

## Relational Theories in Practice: One Community's Experience

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As seems to be happening with increasing regularity, about a year ago some friends and I found ourselves discussing our concerns and fears around the direction in which social, political, and economic life is moving. We agreed that a) discourses influence our visions of what is possible and b) locally generated responses to public concerns are effective and just. We live in Powell River, which is a relatively isolated community on the coast of British Columbia, Canada. Powell River is going through major transitions with the downsizing of our main industry; this has very real effects not only for economic life, but the social and cultural life of this community as well. As we brought the conversation from global issues to matters closer to home, we began exploring what we think needs to happen before the next municipal election in order to engage more citizens so that new realities might emerge.

And so PR Voices was born. It began as an extremely informal process (and in fact has had many incarnations over the past several years!), but thanks to a generous grant from the Taos Institute in the Spring of 2013, we have been able to increase our activities and our reach. We are pleased at this point to report back to you what you've helped us accomplish so far, and what our hopes are for the new year.

Our objectives are to: 1) host a variety of public speakers on topics related to pressing local concerns, 2) engage citizens across demographic and political divides, 3) generate rich dialogue around concrete possibilities for the community's collective future, and 4) document learning from this process for both public and academic audiences, so this local initiative can also provoke critical conversations and action in other communities. Our aim is to create forums in which new realities can be co-constructed through generative dialogues and actions that spring from the events we host.

### ***Successes to celebrate***

We are excited about the momentum that is building around these activities. Our team of organizers continues to grow, as does our contact list of interested community members. We have hosted a range of events, extending beyond speaking engagements to also include a community dialogue (as part of a broader province-wide initiative) and a workshop. We've created pamphlets, attended other events, and started a [Facebook page](#) as a way of connecting with more perspectives. We've even participated in a province-wide [crowd-sourced film](#), exploring BC's economic future. We've been sharing with others through [blog posts](#), television, posters, list-serves, radio, [the newspaper](#), and online videos.

One of the ways we've been collaborating with more people is through our community partnerships. For each event, we invite a range of organizations and/or businesses to partner with us. Their contributions vary, but perhaps what is most gained through these formal connections is the cross-pollination of ideas that comes when more (and diverse) participants are actively engaged. An exciting surprise has been the fact that we've now also been approached by other organizations to partner in support of events *they* are hosting! There seems to be increasing engagement in our community around these ideas, and some continuity between ours and other organizations.

Another wonderful surprise has been the emergence of two new informal collectives. One is a study group based on the work of the second speaker in our series, Michael Lewis. A group of people who attended his talk and workshop have begun to gather in order to explore the local implications of the ideas in his co-authored book, [The Resilience Imperative](#). The other emerged in response to our third speaker, Katherine Gibson. Katherine shared ideas from her new co-authored book [Take Back the Economy](#), which inspired the emergence of a working group. This group aims to inventory and map the diverse economic activities in this community in order to identify (and ultimately bolster) those which nurture the wellbeing and sustainability of the place and its people. The beauty of

both of these groups is that they were organic responses – by participants - to the coming together of people and ideas at our speaking events. We are excited to see what follows from these ongoing collaborations.

### ***Challenges to consider***

We have been learning as we go, and there is always room for improvement. Despite our efforts to cast the net wide, this is not proving to be a fast or simple undertaking. While there are always new people and perspectives at our events, there are a lot of perspectives under-represented or missing. This continues to be one of our greatest challenges, which we continue to reflect on and consider.

Another challenge we face – which most certainly is related – is the risk of becoming entrenched in certain ideas around what is ‘good’ for this community. Living in a small community, many of us have multiple relationships with people who may not share our political positions. This reality can help us to critically engage with our own assumptions, deepening our discussions beyond superficial (and polarizing) representations of issues and positions. It also help us find points of connection, which is much more likely to move us towards change. Of course, this kind of relational approach also requires that we are willing to *be* changed – which is where both the joys and the fears of this work lie!

A third challenge we continue to face is how to organize in a way that allows for emergence and unpredictability. The informal nature of our group is what many of us love most about it, but when it comes to money matters and other important decisions, we have found that it is necessary to allow for a degree of formal organization as well. In last year’s newsletter, Sheila McNamee wrote that “The Taos Institute is, itself, an experiment in construction. We all live daily with the tension between the pull toward organizational policies and procedures and the emersion in constant evolution and possibility. We both crave order and stability while harboring a tremendous desire for freedom and the unknown.” Reading these words, I feel assured the PR Voices is also such an experiment, and continuing to wrestle with these questions is simply part of what it means to be involved in something that is dynamic and alive.

### ***Thinking forward***

2014 is election year for our region, and with that comes big questions around how change happens, and what it might look like. The hope of PR Voices is to host events that will capture the imaginations of more people and entice us all to get involved in our community in the coming year. Inviting the arts (visual arts, music, theatre, and more) into our efforts will hopefully help us to further open our minds and motivate us. In 2014, we aspire to engage more young people through some fun and creatively inspired events as well. We also look forward to launching a website, through which people will be able to access information about matters of local concern. We are very enthusiastic about the year ahead.

We believe that local initiatives can be strengthened when seen to have relevance *beyond* the scope of a particular community. We also believe theoretical discussions can be strengthened when seen to have relevance *for* particular communities. It is for both of these reasons we so appreciate this ongoing relationship with the Taos Institute.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCZ4jsTBRPM&authuser=1>