

Queer Activism Think Tank

Executive Summary

Throughout the 2013-14 Academic Year the Queer Activism & Social Justice Think Tank met to learn about, discuss, and practice engaging in queer activism work that was grounded in equity and social justice. The group came to know itself as QATT and was made up of 11 people, 9 undergraduate students at the University of Utah and 2 instructors. We spent Friday mornings together all year in our classroom in the Honors College where we grappled with theory, tried our hands at planning direct action activism, built strong friendships, developed ourselves as leaders, connected with the local community, and critically reflected on each of these practices. As such we believe our learning outcomes (so far) are as follows (note that we also discuss various research topics, class activities, and experiences in this section):

- We have developed a deeper understanding of queer theory, and believe that we can now utilize it to push our thinking as activists so that we are more creative and inclusive, and less tied to the rigid ideas associated with mainstream gay movements. We also know much more about the historical evolution of LGBT activism, as well as the current work being done. We have studied the work of authors such as Noreen Giffney, Dean Spade, Susan Talburt, Michael Signorile, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. We learned about the history of LGBT students on university campuses in the United States and how this history is connected to a larger LGBT US history – we also learned how to be critically reflective in regard to history and what’s not presented to us. We went to the “Let It Stand” rally at the State Capitol in January and then used it as a case study in critically engaging with the mainstream same-sex marriage movement.
- We have planned and carried out five different kinds of queer activism. This means that we also worked to figure out what queer activism means to us, which is no small task since one of the main tenets of queer theory is that once something is defined it is no longer queer (queer, theoretically speaking, “means” fluidity, resisting definition/boundaries, and challenging norms). We also learned about various activists and forms of activism (ranging from pacifism to direct action) including: Saul Alinsky, Eric Hirsch, Malala, Mancur Olson, Chris Crass, “Buddha on Strike,” “Self Immolation,” “Tank Man,” “Standing Man,” and various people in the UndocuQueer Movement. We wrote our own personal mission statements, identified our individual and group goals, and sketched out the narrative we wanted to drive through our work. We plotted out possible successes and their corresponding driving forces at the group, community, and macro levels in order to better ground our work. And we thought through both best and worst-case scenarios in order to plan in more depth. We also attended the GenderRevolution conference to learn about local work queer activism and education and to connect with the larger community.

Our queer activism “projects” are as follows:

1. **Dan Savage Action**

We learned that Dan Savage was coming to campus as the PRIDE Week keynote speaker. We had mixed feelings about his work. We learned as much as we could about him and his work. We reached out to other student groups and built a coalition that planned and participated in a “silent educational protest” at his keynote address. During this protest we shared various perspectives about Savage’s work. We also listened to his talk and processed it after it was over with our class as well as other students we worked with.

2. **Occupy Queer Street**

We planned and facilitated a workshop at the Power of One Conference. The workshop was called Occupy Queer Street, based on the Occupy Wall Street concept. Our goals were to teach about the intersectionality of social justice topics and how they relate to LGBTQ issues and then give participants the opportunity to define other issues and their impact on queer

communities through art. We formally presented on three content areas 1) Transgender People and the Prison Industrial Complex, 2) Undocumented Queer Immigrants, and 3) Homeless Queer Youth. The art projects were a series of 10x10 tiles with figurines affixed to them and expressed participants' own take on intersectionality.

3. Reclaiming Identity

Partnering with the LGBT Resource Center, we hosted a community art activism project at the Sorenson Unity Center. We taught the audience about how to reclaim words and ideas that have been used to harm the LGBTQ community. Participants then made bandanas with their own versions of reclaiming and empowering LGBTQ people. The bandana project was then displayed at the Breaking The Silence Event hosted by the LGBT Resource Center on National Coming Out Day. Since the QATT was so involved in the event we were invited to be the group to break the silence. Breaking the silence was a great honor, and partnering with the LGBT Resource Center is something we will continue to do.

4. Trans-feminist Art Show

We collaborated with local artists to put together an art show that represented the spectrum of gender expression and was intentional about international perspectives. The art show was at Mestizo Coffeehouse, a partner of QATT. The place was packed and the range of art was amazing. We hope to make some version of this event an ongoing event.

5. The Room Next Door

We partnered with Pioneer Theatre to help advertise and decorate the lobby. We commissioned a University Student Queer Artist to read the play and create an original art piece. QATT also partnered with MUSE to host a dinner for us and our outreach partners. After the dinner we all went to the play together.

- We have built strong enough relationships within the group and in the larger university and local community that we have transitioned into an ASUU recognized student organization called "SQuARE" – Students for Queer Art, Resistance, and Education. We are putting our leadership and teambuilding skills to work because we are in charge of everything about the group. We will meet on a monthly basis over the summer and then begin to recruit new members once fall semester begins. We plan to participate in a number of events next academic year including the Day of Service, PRIDE Week, and COSA. We will also plan our own events. We are grateful to the Honors College and ASUU for their financial support of this group. We feel ready to do this because by January we, the students, had taken over the planning of our Friday morning class sessions so that we could practice the design and facilitation skills necessary for transitioning into a student organization. We learned skills associated with planning meetings, organizing guest speakers (like representatives from UMOCHA and Mestizo Coffeehouse, as well as various local artists who wanted to get involved with our work), and putting together proposals for presenting at local conferences.

Finally, we would like to introduce our group to you in a way that is line with a queer approach and our own commitments as a group. We came together as a collective in which we all grew as individuals but maintained a focus on the fluid nature of our identity as a group of people committed to socially just practices of queerness, art, resistance, and education. And we are still working from that position.

Our names are Jai Hamid Bashir, Natalie Blanton, Kim Hackford-Peer, Jackson Hannon, Lauryn Hansen, Brian Powell, Loren Ruiz, Kathy Tran, Valerie Velarde, Georgie Zamantakis, and Kilo Zamora. We are queer activists, artists, resisters, and educators, and this means something different to each of us, but we support one another in our work because all of our work is important. We study things like Theatre and Arts Technology, Metallurgical Engineering, Sociology, Psychology, English Literature, Political Science, Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, Spanish, Environmental and Sustainability Studies, and Education. We work in places all over campus such as research laboratories, the Gender Studies Program, Trio, the LGBT Resource Center, Housing and Residential Life, the Bennion Center Alternative Spring Break Program,

and ASUU. We volunteer with theatre companies, the Inclusion Center, the University PRIDE Week planning committee, the undocumented rights movement, with the Utah AIDS Foundation, and lots of other places. Many of us plan to go on to graduate school, and some of us will even begin this part of our educational journey this Fall 2015. We like to hang out as a group. We eat together whenever we can and even coordinated a snack contributor for every class – some of us are vegan, some vegetarian, some gluten-free, some don't eat fish, but we all eat together and make sure there is something tasty for everyone and we believe this is an important part of our work as relationships are strengthened through breaking bread and chatting while eating. We look forward to continuing our work as SQuARE and are excited to hang out, eat, plan, and engage with more students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community members in the coming year. Join us!