaborative establishment of the St. John's Drug User Group, followed by related commentary from four of his students detailing their respective policy 'zines,' each of which was composed in direct consultation with service users.

Key Words: Praxis; Community-based research (CBR); Community service learning (CSL); Experiential learning; Harm reduction; Marginalized communities; Faculty-student-service user collaboration; Addiction and mental health policy; service user engagement

Introduction

Shortly after beginning my tenure-track contract at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), January 2015 marked my first teaching term as an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work, where I was assigned to teach several sections of a second year course regarding *Critical Approaches to Health and Social Policy* (SCWK 2520). As my personal teaching philosophy is anchored in what I

have come to conceive as the mutually-constituting, inter-dependent relationship between teaching, research, and community-based professional involvements, this course was a perfect fit for me to begin my career at MUN, as it actively encouraged me to draw examples from my extensive policy-driven research experiences related to both mental health and the force/phenomena we have come to term ‘addiction,’ in both academic and professional consulting capacities.

Description of my Personal Research Focus and its Relation to the Course

Stemming from my longstanding research focus on people who use presently illicit drugs (PUD), and the harm reduction-based public health policy interventions designed to meet their needs, the themes of bottom-up grassroots policy resistance, and direct service user involvement of in all aspects of the policies and programs that are ostensibly designed to meet their needs became a recurrent theme in the course, in part owing to a related research project I was immersed in at the same time (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2005; Cheng & Smith, 2009; Smith, 2016; VANDU, 2004, 2010). “In recognition of the deceptive ‘medicine as business’ rationality underlying the designations ‘client’ and ‘consumer’, effectively resituating subjects in a passive, one-way relationship to capitalist forces of production/consumption,” as I have argued elsewhere, this paper consciously employs the term ‘user’ in reference to both harm reduction and drug treatment subjects, “positing the designation drug/service user as a potentially productive, fluid interchangeability” (Smith, 2012, p. 211).

To be more specific, my recent research agenda entails a comparative, international analysis of how socially vulnerable population groups such as PUD are increasingly engaging in various forms of organizing and activism in order to ensure that their individual and collective voices are actively included, engaged, and/or consulted in all aspects of the policies and programs that are ostensibly conducted in their interests, from policy development and project implementation, to service delivery, to research and evaluation (AIVL, 2012, Allman et al., 2006; Balian & White, 2010; Friedman, Schneider & Latkin, 2012; Kerr et al, 2006; Latkin & Friedman, 2012; McNeil et al., 2013; McNeil, Kerr, Lampkin & Small, 2015; Osbourne & Small, 2006; Small et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2003). Upon beginning my contract at MUN in November 2014, I therefore actively sought to initiate an informal, trans-disciplinary, inter-sectoral reading/discussion group forum not only for MUN faculty and students from across the (inter-)disciplinary spectrum, but also policy actors, harm reduction and addiction treatment service providers, as well as drug/service users to critically analyze and debate related issues with the goal of working towards collaborative research endeavors relating to people who use drugs in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Background/Context: The Harm Reduction and Critical Drug Studies Research Exchange Groups (REG) and the St. John’s Drug Users’ Group

Given my strong research emphasis on the fundamental value and importance of drug/service users’ lived experience and/or experiential knowledge (particularly in the context of policy-related research and pedagogy), I did not establish the research exchange group with the intention of fostering a membership base solely consisting of a homogenous group of upper-middle class, highly/hyper-educated academics, policy actors, and/or clinical/administrative personnel from the local harm reduction and/or addiction treatment communities, despite the fact that I explicitly encouraged the involvement of each and every one of these groups. From the outset, I envisioned the *Harm Reduction and Critical Drug Studies* REG as having a strong (drug/service) user-centric mandate, with the group’s activities and research undertakings directly informed by the very people whose lives were directly shaped and informed by treatment and harm reduction interventions—that is, PUD

and/or people with lived experience of substance use, dependency, and/or treatment and recovery (PWLE).

This aspect of the *Harm Reduction and Critical Drug Studies* REG was articulated in no uncertain terms in the promotional material concerning the establishment of the REG that was circulated throughout the MUN community. "The REG is strongly committed to involving people who use drugs," the one-page promotional flyer began, "in every aspect of the policies and programs that are designed to meet their needs." Going on to detail the plurality of different groups for whom the REG may be of relevance, namely drug/service users and providers over and above policy actors and academics from across the MUN community, the flyer asserted that all individuals would be granted 'equal opportunity' not only to speak, but moreover to "contribute and share their skills and lived experience". Explicitly addressing the *Harm Reduction and Critical Drug Studies* REG's primary objectives, the promotional write-up concluded with a bulleted list, much of which contained an overt focus on the centrally important role of PUD and/or PWLE, including: (1) "[t]o create a space for interdisciplinary networking and inter-sectoral collaboration between researchers, service providers, policy makers and drug/service users"; (2) "[t]o work towards establishing an independent user-run, user-led group in St. John's, made up of past and present, active and recovering drug users that can provide peer-led consulting and training services for researchers, government agencies, policy makers, and social service agencies that work with people who use drugs"; (3) "[t]o increase awareness among professionals (i.e. researchers, doctors, pharmacists, nurses, policy makers, etc.) and the larger public regarding the fundamentally important role of both recognizing the fundamental value of lived experience and experiential knowledge among people who use drugs, and situating people who use drugs at the heart of harm reduction, from policy development to service delivery; and, finally, "[t]o work towards establishing an independent user-run, user-led group in St. John's, made up of past and present, active and recovering drug users that can provide peer-led consulting and training services for researchers, government agencies, policy makers, and social service agencies that work with people who use drugs".

It was only at this stage, as the *Harm Reduction and Critical Drug Studies* REG membership base began to grow—first with students and faculty from Memorial University, followed by policy actors, administrator and frontline service providers from agencies with a mandate to work with PUD—that I began to feel as if I may be 'putting the horse before the cart', so to speak. Given the overt emphasis on the direct inclusion of drug/service user voices in the REG, I began to imagine how I might feel were I a person with lived experience of substance use invited to attend a meeting almost solely composed of highly educated, white collar, academics, service providers, and policymakers. This issue was complicated by the question of how to go about recruiting active drug/service users to attend said REG meetings. Stemming from my insistence on the direct involvement of PUD these questions eventually came to grow so significant that I made the decision to postpone the formal launch of the *Harm Reduction and Critical Drug Studies* REG in order to engage in some empowerment and capacity building work amongst the local, St. John's-based community of PUD. Given the fact that unlike central or Western Canada, there was no precedent for organizing or activism among PUD in Atlantic Canada (and particularly Newfoundland), this task proved to be slightly more challenging than I had initially imagined.

In an effort to establish an autonomous organization by and for PUD in St. John's, I therefore began by holding a series of meetings with relevant local stakeholders, including individuals from the only formal harm reduction program in the province of Newfoundland—the *Safer Works Access Program* (SWAP), a program run by the *AIDS Committee of Newfoundland and Labrador* (ACNL)—as well as several key individuals who played a central role in organizing independent recovery-based groups

for PUD in St. John's and surrounding areas. This series of meetings yielded a number of enormously helpful suggestions, and with the assistance of a number of community partners (detailed further below)—the ACNL chief among them—I began preparing promotional material for the first formal meeting of the *St. John's Drug Users' Group*. Beneath the large bold title that read “ATTENTION: People With Lived Experience of Substance Use—*You ARE the experts!*,” the flyer began by stating:

In the spirit of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network's 2005 policy position paper entitled ***Nothing About Us Without Us***, researchers, policy makers, and service providers **NEED** to consult people with lived experience of drug use in order to develop effective and responsible policies and programs relating to harm reduction and drug treatment.

Coinciding serendipitously with the initial stages of disseminating promotional material for the inaugural meeting of the independent group by and for PUD in St. John's, I received an email concerning a new initiative being adopted by Memorial University's *Office of Public Engagement*. Entitled *Engage Memorial*, this initiative was composed of an array of diverse events, all of which were explicitly designed to “build capacity for public engagement within the university and between Memorial and external collaborators” according to Engage Memorial Coordinator Alison Butler (personal communication, February 5, 2015). By being featured in the *Engage Memorial* campaign, I hoped that not only the REG, but also the first meeting of the St. John's drug users' group would gain increased exposure, thus effectively serving to raise public awareness.

Brief Description: Critical Approaches to Health and Social Policy (SCWK 2520, W2015)

The course I was assigned to teach—*Critical Approaches to Health and Social Policy*—progressed the focus of the course material shifted from traditional policy-making actors and processes, to grassroots, bottom-up acts of policy resistance, along with the increasing impetus for direct service user engagement in the policy development process. At this point I referenced the *Harm Reduction and Critical Drug Studies* REG as a case in point, and much to my surprise, my students seemed to intuitively understand the fundamental value and importance of direct service user involvement, particularly in the case of policies and programs that are ostensibly developed and implemented in the interests of marginalized, socially vulnerable population groups. Moreover, following a class discussion of the challenges inherent in recruiting marginalized population groups such as people who use drugs (PUD), one of the students in the course group made the unsolicited suggestion that the students themselves assist in generating interest in the PUD project by posting the promotional material via their individual social media platforms. After a short discussion, the course group reached consensus, and thus committed to helping promote the inaugural meeting of the St. John's drug users support network.

Soliciting participants for the first meeting of the St. John's Drug Users' Group, however, proved to be a rather challenging task. While details regarding the outcome of the inaugural meeting, and the state of autonomous organizing on the part of people who use drugs in Newfoundland and Atlantic Canada more generally is perhaps best left as the subject of another paper, suffice to say that my students' assistance played a pivotal role in helping to promote the group's first meeting. As the term drew to a close, I distributed a list of potential topics for the final term essay well in advance of the due date. At the close of our collective in-class discussion of the essay questions I had prepared, I informed the students that they could adopt an alternative format for the final assignment. In an attempt to more concretely render this suggestion, I made reference to a specific topic and format that an alternative to a formal academic essay might take—what the participating students and I eventually came to term ‘policy position zines’.

An Introduction to the Three Student Co-Authors' Policy Position Zines

Having been introduced to the *Safe Harbour Outreach Project* (SHOP)—the one and only local, St. John's-based organization devoted to working with people involved in the sex trade from an explicitly harm reduction-based perspective—during my preliminary organizing efforts regarding the St. John's Drug Users' Group, I reiterated an issue I had discussed with the course group earlier in the term concerning the legal challenge to Canada's laws regarding sex work/workers that was taking place at the time. As an example, I suggested that one possible option would be for someone with a genuine interest in this area to compose a policy position booklet outlining the laws regarding sex work in Newfoundland and Labrador that might have immediate, practical use value for SHOP service users.

This example effectively served as the spark for the very first student policy position zine proposal: Laura Moores' *Legal Matters: Sex Worker Rights and the Law*. Given Laura's longstanding interest in legal issues affecting sex workers, as evidenced in her earlier assignments throughout the term, she immediately picked up on my example and adapted it into something that not only met all of the assignment criteria and incorporated the underlying course themes of both direct service user involvement in policy development, and bottom-up, community-based, grassroots forms of policy resistance, but also had the potential to have a direct, immediate impact on SHOP service users. Co-author Laura Moores' herself explains the nature, focus, intent, and potential impact of her policy position zine in the final section of this paper.

Following my approval of her intended policy position zine regarding legal issues relating to individuals involved in sex work in the context of Newfoundland and Labrador, with Laura's permission I described her project to the course groups during the following week's class in hopes of further solidifying the example I had initially proposed the week prior. The more tangible and concrete example of Laura's well-developed, timely and policy-relevant zine or booklet designed with SHOP service users as the intended audience served to not only directly inspire several other students' ideas for their own unique alternative final assignments, but also effectively established the 'policy position zine' as the most accessible, practical, and easy to format template that virtually each and every student who chose to pursue an alternative final assignment would go on to adopt.

The second student to meet with me to discuss her proposed policy position zine was Sydney Sheppard, who chose to focus the vast majority of her course work throughout the term on autonomous organizing in the field of mental health, namely psychiatric survivor initiatives. After listening to Sydney's initial ideas for her alternative final course project, I immediately put her in touch with a friend and former collaborator of mine by the name of Raymond Cheng, Policy Analyst and Research Exchange Facilitator for the *Ontario Peer Development Institute* (OPDI), with whom I had co-authored an evidence-based literature concerning the role and fundamental importance of active service user involvement in all aspects of 'mental health' and 'addictions' policy and practice for the Ontario Ministry of Health (Cheng & Smith, 2009). Raymond very quickly pointed Sydney in the direction of the one and only independent psychiatric survivor initiative in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador—the *Consumers' Health Awareness Network of Newfoundland and Labrador* (CHANNAL)—and Sydney wasted no time in contacting CHANNAL directly, as direct collaboration with community-based agencies quickly became a mandatory aspect of the policy position zine as more and more students began to adopt the alternative final assignment format on an exceptionally diverse range of topics. As one of the three student co-authors to this paper, Sydney's detailed description of her experiences in collaborating with CHANNAL and composing her policy position zine—entitled *Experts by Experience: The History and Importance of Consumer-led Organizations*—is contained the following sections to this paper.

Closely relating to the underlying purpose and objectives of the St. John's Drug User Group, the third student to approach me with a proposal for a policy position zine was Rebecca French, whose work throughout the term was primarily centred on people who use drugs (PUD) and/or people with lived experience (PWLE) of substance use, dependency, and/or treatment and recovery. Directly inspired by my experience attempting to establish an independent group by and for PUD in St. John's and surrounding areas, Rebecca's idea for her policy position zine was to develop a document intended to support and provide a clear rationale for the active involvement of PUD in all aspects of the harm reduction, treatment-related, and or public health-driven interventions that are ostensibly developed in their interests, yet all too often take place without any form of direct involvement or consultation with drug/service users themselves. During the process of composing her policy position zine—entitled *About Nothing Without Us: Engaging People With Lived Experience of Substance Use in Harm Reduction Policy and Programs* (Smith, forthcoming)—Rebecca contacted senior mental health and addiction policy actors to inquire as to the nature and extent of 'peer' involvement among PUD/PWLE. Additionally, Rebecca consulted directly with both the Founder and Senior Manager of the only harm reduction based program in the province—the AIDS Coalition of Newfoundland and Labrador's (ACNL's) *Safer Works Access Program* (SWAP)—as well as an individual with direct lived experience with substance use over the course of a meeting that I organized and supervised on her behalf.

By the end of the term, approximately 25% of my students had opted to pursue an alternative project for their final course assignment, literally all of which followed the model template of what came to be referred to as 'policy position zines' as initially developed by myself and Laura Moores. In order to demonstrate the breadth and diversity of topics, however, it is relevant to include a partial list of additional topics that various students chose to pursue for their alternative final assignments by citing a select number of policy position zines produced by students in the course, including: (1) *Adapting to Newfoundland: A Guide for New Canadians* by Mona Shannir, in collaboration with the St. John's based *Refugee and Immigrant Advisory Council* (RIAC); (2) *Home is Where the Heart Is: A Users' Guide to Navigating NL Housing* by Heather Croke, in collaboration with *Stella's Circle*; (3) *Accessing Accommodations: A User-to-User Guide to Accessing Accommodations At Memorial University's Blundon Centre* by Meg Healey, in collaboration with Memorial University's Blundon Centre, and; (4) *Anonymous and Rapid HIV/AIDS Testing IN Newfoundland and Labrador* by Collette Hicks, in collaboration with the AIDS Committee of Newfoundland and Labrador (ACNL).

The following sections of this paper thus constitute in-depth descriptions written by each of the three abovementioned students. Here, each student co-author describes their initial inspiration for taking on their given policy position zine topics, and the collaborative, community-based process of assessing the needs of each respective agency and corresponding service user community for whom their projects were intended to benefit. Furthermore, each of the three students critically addresses the intended impact of their zines, dissemination strategies, as well as including an update concerning the outcomes of their individual projects to date. The students whose work is addressed in further detail in the following three sections were selected to participate in the conference that initially inspired this paper for a number of reasons, including: (1) the sense of complementarity between the three topics; (2) the fact that these students were the first three individuals who elected to pursue an alternative to the original final essay assignment, and; (3) the high quality of their finished policy position zines.

While I had established and disseminated a grading rubric for the majority of students who chose to follow the traditional essay format, I then had to devise a method of clearly and fairly assessing the alternative *policy position zines*. Modelling the evaluation of the zines on the rubric I employed for

the students who chose to pursue the traditional essay, the zine rubric contained four separate elements, as follows:

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| 1. Topic and content | 10% |
| 2. Creativity in relation to intended audience | 5% |
| 3. Organization, coherence and clarity | 5% |
| 4. Accompanying short (4-5pg) write-up/summary | 5% |

Above and beyond the policy position zine itself, therefore, the students who chose to pursue the policy position zine project were additionally required to submit a very short, informal, self-reflexive paper describing: (a) the rationale/justification for their chosen topic; (b) the use value, intended audience and dissemination strategy for their final zine; (c) explicit incorporation of course themes/theories, and; (d) details concerning the process of researching and/or collaborating with community-based agencies. As evidenced in the following three sections, these themes were taken up in different and unique ways as each student's relationship to the grassroots community-based agency with which they collaborated was slightly different.

Policy Position Zine 1.

About Nothing Without Us: Engaging People with Lived Experience of Substance Use in Harm Reduction Policy and Programs

Rebecca French

What is harm-reduction? While examining my course syllabus for *Critical Approaches to Health and Social Policy* (SCWK 2520), this was a question that stood out in my mind, as I queried the term on multiple occasions. Beginning my social work degree with minimal background experience in the field, I could not quickly grasp the abstract concept of harm reduction. However, as time progressed my understanding of harm reduction improved, and I became increasingly intrigued by the subject.

As the course progressed, I soon came to learn that harm reduction refers to “interventions that seek to reduce the harms associated with substance use for individuals, families, and communities’ through a comprehensive range of ‘co-ordinated, user-friendly, client-centered and flexible programs and services’” (City of Toronto, as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 210). One example of harm reduction measures for people who use drugs can be seen in the case of needle exchange programs (NEPs) and/or safer crack use kit distribution programs, both of which are intended to discourage the spread of Hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS and other blood-borne viruses (BBVs).

While reflecting on why I had never reviewed or discussed harm reduction in the past, I came to realize this was because it is a taboo concept, rooted in our society's idea of what is considered normal and what is not. Our local communities are not exposed to renowned harm reduction initiatives, and it is therefore an invisible concept that needs to be unmasked in order to reduce stigmatization and ostracization faced by drug users each day.

As a result of my newfound captivation with harm-reduction, I decided to create my policy position zine based on ideologies stemming from most harm-reduction practices. Most importantly, this included the inherent value of including those with lived experience in the development and implementation of policies and programs that are created in their interests. Entitled *About Nothing Without Us: Engaging People with Lived Experience of Substance Use in Harm Reduction Policy and Programs*, I delivered a talk regarding my experience composing this policy position booklet as part

of a panel presentation with my former professor, Dr. Christopher Smith, along with two of my fellow classmates at the Atlantic University Teaching Showcase in October, 2015.

In choosing to create an activist-oriented zine instead of a formal academic essay, I unknowingly dove into an experience that initiated numerous learning opportunities for me. These opportunities included working with community organizations I was unfamiliar with in the past as well as working with individuals who have valuable lived experience.

The project commenced when I attempted to initiate communication with local agencies whose mandate entails providing services for people who use drugs. I very quickly came to realize, however, that professionals who claim to help drug/service users could not adequately address the questions I sought to answer. More specifically, I was interested in learning how and to what extent people with lived experience of illicit substance use were directly involved in any aspect of harm reduction service delivery, social support, or otherwise. Out of three email inquiries I made regarding this question or issue, the AIDS Committee of Newfoundland and Labrador (ACNL) was the only agency to respond. I believe that the lack of response from the remaining two agencies—namely *Thrive Community Youth Network* (CYN) and the *Mental Health and Addictions Division* of the *Provincial Department of Health and Community Services*—was as a result of their embarrassment due to the absence of any form of direct involvement among people who use drugs.

Despite the lack of response from two of the three organizations, on the advice of my professor, I contacted the ACNL's *Safe Works Access Program* (SWAP) from which I did receive an email detailing the various ways that they have included users over the years as well as the remarkable work they do for users in partnership with users. SWAP is a health promotion and education service that provides clean needle distribution. This service is offered by the AIDS Committee of Newfoundland (ACNL) (T. Walsh, personal communication, March 17, 2015). Said provision of needles was started at the request of a drug user, while users also helped in finding sources for safer using supplies. While promoting SWAP, drug users were also the primary volunteers and frequently presented at educational sessions to Health Care providers as well as the broader community. (T. Walsh, personal communication, March 26, 2015).

Although I was excited to learn how this organization was operating in Newfoundland, I could not help but be disappointed at the knowledge that there was still an acute lack of independent initiatives by and for people who use drugs. Furthermore, I began to grow frustrated and saddened by the lack of user involvement in general across the province. This realization helped to generate my passion to complete this project as I strongly believe there should be user-driven and user-run services throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

Before meeting with a substance user myself, I believed it was important to conduct extensive research into the topic of harm reduction strategies as well as incorporating those with lived experience of illicit drug use in the structuring of policies and programs. In doing this, I discovered well-researched evidence to support my hypotheses of the relevance of including those with lived experience. As the state-funded, national-level *Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League* explained, “[w]hile some in the community may view people who use or have used illicit drugs as having very little if anything to offer governments, services and the community, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth... The Australian experience has reflected the value of involving people who use or have used illicit drugs in the development of policy and programmatic responses.” (as cited in Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2005, p. 39).

In completing this research, it was evident that there were various benefits for everyone involved in this process above and beyond service users themselves. On a societal level, incorporating users informs society that drug users can be mobilized into a potent political force for health and human rights advocacy. The de-marginalization of drug users can bring attention to health emergencies in drug networks and increase the awareness of the necessity of harm reduction sites. On an organizational level, it was demonstrated that users can help programs remain current and relevant as the services users help to design are the services they are more likely to access. Moreover, on an individual level, user-driven organizations can support people while they are finding stability with their drug use and offer direction in their lives, if it is missing. User organizing can also raise drug user's self-esteem and self-efficacy (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2005, p. 37).

I also discovered important aspects which are necessary in order to ensure all drug users are taken seriously and feel comfortable while participating in services. Mason (2006, p. 9-12) found these following ideas must be integrated to successfully incorporate drug users in policy making and service delivery. Rewarding drug users both financially and with a sense of accomplishment is vital. It is also critical to take care of a drug user's basic needs. Open and respectful communication eliminates incorrect assumptions around expectations and personal assumptions. A focus on empowerment whereby drug users have meaningful roles, decision-making power and are involved in not only policy development, but program delivery. Ensuring drug users are consulted first to certify their voices outnumber non-drug user voices. The ability to be a good facilitator, manage expectations, have supportive leadership and conflict management skills is necessary. Confronting program adversaries with statistics that demonstrate program effectiveness and working with law enforcement has additionally proven to be successful. Providing users with specific training should support individuals who may not be accustomed to working in organizational or professional contexts (GLADA, 2005, p. 12).

After learning these facts about working with people who use drugs, I felt confident in arranging a meeting with a participant of the St. John's Drug User Group, organized and facilitated by my professor, Dr. Christopher Smith. I believe the most relevant information I learned during this experience related to the specific harm reduction services that St. John's is lacking, as well as what aspects of the existing services require improvement. The ideas I learned from this meeting were extremely insightful and I do not believe I would have considered them beforehand, including the following: (1) many drug users are not comfortable meeting in person with policy makers and government officials; (2) other users may not be in the immediate vicinity, but are able to contribute a great deal of knowledge as a result of their lived experience, and; (3) detox alone is not enough and is only as beneficial as the 'after-care', which is of equally—if not greater—importance. Newfoundland and Labrador presently lacks the services to help with this crucial stage of recovery, in that users return to the same area and social network as they did prior to availing of treatment and/or detoxification services (A. M. Kieley, personal communication, 24 March 2015).

Another way that I benefited personally from this meeting was the way in which it helped to reduce my own stereotypes concerning how people who use drugs may look or act. Through this experience, I came to understand that there is a significant misunderstanding surrounding drug users in our present society, and we must not merely stop ostracizing individuals based upon socially constructed labels and stigmatizations, but moreover, honor the valuable contributions substance users can have on communities and society as a whole.

As a result of this project, my booklet has been distributed to SWAP and used at presentations held by their organization. This project indirectly also provided me with the opportunity to volunteer with

the ACNL, thereby allowing me to continue to learn about the benefits and relevance of practicing harm-reduction strategies on a daily basis.

Policy Position Zine 2.

Experts by Experience. Consumer-led Organizations: History and Importance

Sydney Sheppard

The booklet I presented at the *Atlantic Teaching University Conference*, entitled “Experts by Experience” contains a critical account of the history of the consumer survivor movement, both in the specific socio-cultural context of Newfoundland and Labrador, and beyond. The primary issues and themes that emerged during the course of my examination include both (1) the effectiveness of consumer survivor organizations, and; (2) the fundamental importance of directly including psychiatric/consumer survivors in research in order to help shape and inform best practices. The reason I chose to create a booklet as opposed to a writing a research essay is the lasting impact I hope and intend it will have on a community-based level. I truly believe in the work of Consumer Survivor Initiatives (CSI) and the “nothing about us, without us” campaign which promotes the concept that nobody knows what someone is going through better than the individual themselves (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2005). The contribution of CSIs to the lives of individual consumers, and on mental health research in general, is significantly under-recognized, under-utilized and under-valued. While composing my policy position zine my intention was to present a synthesis of the findings from my course-related research along with my collaborative work with CHANNAL in a concise and easy-to-understand booklet. To this end, I explicitly sought to allow the audience to recognize the central importance of respecting psychiatric/consumer survivors and their contribution to research, as well as to society in general. Although the intended audience for my policy position zine was incredibly broad, I primarily hoped to better inform those involved in research, along with mental health service providers.

There has been a recent increase in initiatives by large companies and government agencies to support people living with mental wellness issues. It was my hope that this booklet and conference presentation would help to support the need for such initiatives and promote an environment that served to enable others in their pursuit of social justice. While it is important to talk about changing the attitudes surrounding mental illness, it is equally—if not *more*—important to actually make the change. If just one person who reads the booklet stops to think before judging someone with a mental illness, I will feel that my efforts have been successful.

This project had its beginning after I had an opportunity to speak with mental health consumers from both Newfoundland and Ontario about possible projects that they felt had the inherent potential to make a meaningful and lasting impact regarding the stigma associated with mental illness. For instance, Raymond Cheng, along with the staff at CHANNAL—Newfoundland’s sole Consumer-led Organization—are primary examples of individuals who have made a huge impact on the consumer-survivor movement in Canada. These individuals have helped me find the best resources to argue the point at hand and have provided insight into why this argument is so important. In the first case, Raymond Cheng has experience as a member of the board for the *Centre for Addiction and Mental Health* (CAMH) and is currently a Policy Analyst and Knowledge Exchange Facilitator at the Ontario Peer Development Initiative (OPDI), an initiative aimed at helping Consumer-led Organizations across Ontario, Canada.

CHANNAL, on the other hand, does incredible work for consumers across Newfoundland, holding peer support groups, visiting hospitals, educating others, lobbying government, and hosting events such as stigma awareness week.

Having attended CHANNAL's Open House, I was able to listen to their members' concerns and, as a result, I serendipitously discovered my research topic. I then conducted an extensive review of academic and 'grey'/community-based literature regarding the organization, development, value and role of CSIs in various regions across the globe to better inform the project, narrowing in on some very important, hard-hitting facts that are impossible to ignore, such as the following:

- A study entitled "Beyond the Service Paradigm: The impact and Implications of Consumer/Survivor Initiatives" revealed that before joining a CSI participants had a mean number of 48.36 hospital inpatient days. After joining, those days dropped to 4.29. The mean number of days a participant contacted a crisis service before joining was 3.54, after joining the figure dropped to 0.81. (CMHA et al., 2005, p. 6)
- A program study titled "Therapeutic Relations/Connections" that was funded by various sources, including the Canadian Health Services, was intended to measure the role of CSIs in helping people transition from hospitalization to living in the community. This study saved more than \$12 million due to fewer days in hospital. People were discharged on average 116 days sooner (CMHA et al., 2005, p. 6)
- Consumer-led organizations provide treatment for consumers that are equal to, or better than, traditional treatments, with consumers reporting more satisfaction with consumer-led treatments than traditional. (Doughty & Tse, 2010)

With respect to research:

- The attitudes of health professionals are less than accepting of consumer participation in research and health initiatives. Many researchers do not value, or actively encourage, consumer participation (Happell & Roper, 2007, p. 238); they may even turn away consumers because of their mental illness. However, (as quoted in Happell & Roper, 2007, p. 238), Griffith et al. state, "psychiatric diagnosis does not constitute criteria for determining a person's ability to conduct research."
- Involving consumers actually increases the reliability of the research and leads to better health outcomes for survivors. (Happell & Roper, 2007, p. 238).
- Consumers also face the barrier of being told they lack the necessary skill and training to participate in mental health initiatives. This is wrong for two reasons: first, consumers bring valuable life experience to such projects, providing much needed insight into the lives of the people the initiative is being designed to help; and second, consumers are being offered training in research by organizations like the Canadian Depression Research and Intervention Network, which enables them to acquire skills in the area of research (<http://cdrin.org/lived-experience/>).

This project has allowed me to focus on an area that I am very passionate about, and hopefully make a difference. The booklet itself is readily accessible and easy to interpret and the presentation was collaborative and exciting, and both have received very positive feedback. Through these efforts I have gained valuable technical, research and life skills, including how to collaborate with the community. As mentioned previously, the booklets will be available at local businesses in St. John's, Newfoundland by free will donation. Proceeds will go directly to the community organizations that have helped to inform these projects. *Experts by Experience* will also be available as a resource at CHANNAL.

At the end of the day, I hope that this booklet and this conference presentation help people recognize the importance of consumer involvement in mental health initiatives, especially research, as nobody understands how to conduct appropriate research for mental health service users better than the service users themselves. I hope the steps that I have outlined in this project are taken into account by researchers, and that they include psychiatric/consumer survivors not only as ‘subjects’, but also as equal participants with valuable insights and contributions in their work, yielding the best results possible. Finally, I hope that this project helps to combat the stigma associated with mental illness by providing education to those who might not be aware of the potential consumers have in partnering for change. In this respect, I believe that Manitoba’s health statement says it best: “[c]onsumers have a right to participate and have a direct and active role in all processes that affect their lives” (Manitoba Health, 2005, p. 1).

Policy Position Zine 3.

Legal Matters: Sex Worker Rights and the Law

Laura Moores

My booklet and portion of the presentation was focused on sex workers and their legal and civil rights in the context of St. John’s, Newfoundland. Prior to this presentation, the federal government passed Bill C-36, which became *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* (Government of Canada, 2014). The language in this act was written in ways that could be ambiguously interpreted, and thus a more accessible interpretation of the law, as well as local resources that could benefit sex workers, was required. After doing some research on similar publications by other national sex worker rights organizations, I met and consulted with the founder of the *Safe Harbour Outreach Project* (SHOP), Laura Winters. I also conducted a general research and literature review in the area of sex work and decriminalization. The basic theme running throughout these articles and studies are the problems that sex workers experience with the current criminalization, as well as the discourses that result from stigma and difficulty with working with police and policy makers (Jeffrey, 2005; Krüsi et al., 2014; Laing & Cook, 2014; O’Doherty, 2011; Saunders & Kirby, 2010). After discussing the needs of those who access SHOP’s services, a zine outlining the language of the new laws, as well as the rights of sex workers, was determined to be of benefit. This booklet or “zine” was drafted, reviewed by legal counsel, and re-written twice before being produced for SHOP. SHOP was then provided with the file to edit or reproduce as needed.

During our conference presentation on October 17, 2015, I discussed this process, as well as some of the reflections that I had after the completion of the zine. Initially, I had hoped to have more of a “bottom-up”, grassroots process, but unfortunately, this was not possible. As the information to be included in the zine was of a sensitive, technical and legal nature, the information required more top-down consideration to ensure the validity and correctness of the interpretation of the law. As this segment of the population, namely sex workers, is already quite vulnerable, it was crucial that the information be reviewed and approved by a lawyer, as well as representatives from the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC). While I understood and recognize the need for this vetting, I felt, and continue to feel, conflicted about having to involve these organizations. By soliciting the response and feedback of these individuals, I felt that there was a potential for their desires to overtake those of SHOP. While these individuals were originally selected by SHOP to review the material, I was still concerned that there was a potential for the needs and wants of the sex workers could be potentially minimized or disregarded.

After the presentation at the conference, there was an audience member who was interested in disseminating the zines to a local zine library. I agreed to provide mine on the condition that there

was no charge for the zine, or a “pay what you will” to solicit donations for SHOP. While the zine has the potential to be a revenue source for SHOP, I was concerned that the individuals that would benefit most from this information may not have the means to purchase the zine. The zine is currently available through various zine libraries in the city, as well as coffee shops for free or donation.

The presentation as an extremely valuable learning experience as I not only got to present the material that I researched and developed, but also had the opportunity to answer questions and solicit feedback. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and I feel that this was not only a prime example of work that benefits the public in critical policy examination and discussion, but I also feel that this has assisted me to develop the skills needed to work with both marginalized populations, as well as upper-level stakeholders, as is commonly experienced in the current neo-liberal realities of current social work practice in Canada. This assignment and presentation provided me the opportunity to experience, first hand, the reality of balancing the needs of the grassroots organizations with that of the policy makers. While I am personally conflicted on deferring to powerful governmental institutions, I recognize that this is, indeed, necessary for much critical policy analysis as these said institutions are often the policy makers.

In his article, “Harm Reduction as Anarchist Practice”, Smith (2012) argues that harm reduction is being co-opted by governmental agencies as a concept, without actually practicing it as originally intended by the grassroots organizations that developed the original true harm reduction policies. In much the same way, I feel that this project echoed these sentiments. I was attempting to create a grassroots, bottom-up policy manual, but was unable to do so when confronted with the realities of providing legal information to a vulnerable population. So is this, in and of itself, an act of harm reduction? While I definitely had to take into consideration the wants and needs of the RNC and legal team consulted, I still managed to ensure that the ultimate end result was a booklet that provided accurate, up-to-date, pertinent information for the benefit of sex workers, not the larger bureaucratic organizations that were consulted. I am also aware of the current political and regional context in which this booklet was produced. SHOP is the first and only organization of its kind, and while it has a good working relationship with the RNC, precautions still need to be taken to ensure that this relationship is not jeopardized. While I feel that, ultimately, the zine was beneficial in the information provided to the sex workers on their rights, responsibilities and resources, I maintain that because of the nature of this information, it is not possible to do a true grassroots, bottom-up project on this material without also potentially causing great harm.

Ultimately this project provided a very valuable learning experience with working with smaller, grassroots organizations and balancing their needs and wants with that of policy makers and larger organizations. The response to the zine has been overwhelmingly positive, and I am currently researching additional zines for SHOP and other organizations in St. John's, Newfoundland, with hopes of publishing them independently in the summer of 2016.

Conclusion

This project emerged, at least in part from the increasing impetus in contemporary pedagogy towards transformative, action-driven, experientially-rooted and community-based learning and research. In this sense, what came to be termed '*policy position zines*' represented the antithesis of the traditional academic essay, which has a limited use value outside the context of the classroom, or, at best, obscure academic journals that essentially represent a conversation between and among elites of the so-called 'ivory tower'. While recognizing the fundamental importance of critical thought/analysis, above and beyond the slightly more methodical skills necessary to compose a

well-written, well-structured, and well-argued academic essay, the policy positions papers, on the other hand, not only provided students with the opportunity to meaningfully engage with various populations within the surrounding community and help to identify and address areas of need, but moreover it provided these students with an end product that had a use value and ‘life’ beyond the walls of the ‘ivory tower’, with the inherent, fundamental, in-built potential to affect meaningful change at the grassroots level and among various specific sub-populations that have been traditionally silenced, overlooked or ignored in academia at large. As one of the (overwhelmingly, almost glowingly positive) feedback forms regarding our panel presentation at the Atlantic University Teaching Showcase (2015)—entitled *Faculty-Student-Service User Collaboration in Community-based Action Research Regarding Service User Involvement in Mental Health and Addiction Policy*—so succinctly concluded: “Hopefully the students continue this important work and continue to demonstrate the importance of the work Christopher is doing—Great to focus on *action!*”

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