School of Rock: The Curricular Dimensions of an All-Ages Venue

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SCHOOL OF ROCK:
THE CURRICULAR DIMENSIONS OF AN ALL-AGES VENUE

A Dissertation Presented to
The Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
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Advisor: Dr. P. Bruce Uhrmacher
Abstract

Schools are only one of many sites for pedagogy and curricula. Youth encounter educative experiences at many sites and in many forms. For many youth, the all-ages music scene is their most meaningful classroom with the music and the ethos of the movement serving as their teachers and other young punks their classmates.

This study examined the learning experiences and the dimensions of received curricula at an established all-ages music venue in a large urban city. The Vera Project in Seattle, Washington was the subject of this qualitative study, which utilized the methodology of educational connoisseurship and criticism to describe and interpret the experiences of youth on the music scene. Four research questions guided this study: 1) What are the intentions of the Vera Project as an all-ages music and arts space in a large urban city? 2) What are the elements of implicit and null curriculum experienced at the Vera Project? 3) How do the implicit messages of the Vera Project transcend its walls? 4) What is the significance of the intentions and practices of the Vera Project for other youth music and art communities in general and curriculum matters in particular?

The voices of Vera’s youth and observed scenes from activities that define the Vera Project are presented as thematic vignettes followed by short interpretations. The scenes and voices of Vera shed light on multiple educative experiences that happen at the venue including: the power of safe struggle and authentic work, the natural exploration of
social and cultural issues, and youth voice as equal voice. Implicit messages around inclusion, allies, validation, and representation at the venue are explored, as is the symbiotic relationship between teacher and learner as is manifested in this venue. This study brings the all-ages venue as a site of learning into the dialogue on public pedagogy and considers how the educational commonplaces manifest in this public domain.
Acknowledgements

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This project would not exist without the generosity of time and support of Beth and the Vera Project. I am indebted to each of my interview participants who gave their time and energy and unwavering enthusiasm; your words built this project.

This project would not exist without the deep love of learning that my parents, Rita and Sandy, instilled in me from a young age. This project is for my father, to whom I owe an enormous debt. He taught me the power of words and to be thoughtful of the lives of others and that the ability to learn is universal.

To my wife Hilary, I express my deepest gratitude. Throughout this work she was my sounding board, my editor, and my compass. Her unwavering support and belief that someday I would finish has sustained this effort. Hilary, my gratitude extends far beyond the support you have given me to complete this work and is far greater than what I can fit on a page; I am grateful every day for the beautiful life I share with you.
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Chapter One: Introduction and Rationale

The central point, as I see it, is to perceive more fully the great diversity of venues that shape who we have become, are becoming and might become. Focus on curriculum and pedagogy in schooling alone presents a myopic view of what shapes human beings. (Schubert, 2010, p. 16)

I sat alone at a table and tried to take in the moment of my first show, tracing the words, ‘All Ages’ with my finger from the flyer that was glued to the table. I felt part of something for the first time. (Cinders as cited in Duncan, 2007, p. 126)

Introduction

For many students, the school environment can be one that is oppressive and exclusionary, thereby making learning rigid and often painful. Scholars have found that urban schools in particular emphasize “hierarchical authority and control” (Berman, 1997, as cited in O’Donoghue, & Kirshner, 2003) and curriculum that transmits, “narrow and passive definitions of democracy and citizenship” (O’Donoghue & Kirsher, 2003, p. 3). School environments cannot be the sole learning environments that will engage and challenge youth. Strobel, Kirshner, O’Donoghue & McLaughlin (2008) write, “At the moment that adolescents need supportive relationships, opportunities for autonomy and
choice, and a sense of competence in their dealings with the world, many secondary
schools offer precisely the opposite characteristics” (p. 1679). Because of the limitations
of the K-12 school systems, the necessity of rich and varied out of school experiences are
all the more critical.

Many youth gravitate towards arts and music performance spaces in their out of
school time. Arts and music venues are places of informal learning and engagement for
many youth. More than just performance spaces, arts and music venues can become a
sanctuary for youth who are disenfranchised from the school system and struggling to
find their voice.

The arts reach youth who are not otherwise reached, including those who are
disengaged from schools and social institutions in the community and those at risk
for hardship and alienation. ... The activities in which students are engaged may
take place in school, or more poignantly, after school in programs held on school
sites or in community institutions. (Gadsden, 2008, p. 47)

It is the environment outside of school, with its informal mode of learning, that can bring
the “poignancy”, or perhaps more accurately the authenticity and inclusiveness, to youth
for whom the arts hold great possibility. More than just a place to congregate, venues
for the arts are spaces where youth can engage in identity discovery and exploration.

As urban neighborhoods attract a range of ages, backgrounds, and skill levels,
community arts organizations offer these folks a different kind of learning, one
driven not by the expectations of the institution, but by the artist who goes there.
(McCue, 2007, p. 595)

Gadsden, 2008, sees the arts as a substantive place for youth who are silenced by the
systems of schools to find a voice, “In this way, the arts act as a venue for social justice
and a platform for those often invisible in traditional classroom settings” (p. 32).
Music and arts venues facilitate learning experiences and therefore have curricular constructs that are worthy of examination. Such venues are not governed by the structures, regulations, and expectations that guide school systems; they have a unique brand of curriculum all their own.

If education research fails to address the pedagogical force of popular and public culture, Pinar (2006) argues, it risks operating under the false assumption that schools are closed systems, with learning occurring only within a prescribed pedagogical process. (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011, p. 339) Concepts of curriculum and pedagogy are not formulated with the same intentions as formal schooling. Such spaces are allowed to script their own intentions and expectations outside the confines of mandated standards.

**Rational for the Study**

The focus of current research on out of school learning is on youth participation in structured out of school activities such as clubs and youth organizations. The vast majority of this research is outcome oriented with the objective of justifying the worth of such programs. Researchers look to establish the measurable outcomes and physical manifestations the environments provide. Strobel, et al. (2008) note, “Of central interest to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are achievement-related benefits that result from involvement in after-school programs” (p. 1680). With the focus of the out of school learning literature on measurable outcomes, we know very little about what youth experience that is not directly correlated to achievement.

The concepts of curricula can apply to any space with a mission, intentions, and participants. All persons that interact purposefully with such a space receive far more than is intended. There is extensive work that examines the hidden curriculum and null
curriculum received by students in the K-12 setting (hidden curriculum see: Apple (1982), Grioux (1983), Jackson (1968) null curriculum see: Eisner (2002)). While much of the literature that expressly addresses curricular dimensions is within the realm of formal education, there is growing recognition of the value of examining the curricular dimensions present in informal learning environments (see: Shubert (1980, 2010), Bekerman, Burbules, & Silberman-Keller (2006)).

All-ages music and arts venues are celebrated as places where youth can engage in a music community (Stewart, 2010). Because the research orientation in the field of outside of school learning is focused on achievement related benefits, music venues have not been studied with relation to curricular constructs. We have minimal knowledge of three curricula: explicit, implicit, and null (Eisner, 2002) present in many informal learning spaces, including music venues. In the world of arts and music venues, what youth do not explicitly receive (the dimensions of the implicit and the null curriculum) has yet to be examined.

Eisner (2002) describes three distinct curricula present in all schools: the explicit curriculum, the implicit curriculum, and the null curriculum. Eisner drew his theoretical distinctions based on the structures of traditional schooling. There is growing recognition in the field of curriculum studies that the world outside of traditional schooling can provide as rich of learning experiences as the one within. In 2004 Shubert writes:

Even more, I began to be convinced that students, all of us, reconceive and reconstruct ourselves through interactions that most often occur outside of schools. These interactions, what I have come to call the outside curriculum, are the complex networks of influence among home, family, friends, other peers, mass media, non-school organizations, vocations and avocations. Compared to the configuration of these influences, the influence of school pales significantly. (p. 20)
Although Eisner’s curricula were originally defined with reference to the school system, these concepts of curricula can be applied to any space with curricular constructs, which is to say a place with intentions, participants, and learning experiences. Eisner’s curricula can be used to follow Shubert’s advice:

To understand the curriculum practice that powerfully transforms human lives, scholarship must include more than school alone; it must embrace the educational influence of community, culture, world and even cosmic phenomena. (2004, p. 20)

Venues where youth can engage with the arts on their own terms can be a refuge in a storm of schooling. Researchers have studied the products youth can produce and the impact of participation, but we have yet to study the full range of curriculum youth receive from an all ages-music scene. In order to understand the full impact on youth of participation at music and arts venues, we must study not just what promoted, but what is experienced.

**Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the learning experiences of youth on the all-ages music scene by conducting a qualitative study of an established all-ages music venue, the Vera Project in Seattle, Washington. The aim was to hear the voices and observe the participation of youth to understand the experiences that shape the learning youth voluntarily receive by becoming part of the all-ages scene. Of central interest to this study was the implicit messages received by youth in this environment and how these messages transcended time at the venue to other facets of life. With the understanding that the findings of this study are contextual to the Vera Project, the all-ages music scene
is a part of the public pedagogy across the country where youth also experience the curricular dimensions of the music scene, possibly making the lessons from this study relevant to other all-ages music scenes.

**Four questions guided this research study.**

1. What are the intentions of the Vera Project as an all-ages\(^1\) music and arts venue in a large urban city\(^2\)?

   Question one seeks to understand both the documented and articulated as well as the unstated nuanced intentions of the Vera Project, the all-ages music and arts venue in Seattle, Washington where this study was conducted. To answer question one, published documents as well as Vera staff members contribute answers to the stated intentions and mission of the Vera Project. Multiple interviews with other Vera participants as well as observations and artifact collection further build a profile of the intentions Vera articulates and the intentions that are unstated yet internalized by others.

2. What are the elements of implicit and null curricula experienced at The Vera Project?

   Pedagogical terminology must be redefined to be contextual to the learning that takes place in a public site or scene, such as an all-ages music venue. The all-ages music scene or an all-ages venue and community space does not have many of the components that define traditional schooling (e.g., learning objectives, a scope and sequence, and

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\(^1\) “All-ages” refers to a music scene that opens its doors to the under twenty-one set. All-ages is a loose term that holds no more technical merit than a particular scene or venue

\(^2\) Vera’s position in Seattle (“a large urban city”) is of immense importance because as we interpret and evaluate the learning experiences and curricular dimensions of the Vera Project, the larger context of the social, cultural, and political climate of Seattle will frame the conversation.
proficiency standards), therefore pedagogical terminology that is used frame the learning that happens in the traditional school must be redefined for the community scene.

Eisner’s definitions (2002) of the implicit and the null curricula have been given the flexibility to address learned experiences of both the intentional and unintentional variety, as is characteristic of informal learning at public sites (Sefton-Green, 2013).

Question two looks to uncover the curricular experiences that are not explicit or forward facing and to understand how implicit messaging is transmitted through the experiences at the venue. This question is addressed by challenging interview participants to think clearly about how social, political or personal issues are played out at the Vera Project. Extensive observations and artifact review further explore the range of curricular experiences beyond the stated mission and advertised offerings.

3. How do the implicit messages of the Vera Project transcend its walls?

In many ways, question three is about identity development, both by Vera Participants and by the Vera Project as an organization in Seattle and as a microcosm of the all-ages scene. This question considered how participation on the all-ages scene at Vera Project shaped persons in a way that moved beyond their attendance and participation at the venue. Question three is addressed by direct questioning of interview participants. Participants (whose experiences with Vera were diverse) were asked to consider if and then how Vera impacted their respective lives, if Vera played any role in self-perception, and if Vera impacted the way they viewed others. This data was complimented by observed behavior on multiple different occasions in different settings.
(music shows, informal observations, committee meetings) as well as thorough examination of the aesthetic dimensions of Vera in its current iteration.

4. What is the significance of the intentions and practices of the Vera Project for other all-ages music and art venues in general and curriculum matters in particular?

Question four is about the lessons learned. For other youth oriented venues, lessons this study has to offer on the role of teachers and learners, the significance of milieu and aesthetics, as well as subject matter will be addressed. The Vera Project is unique in its combination of variables, but some of the lessons are universal to the all-ages scene. Question four is addressed through the analysis and organization of the themes that emerged from the study. The themes are organized using the conceptual framework in order to provide specific commentary on each of the educational commonplaces manifested at the Vera Project.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

The intent of this chapter is to find a place for the curricular dimensions of an all-ages music venue amongst the literature on out-of-school learning and curriculum theory. This chapter works from a discussion of the focus of the research on out-of-school learning and then moves towards the less formal public sphere, discussing the literature on the nature of informal learning and then on to the literature on public pedagogy. The chapter then discusses the dimensions of curricula (implicit/hidden and null) that are of greatest interest to this study and concludes with a discussion of the conceptual framework used to interpret the study’s findings.

Out of School Learning: Structured Environments

“Out of school learning” is an umbrella term used to describe all experiences that are not part of the mandated school day. Out of school learning encompasses places and programs where youth can engage in all kinds of learning experiences outside of the traditional schooling environment. Because out of school learning is so wide-ranging, the literature considered here addresses both the more frequently examined, formal out of school learning experiences as well as literature on informal out of school learning, which
is most characteristic to learning experiences at a music venue. This dissertation takes lessons from both.

The types of out of school learning environments are as varied as the term is broad. Out of school learning environments include: structured community based youth organizations (CBYO), museums and galleries, athletics, music venues, art spaces, and more. The type of structures and intended outcomes of informal learning environments is just as varied. Some environments foster a very structured program with distinct roles for the participants and clearly articulated outcomes, while other informal learning environments function on a drop-in basis and any outcome or product is determined by the individual.

Much research has been conducted on youth involvement in structured after school programs, much of that work with an emphasis on “at-risk” or disenfranchised youth. The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University facilitates extensive research on the educational experiences in out-of-school settings for school aged youth. This research includes the examination of civic engagement in community based youth organizations (CBYO) (O’Donoghue & Kirsher, 2003) youth participant perceptions of various CBYOs (Storbel, Kirshner, O’Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008), as well as how participation in after school programs can enhance youth development (McLaughlin, 2000; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silbereisen, 2002).

The impact on adolescents of structured out of school learning is well documented (Jones & Deutsch, 2012; Hill, 2007; McLaughlin, 2000). There is a large body of work
examining the correlation between youth involvement with out of school activities and success in school (Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011; Grolnick, Farkas, Sohmer, Michaels, & Valsiner, 2007; McLaughlin, 2002) as well as research on the social and emotional benefits to youth involvement in out of school activities (Hill & Hill, 2007). The role out of school activities play in youth identity development is another theme in the literature (Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002; Jones & Deutsch, 2013).

By in large the objective of the research on out of school activities is to establish measurable outcomes; how did out of school activity participation affect the youth participant? What measurable gains can be attributed to participation? Researchers are interested in demonstrating a correlation between participation in out of school activities and youth and community betterment. Of central interest is how participation impacts a youth’s performance in school and on post K-12 outcomes. With regard to the community, researchers are interested in how youth involvement in out of school activities can lead to a reduction in violence and community tensions (McLaughlin, 2002).

McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman (1994) reflect upon a past decade of research on youth involvement in community organizations in their text, Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth. The authors open with discussion of the research orientation in the field, “The question for all research in this field is, Did it work? But most researchers have defined “it” as a program” (p. 5). In other words, did the program ‘fix’ the problem? And the problem is often assigned to the youth themselves. Indications of the problem being fixed are tied
measureable outcomes. This research model does not allow much room for the examination of the quality of a youth’s participation or that of the characteristics of the learning space itself.

Research on youth participation is not nearly as robust with regard to music and arts venues. Because involvement at a venue is very much informal and does not often involve enrollment in a scheduled class or regular meeting participation it can be difficult to track participation. Additionally, both the amount and the nature of participation at a arts and music venue varies to such a degree that it becomes difficult to make correlations between a youth’s participation and her greater life outcomes, which is the central focus of research in the field of out of school learning (Sefton-Green, 2013).

This limitation does not invalidate the enormous impact participating at arts and music venues have on youth. However, it does make the current outcome orientated model of evaluation difficult for determining the qualities of the experiences youth have at in such environments. There is a potential shift in the way youth experiences in out of school programs can be evaluated. In their 2008 study, Strobel et al. take note that the current trend in evaluation of out of school programs is limiting, “Researchers and evaluators should broaden our ideas of ‘success’ and ‘impact’ in after-school programs. For urban youth in particular, the benefits of participation in after-school programs may not be solely related to academically oriented outcomes” (p. 1701). This acknowledgement may open the door for arts based research to enhance the outcomes correlation with the rich descriptions that can portray a youth’s experience, without
having to rely on a post participation outcome data as the indicator of a program’s success.

**Non-Formal and Informal Learning**

Formal learning is what takes place in mandatory schooling environments. Scholars both stateside and across the Atlantic agree that formal learning is contextual to an institution with a defined power structure, pre-established curriculum, forced participation (and usually limited choice), evaluation and leads to some sort of completion credential (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom (2002); Diamond, Luke, & Uttal, 2009; Sefton-Green, 2013). By contrast, informal learning “is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill that occurs without the presence of externally imposed criteria” (Livingston, 2006).

Non-formal and informal learning happens in areas not designated as schools. Sefton-Green (2013) reinforces the idea of the non-school with respect to informal learning, “Non-formal and informal learning tend to take place in contexts where teaching and learning aren’t usually understood to be the primary purpose of place” (p. 20).

On one end, formal education is usually teacher directed, whereas informal education is often peer-directed, often without a discernible leader. In many informal settings, the learner is not making an effort to learn; there is no metacognitive action to understand and remember. (Jaffers, 2006, p. 23)

Formal learning is associated with the K-12 (and traditional post secondary) system and the supplemental programs (e.g., tutoring, review courses, academic advising) that enhance and promote the traditional schooling process and structure.
In contrast, non-formal or in-formal learning can encompass methods and settings where persons have educational experiences that are outside the format of mandated schooling. “Non- and in-formal learning(s) are defined by the degree they vary from the norms derived from the common sense of schooling” (Sefton-Green, 2013, p. 16). Music and arts venues are places where youth voluntarily participate as community members, musicians, artists, and collaborators. In such places the learning is informal and at times unintentional. By its nature, out of school learning is informal learning; it is voluntary, individualized, open ended, and self guided (Sefton-Green, 2013; National Research Council, 2009). The virtues of informal learning combined with the power and empowerment the arts can provide make arts and music venues important places for youth.

There is no set definition of what informal learning is, only what it is not, formal learning. Scholars across disciplines and oceans agree that non- and informal learning take place outside of mandatory schooling where an authority (government, school, teacher) dictates what, how, and when content will be delivered and evaluated.

With agreement on what it is not, there is variance on the characteristics of non- and in-formal education and if they are in fact the same thing. Several scholars draw a continuum of educational experiences ranging from the formal to the informal, with the non-formal settled between.

There is a distinct body of work on informal learning in the UK. The European Commission issued a report on Lifelong Learning (2001) in which it codified different dimensions of informal learning. On the intentionality of learning experiences, the
Commission writes, “Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or ‘incidental/random’)” (as cited in Colley, Hodkinson & Malcom, 2002). Livingston (2001), another UK scholar, provides a definition of informal learning that may be most applicable to understanding the type of learning that happens in a youth run music and arts venue:

Informal learning is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria…in any context outside the pre-established curricular of education institutions. (as cited in Colley et al., 2002, p.8)

Informal learning is further characterized by voluntary participation in a nonlinear and open-ended manner (Colley, Holdkinson, & Malcom, 2002; Diamond, Luke, & Uttal, 2009; Sefton-Green, 2013). The opt-in nature of informal learning is especially important when considering the participation of youth who are disenfranchised and feel isolated from their traditional school environments.

In order to understand the critical importance of informal learning and learning environments, finding a concise definition is not necessary as there are several characteristics that define non-formal and informal learning that are of importance to this study. For the purposes of this study, the term informal learning will refer to learning experiences that are defined by voluntary participation on the part of the learner(s), venues for learning that are not schools, and a lack of traditional power structures.

By nature the learning that takes place in a music and arts venue is informal. It is strictly voluntary and often times non-linear. Curriculum is derived by the participants, rather than dictated from top down as is in formal schooling, and is a product of the space.
Public Pedagogy

This form of education, commonly known as *public pedagogy*, has been largely constructed as a concept focusing on various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling and is distinct from hidden and explicit curricular operating within and through school sites. It involves learning in institutions such as museums, zoos, and libraries; in informal educational sites such as popular culture, media, commercial spaces, and the Internet; and through figures and sites of activism, including public intellectuals and grassroots social movements. (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2001, p. 339)

Public Pedagogy is a field of scholarship that casts a broad net to encompass learning that happens in places that are not school. Public pedagogy has multiple meanings and is by nature interdisciplinary, across the field of education (curriculum studies, higher education, art education) as well as women’s studies, queer studies, cultural studies, anthropology, art and more (Sandlin et al., 2010).

Public Pedagogy envelops and expands upon Schubert’s work (beginning in the 1980s) on the examination of *outside curriculum* as a place of learning. In 1982 Schubert writes:

> What is also interesting is the fact that the need to expand curriculum beyond schooling is not only advocated in writing by those who tap new literatures, but from those in many other corners of the curriculum field as well. Curriculum writers who run the gamut from social behaviorist, to intellectual traditionalist, to experientialist, sense the need to move curriculum theory and practice beyond the confines of schooling. (p. 226)

Schubert’s discussion on outside curriculum weaves in work from the most known curricular theorists of the twentieth century as he makes the case for the necessity of outside of school learning.

In Chapter Two of Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick’s *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* (2010), Schubert presents outside curriculum (also referred to as out-of-school
curriculum) as both predecessor and concurrent to public pedagogy. Schubert remains one of the most influential writers on outside curriculum and public pedagogy and he speaks to the influence of public pedagogy in the field of curriculum studies as well as other social sciences:

To learn more about the many dimensions of life that shape human beings, one could tap literature from sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, history, philosophy, economics, biology, ecology, geography, political science, psychology – almost any discipline, sub-discipline, or area of study. Illumination of who we are, how we have become, and where we might be headed could emerge from inquiry into any realm of formal or informal knowledge. The emergent study of public pedagogy has revealed insights from many different sources-those noted above and more. (2010, p. 14)

Schubert’s description demonstrates just how wide the field of public pedagogy is.

Persons concerned with the education (to be clearly distinguished from schooling) of students straddle fields and disciplines, methodologies and settings.

The single thread that binds the field of public pedagogy is that the learning takes place outside of, and at times in spite of, schooling.

Public pedagogy has come to signify a crucial concept within educational scholarship—that schools are not the sole sites of teaching, learning, or curricula, and that perhaps they are not even the most influential. (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010, p. 2)

In the broadest sense, the field of public pedagogy affirms that learning is not contextual to schools and that rich learning takes place when the learning experiences are not constrained by the structures of schooling.

Simply in name, “public pedagogy” denotes that there is a practice, or even a methodology, of teaching in the public sphere. By associating the term “pedagogy” with
the idea of public learning, there is an insinuation of legitimacy, which further supports Shubert’s (2010) call to examine the curriculum and pedagogy of out-of-school learning.

In addition to referring to a place of learning (i.e., not at school), public pedagogy can be further seen as a form of activism. Public pedagogy can be more than learning in a place that is not a school; it can be learning that is tied to a social place outside of the current social and political culture of formal schooling. Brady (2006) describes the relationship and interdependence of activism and space that help define public pedagogy:

It is an activism embedded in collective action, not only situated in institutionalized structures, but in multiple spaces, including grassroots organizations, neighborhood projects, art collectives, and town meetings – spaces that provide a site for compassion, outrage, humor, and action. (p. 58)

Many of the scholarship and research on outside curriculum, public pedagogy, and informal learning aims to pull the thread of the outside back into the classroom. In their conclusion, Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick (2011) warn that there is much that can be lost if public pedagogy cannot have a place of its own, outside the context of the school systems. The authors write:

Although public pedagogy is often conceptualized as something other than institutional, much of the literature still rigidly posits it relation to schooling, evaluates extramural pedagogies via an institutional lens, or pulls learning that could be accomplished in public sites back into the classroom; we view this stance as potentially problematic, as we feel public pedagogy could lose some of its conceptual significance if its definitional boundaries are not maintained. (p. 363)

Pedagogy and curriculum in out of school spaces is characterized by its informal nature and voluntary participation. To bring the pedagogy and curriculum of an informal space (e.g., a music and arts venue) into the realm of formal schooling would be to alter the nature of the learning experiences of the youth participants.
Dimensions of Curricula: the Hidden and Null

Curriculum scholars are concerned with every experience a learner has within the context of schooling. Elliot Eisner puts forth three curricula present in all schooling experiences: the explicit, the implicit, and the null curriculum (2002). The explicit curriculum is articulated intentions of the school, classroom, or lesson. The explicit curriculum is defined and public. The implicit curriculum is neither defined nor public; it is the unspoken social messages transmitted to students by schools. The third curricula is a void of teaching, it is what is not taught, what is omitted from the school experience. Eisner calls this the “null curriculum”.

The explicit lesson plan is but a fraction of what is taught in schools; it is that which is not explicitly taught and that which is omitted, that can have the greatest impact on how schools shape students and therefore society. For decades the field has paid close attention to the school as an agent of socialization (Vallance, 1973-74, Giroux, 2001). Scholars have visited and revisited the impact on students of the implicit curricular components of the schooling experience. These non-articulated experiences fall under the term, “hidden curriculum.”

The hidden curriculum consists of the messages given to children by teachers, school structures, textbooks, and other school resources. These messages are often conveyed by teachers who themselves are unaware of their presence. (Eisner, 2002, p. 102)

The idea of a hidden curriculum functions most usefully as a device for identifying those systematic side effects of schooling that we sense but which cannot be
adequately accounted for by reference to the explicit curriculum (Vallance, 1973-74, p. 7).

As social structures that require participation by all of society’s young members, schools play a large role in constructing and reinforcing the nation’s social fabric. “Hidden curriculum is acknowledged as the socialization process of schooling” Kentli (2009) continues, “the hidden curriculum as a socialization of schooling can be identified by the social interactions within an environment. Thus, it is in a process at all times and serves to transmit tacit messages to students about values, attitudes and principles” (p. 88).

The hidden curriculum defined in the education literature is contextual to formal learning. The hidden curriculum of schools is applicable to youth who are bound in a system with a clearly defined power structure in which they are on the receiving end. Children are captives in the school environment and are therefore mandated to participate in the school dictated curriculum and to ‘hear’ the messages of socialization that the hidden curriculum can impart.

Grioux (2001) sees how the hidden curriculum can function as a mechanism of oppression “The hidden curriculum of schooling encompassed and reproduced a whole range of meanings that represent selections from the ideological and cultural resources of dominant interest groups” (59). In this context the hidden curriculum can reinforce the status quo, which is most often a myopic and oppressive narrative for any student who does not fit the dominant culture norms.
The hidden curriculum can be one that promotes oppression and reinforce traditional power imbalances. Referring to the hidden curriculum, Giroux asks the question, “How does the process of schooling function to reproduce and sustain the relations of dominance, exploitation, and inequality between classes?” (2001, p. 56).

The third dimension of curriculum is the null curriculum, the curriculum that is not taught. Like the hidden curriculum, the null curriculum is not advertised and its effects on students are subliminal. The null curriculum is what is not presented, what students are not given the opportunity to learn, and can reflect what is not valued by schools and teachers. “It is my (Eisner) thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach” (2002). Eisner defines the concept of null curriculum as, “The options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not a part of their intellectual repertoire” (2002, p. 107).

Every curriculum, both intentionally and unintentionally, omits perspectives, experiences, and skills from its learning environment. Like the hidden curriculum, the null curriculum communicates a set of values to the student by what is not seen worthy of instructional consideration.

Curriculum theory was originally defined in, and continue to predominately reside in, the context of formal schooling. About thirty years ago several scholars called for the expansion of curricular theory to become more inclusive of educational sites and experiences outside of the K-12 system. One of those scholars, Schubert (2010), writes:

The idea of outside curriculum as we called for in the early 1980s (Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1980) and reiterated many times (e.g., Shubert, Lopez Shubert, Thomas, & Carroll, 2002, p. 499-500) was based on the necessary and neglected
need to focus on curriculum both implicit and explicit in many kinds of educational situations. (p. 12)

**Conceptual Framework**

This study will use a conceptual framework that is informed by Joseph Schwab’s “four commonplaces” (1960), P. Bruce Uhrmacher’s (1991) aesthetic dimension of schooling, and Elliot Eisner’s (2002) three curricula.

Schwab’s (1969) distinguished four equally important components of educational thought and practice he calls the “four commonplaces”. Of the commonplaces he writes, “Defensible educational thought must take account of four commonplaces of equal rank: the learner, the teacher, the milieu, and the subject matter. None of these can be omitted without omitting a vital factor in educational thought and practice” (p. 509). Schwab’s work continually considers what curriculum is and the characteristics of the persons who should make curricular decisions. In addition, Schwab looks at how the milieu should shape what and how matters are taught (1973, 1978, 1983). Schwab’s commonplaces are intentional; he writes on how they should be constructed and considered. This study used Schwab’s commonplaces as an organizational lens as the commonplaces to be examined will be naturally occurring and the objective is to observe and interpret what is present, not make recommendations on what should be.

Schwab articulated his commonplaces with reference to the traditional school environment. Elizabeth Vallance (2005) interpreted Schwab’s commonplaces for use in the field of art museum education. She demonstrates this application:

Art museum education programs, though never offering a “curriculum” in the traditional sense of the word, are fairly contained, since one appeal of museum education is the milieu itself: Students of all ages and art backgrounds come to
interact with a collection housed in a finite, usually lovely space, and this special milieu and quite visible subject matter are dominant constants of a museum’s education program. The “teachers” in this program are maximally diverse: They include the teaching professionals and volunteer docents, curators who lecture and teach, the interpretative material such as extended labels and audio tours, and the unseen presence of the curators’ selection and arrangement of the objects on view in the galleries. (p. 76)

The above cited appears in a chapter Valance contributed to Intricate Palette: Working the Ideas of Elliot Eisner (Uhrmacher & Matthews (Eds.), 2005). In this chapter Valance goes on to make the case for art museum education as a good candidate for research using educational criticism as a methodology, “The very subject…is art itself; its ultimate goal can be said to be the teaching of criticism” (p. 82). She continues:

The various teachers in this setting are committed to the language of aesthetics in their very teaching. Thirdly, because art museum education occurs largely within a milieu that itself guides students’ experiences through effect signage and labeling, the milieu becomes a legitimate subject of criticism and is generally a powerful part of a visitor’s experience. (p. 82)

Distinct comparisons can be drawn between the learning experiences had in a museum and those at a music and arts venue. Therefore, I propose to use Vallance’s (2005) reinterpretation of Schwab’s (1969) four commonplaces to inform the conceptual framework for evaluating the educational experiences of a music and arts venue.

For the purposes of this study, I will use Schwab’s (1969) commonplaces: learner, teacher, milieu, and subject matter to build a framework for my criticism. As a complementary commonplace, I will use a dimension of schooling defined by P. Bruce Uhrmacher (1991), the aesthetic dimension. He writes, “the aesthetic dimension refers to the kinds and quality of materials used in the classroom or school as well as the physical arrangement of materials” (p. 28). Because the subject of this study is the venue itself,
the materials and space used to facilitate experiences become a commonplace of their own.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explicit Curriculum</th>
<th>Implicit Curriculum</th>
<th>Null Curriculum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milieu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject Matter</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Dimension</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It is intentional that in this framework the lines that separate the commonplaces and the curriculum are not defined in the areas where they will intersect. In an informal environment without a distinct power structure and scripted curriculum, the commonplaces and curriculum will likely bleed onto and on top of one another, perhaps at times collapsing and expanding. Schwab (1983) writes, “What I have said (above) applies to every art, whether it be teaching, stone carving, or judicial control of a court of law. In art, the form must be adapted to the matter” (p. 265). This study followed Schwab’s advice and adapted his commonplaces to the matter of learning in an all-ages music and arts venue.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Arts based educational research (ABER) is particularly appropriate for this study because it provides the opportunity to show and tell youth and their music scene. Using ABER allowed me to bring a unique environment into focus and provided the opportunity to use artistic and expressive tools to examine an arts-orientated, non-traditional environment. Referring to ABER, Barone and Eisner (1997) write, “‘Thick’ literary descriptions grounds the writing in a particular context so that the complexities adhering to a unique event, character, or setting may be adequately rendered” (97). One of the aims of this study is to provide rich descriptions of the landscape of an all ages music venue, which allowed for an examination as to how this landscape influences the youth who interact with the venue.

One of the central aims of arts based research is to examine educational phenomena in a new light. “If traditionalists generally seek to secure solid explanations and confident predictions, arts-based researchers aim to suggest new ways of viewing educational phenomena” (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 96). The intention of this research study is to examine the intersection of the Vera Project as an informal music and arts venue with the curricular constructs contextual to traditional schooling. To do so is to
reconsider traditional notions about the context of curriculum and to suggest a new way to view the learning experiences at music and arts venues. This work necessitates a research orientation that will allow for the reexamination of educational spaces.

**Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism**

One of the architects of arts-based educational research, Elliot Eisner, found the methods for evaluating educational experiences limiting. Teaching is as much an art as it is a science and methods for evaluation that only speak to the scientific miss much of the picture. In response to the evaluation of an art with a scientist’s toolkit, Eisner (1976) developed a methodology that combines the art of appreciation (connoisseurship) with the act of interpretation (criticism) to provide a framework for educational evaluation:

Educational connoisseurship…is but half of a pair of concepts that I believe to be particularly promising for thinking about the conduct of educational evaluation. The other half of this pair is the concept of educational criticism. Each of these concepts, educational connoisseurship and educational criticism, have their roots in the arts –and for good reason. (p. 140)

Educational criticism is a dance with connoisseurship. “Connoisseurship, generally defined, is the art of appreciation” (Eisner, 2002, p. 215). In order to evaluate educational experiences using Educational Criticism, one must first hone her appreciation for the subject of the criticism. “To be a connoisseur is to know how to look, to see, and to appreciate” (Eisner, 2002, p.15). Developing an appreciation is a personal endeavor, which fits with Eisner’s distinction of the connoisseurship as a private act.

Once the educational critic has become a connoisseur, she can then take the next step, which is to become a critic. Eisner (2002) describes the relationship between developing the appreciation as a connoisseur and moving forward as a critic:
Criticisms is the art of disclosing the qualities of events or objects that connoisseurship perceives. Criticism is the public side of connoisseurship. One can be a connoisseur without the skills of criticism, but one cannot be a critic without the skills of connoisseurship. (p. 219)

Educational criticism provides a toolkit and process of its own. The educational critic uses her senses and dialogue to collect data (Eisner, 1976). These tools allow for the construction of the educational criticism by painting the picture of the experiences for the researcher to interpret and then make meaning of the subject of the criticism.

Educational connoisseurship and educational criticism (here forward referred to as educational criticism) is comprised of four dimensions: the descriptive, interpretative, evaluative and thematics (Eisner, 2002). The descriptive dimension is the opening of a criticism wherein the critic paints the picture of a scene.

To begin to understand a unique space, one must be able to attend a vicarious sensory tour of the space. Eisner (2002) notes that the descriptive dimension can allow an author to, “enable the reader to participate vicariously in the auditory and visual qualities” of a space (p. 226). The descriptive dimension of educational criticism served to facilitated the rich descriptions that will be necessary to understand the feel of the venue and her youth.

The educational critic is charged with interpreting her descriptions. The interpretive aspect of educational criticism seeks to answer the questions, “What does the situation mean to those involved? How does this classroom operate? What ideas, concepts, or theories can be used to explain its major features?” (Eisner, 2002, p. 229).

The third dimension of educational criticism is evaluation wherein the critic looks to establish the educational significance of the subject of the criticism. Eisner, 2002,
writes, “The evaluative aspect of educational criticism attempts to assess the educational import or significance of the events or objects described or interpreted” (p. 234).

The educational critic’s final step is to develop themes. “Thematics is the distillation of the major ideas or conclusions that are to be derived from the material that preceded it” (Eisner, 2002, p.233). Developing themes will require engaging in an iterative process with my criticism wherein I interact with the entirety of the criticism (description, interpretation, and evaluation) to make meaning of the study.

Having multiple types and points of data that structurally corroborate one another is not enough to lend full validity to the work of an educational criticism. “Something more must be added to validate the observations of the educational critic. That something more is the determination of referential adequacy” (Eisner, 2002, p. 239). The intention of referential adequacy is to validate the work of the educational criticism by holding it against the subject of the criticism. In this study I established referential adequacy for both my observational and my interview data.

To establish referential adequacy for the observational data I conducted multiple observations and revisited the research site (the Vera Project) on a frequent basis prior to the beginning of data collection, during the data collection phase, and subsequent to the data collection period. The two music shows observed were attended with a companion. She was asked to review both the observation notes and the resulting vignettes to ensure the representation of the events was accurate. This concordance was a further step in establishing referential adequacy.
Establishing referential adequacy for the interview data was achieved by having each interview participants to review the transcripts of her or his interview as a member check. During the review process each participant were given the opportunity to give clarifying comments, make additions or subtractions to the transcriptions to further clarify her or his responses. Five participants signed off on the transcripts as presented and one participant, Bibi, made minor edits, mostly to provide clarity. In her email she noted, “Hi Lesley, Thanks for sending this along - I made some small edits throughout, mainly to make more cohesive thoughts. Good luck with your project!” (Bibi, email communication, March 15, 2014).

In order to study the dimensions of the received curriculum in a music and arts venue, a combination of interviews, observations and document review served as multiple forms of evidence to work together to inform and validate one another. In educational criticism this is called “structural corroboration.” “Evidence is structurally corroborative when pieces of evidence validate each other, the story holds up, the pieces fit, it makes sense, the facts are consistent” (Eisner, 2002, p. 237).

**Research Questions**

In order to understand the curricular components that permeate the all-ages scene, I examined an all-ages music and arts venue in Seattle, Washington. Seattle is fortunate to have an all-ages venue that has been a part of a changing landscape for over a decade. The Vera Project (“Vera”) serves as a microcosm of an all-ages participatory music scene in which to study the learning experiences of youth ‘on the scene’. The Vera Project is my true participant; I used a combination of site-based observations, in-depth interviews
with multiple Vera participants, and document review to conduct an Educational Criticism of the Vera Project.

The objective of this research was to understand the ways in which The Vera Project and other organizations like it message and construe curriculum to its youth. In order to study Vera as a microcosm of the all-ages music scene, I looked to persons, experiences, places, and documents that could shed light on the dimensions of curricula present at the Vera Project.

My study was guided by four research questions and the data analyzed through the use of a conceptual framework in order to interpret and evaluate my data and then engage in the process of developing themes. The research questions are:

1. What are the intentions of the Vera Project as an all-ages music and arts space in a large urban city?

2. What are the elements of implicit and null curriculum experienced at The Vera Project?

3. How do the implicit messages of the Vera Project transcend its walls?

4. What is the significance of the intentions and practices of the Vera Project for other youth art communities in general and curriculum matters in particular?

**Study Design**

**Meet Vera**

Seattle, Washington is home to The Vera Project, an all ages music and art venue. The Vera Project is located in a nondescript concrete building on Seattle Center\(^3\) in the shadow of some of the Center’s better-known attractions including the fountain, armory,

\(^3\) See Appendix E for a map of Seattle Center.
two museums and one Space Needle. The Vera Project became a permanent resident of Seattle Center in 2007 when it moved from its first real home in downtown Seattle.

In 2014 the Vera Project is an epicenter of Seattle’s all-ages scene and has expanded exponentially since its inception in 2001. On a quick walk through the concrete courtyard surrounding The Vera Project, you see windows filled with colorful screen prints advertising concerts and community events, displayed in a haphazard sort of way. The Vera Project’s published mission statement, “the Vera Project fosters a participatory creative culture through popular music concerts, arts programs, experiential learning and volunteer opportunities for all ages, especially young people” (Vera Project, 2008, p.11) is driven by its vision, “The Vera Project envisions a truly participatory all-ages music and arts community….Vera uses the concept of all-ages to create paths towards learning and power-sharing between youth and adults.” (Vera Project, 2008, p. 11).

Recruitment

The Vera Project as my study site.

My recruitment of the Vera Project as a research site began in January of 2013, but my relationship with the Vera Project dates back a decade. I first came to know the Vera Project ten years ago, when I was a middle school teacher in Seattle Public Schools. It was the tail end of the Teen Dance Ordinance, a set of tyrannical regulations that governed the operation of Seattle’s all-ages venues from 1985-2002 (http://seattletdoproject.wordpress.com), and the Vera Project was just a year and a half old. The Teen Dance Ordinance had made it nearly impossible to operate an all-ages
venue within the Seattle City limits leaving a void of safe spaces for youth to engage with music. I saw many shows at Vera. Us punks of all ages gravitated to the space.

Eight years later I returned to Seattle after a sojourn in Denver. The Vera Project had grown up, Teen Dance Ordinance had been lifted, and Vera had moved from Downtown to Seattle Center. In 2014, the Vera Project has taken on a different space and feel. Vera now has a permanent home in Seattle Center, a much different location from its previous home in downtown Seattle. Vera’s volunteer pool has grown exponentially over the years. The Vera Project has a visible support base and Vera has many more formal structures and programs. Vera remains at the center of Seattle’s all-ages music scene, but in a different space and in a different time.

Looking for a site to study the curricular constructs of an all-ages music venue led me back to the Vera Project. Using a published list of contacts, I wrote an email to the (then acting) director of programming, Josh. Josh was a long time Vera volunteer and then staff member, straddling a decade of growth and Vera’s different iterations. I outlined my background and interest in using the Vera Project as a research study site for a doctoral dissertation and asked if he would be amenable to discussing the idea.

Josh and I met in March of 2012 at the Vera Project. He gave me a full behind the scenes tour and spent a couple of hours with me discussing the work that goes on at Vera and the ways in which the space has evolved. He said he would be happy to support a project (he felt it would be a positive experience for the Vera Project).

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4 The Vera Project has acted as a one of several research sites for a Master’s Thesis study. Davza McGowan, C. R. (2007) looked at youth volunteerism in the arts in his project, “Youth Volunteers in the Arts: the next generation of Arts Administrators, Community Members, and Workers.”
subsequently left the Vera Project to be replaced by Beth who was equally enthusiastic about the work.\footnote{Due to personal circumstances, my dissertation work was put on hold until August 2013 when I reconnected with Beth.}

Beth and I met in September of 2013 and she affirmed her enthusiasm for the project and suggested I come to a Steering Committee meeting to present the idea and seek approval. All decisions about any type of project that take place at the Vera Project must be put before the Youth Steering Committee, which is at the epicenter of the Vera Project’s organizational structure (see Appendix E). I attended the September 17, 2013, Steering Committee Meeting and presented to the youth board my desire to conduct dissertation research on site.

I shared with the committee that I was interested in learning about the range of learning experiences persons have on the all-ages music scene and that the Vera Project would be a wonderful place to conduct research study about learning on the all-ages scene. I was intentional to share details of the research process, including the scholarly language around curriculum theory. I felt it was important to honor the committee as a voice in the decision-making process rather than treat the committee as a ceremonial hoop to jump through. Therefore I was intentional to use language specific to the research and to fully articulate the scope of the work.

To the committee I explained Eisner’s three dimensions of curricula (2002), the explicit, the implicit, and the null. To explain the implicit (or hidden curricula), that which I am most interested in, I gave the example of students who are louder than others or ‘disruptive’ being relegated to the back of the class. This could be teaching students...
that being quiet and compliant is the only way to get ahead, that academics are intended for those that are quiet, and that persons that do not fit that quiet mold are not academics and cannot learn. To illustrate the idea of null curriculum, I gave the example of authors taught in a literature class. If no African-American authors are taught, does the lack of inclusion (null) say something? One of the steering committee members asked if the hidden curriculum was like how, in her American History class, the only real focus on black history had to do with the Civil War. I responded that her example was a strong one of implicit curriculum and maybe null curriculum.

After the discussion the committee seemed excited, but I left the meeting so that they could deliberate this and other assorted business. I reached out to Beth the following day and she reported the youth steering committee members were enthusiastic about the project and collectively gave the project a green light. I explained the proposal and IRB process to Beth, told her I would keep her updated, and that as soon as I had my university approval, I would begin work. As part of the University of Denver IRB process Beth submitted a letter of support form the Vera Project (Appendix I).

**Vera’s voices.**

With the Vera Project as an organization committed to participating, I now had to find participants within the organization that could speak to her or his respective experiences at Vera and perhaps the larger all-ages scene in general. My criteria for participants were two fold: the participant had to have been involved with the Vera Project for at least two years and she or he had to be over the age of eighteen. Using the Vera Project staff as a gateway, I provided an email for recruitment and they reached out
to a core of persons who have been active volunteers over the years. The project director
reached out to volunteers to inquire as to whether or not they would be interested in
potentially participating in a graduate research project about learning in music venues.
The director then passed the e-mail addresses of the interested participants to me so that I
might make contact and explain the full nature of the project, what would be involved
with participating, and the intended outcomes.

Thirteen persons expressed interest in participating and of those thirteen, six
ended up as participants. I made email contact with each interested party and asked about
the years of their involvement and any particular focus they had within Vera. Of
particular interest were persons who were at Vera during its transition from the
downtown space (Fourth Avenue) to Seattle Center (across 2006-2008) and persons who
played different roles at Vera over the course of her or his involvement. With this
information, I selected the six participants to accompany Beth, the director of
programming.

Data Collection

Interviews.

In order to understand the experiences of youth and therefore the dimensions of
received curriculum of the Vera Project, I conducted individual interviews with six
persons who had extensive and intimate involvement at Vera as well as the current
director of programming. The six persons I interviewed fell into two distinct groups:
youth that became involved with the Vera Project during their high school years (Megan,
Paula, and Anne) and another group of youth that became involved with the Vera Project
post-high school, in their early twenties (Vanessa, Alejandro, and Bibi). Within these two groups, each individual fulfilled specific roles that allowed her or his voice to enhance another part of the picture of the Vera Project. Table one provides an overview of each participant’s time at Vera.

Table 1: Overview of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th># Years Involved</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Learned audio engineering, ran sound for shows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Youth volunteer, sound engineering, committee member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Director of Programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibi</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Head of art gallery committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Youth volunteer, head of steering committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Youth volunteer, committee leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Youth volunteer, 1st paid staff member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In preparation for the interviews I constructed three separate interview protocols: one for youth volunteers (who may have also held additional roles), another for the head of the youth steering committee, and a third for the director of programming (see Appendices A, B, and C respectively for interview protocols).

I digitally recorded each interviewed and then hand transcribed the interview from the recordings. During the interviews I took notes on the interviewee’s affect, made sketches, and jotted down any ideas spurred by the conversation. Once the interview was transcribed, I sent the participant the interview transcription in the form of a Word document and asked each participant to review the transcript for accuracy. In addition, I invited each participant to add any further thoughts or provide feedback.
Observations.

I observed three different types of activities that are central to the Vera Project: two music shows, drop-in hours, and a youth committee meeting. The two music shows were selected quite intentionally. It was important to observe two very different genres of music: one show that was in the fairly traditional indie-rock genre and another show that fulfilled the criteria of intentionally reaching out to a non-indie rock, non-white audience.

In order to select the shows to observe I reviewed the Vera Project’s online concert calendar for the duration of the data collection phase of this dissertation (http://theveraproject.org/calendar/). I was unfamiliar with many of the artists so I used Spotify (www.Spotify.com), Bandcamp (www.bandcamp.com) and Soundcloud (www.soundcloud.com) to read artist biographies and listen to tracks in order to select shows that fit the criteria and therefore would be beneficial to observe. I categorized my findings into a chart that allowed me to make an informed decision regarding observations. Table two describes the information for the two shows selected for observation.

Table 2: Details for observed shows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist(s)</th>
<th>Music Genre</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Additional Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rob Skeetz, Diffy</td>
<td>Hip-Hop, Rap</td>
<td>Seattle, WA</td>
<td>- Show was billed as “The Bro Show.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boi, Ju-Ju Twist,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Only show with non-white artists during data collection period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief, Kase</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Only show not in the rock genre during the data collection window</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed, J Byrd (MC)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Artists are all Settle musicians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I conducted four unique drop-in observations. I went to the Vera Project during general open hours (Tuesdays-Saturdays, two to six p.m.). In addition, I conducted informal, drop-in style observations prior to committee meetings and some of the interviews.

I had two opportunities to observe a Steering Committee meeting. The first time I attended a Steering meeting was prior to the start of data collection when I shared my proposal to use the Vera Project as a site to complete my dissertation research (September 17, 2013). I then conducted a formal observation of the March 2014 monthly Steering Committee meetings.

I used a single observation protocol for all of the observations. This protocol was adapted from the example Creswell (2007) presents in his text on qualitative research design. Creswell’s observation protocol has two columns; one column for descriptive notes and the other column for reflective notes (p. 137). I added a third column for sketches or artifact gathering as well as a section for logistical information. Figure four is the observation protocol used in this study.
Figure 2: Observation Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE AND TIME:</th>
<th>EVENT:</th>
<th>EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DESCRIPTIVE NOTES</td>
<td>REFLECTIVE NOTES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immediately following each observation I reviewed my field notes and any collected artifacts (e.g., fliers) and made any additions or corrections. I then carefully transcribed my notes into written summaries of each experience. I worked from my notes and sketches to build a narrative summary from the start to finish of the observed event, including sections for the description of artifacts relevant to the observation.

**Document review.**

Simultaneous to conducting my observations and interviews I reviewed the Vera Project’s governing documents, including Vera’s 2001 articles of incorporation as a 501 (c) non-profit, Vera’s Bylaws, the Five Year Strategic Plan (2008-2013), as well as published charts on Vera’s organizational structure. I reviewed the Vera Project’s website, both for static content and concert calendars, reviews and announcements. I also regularly read the Vera Project’s web blog and show and event advertisements placed in the weekly papers.

In addition, I read historical articles from local papers about the Vera Project throughout the years. I consider these articles to fall into the category of documents, rather than literature as they do not have a scholarly base but rather help document the Vera Project as a part of Seattle’s music scene. Included in my review was an article
from the Seattle Times (Sitt, P., 2002, October 22), “Vera Project Opens its Doors to music lovers of all ages” and in what was Seattle’s (now defunct) other major mainstream paper, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer “Vera Project Ready to Unveil All-Ages Venue” (Pavarez, D., 2002, October 10). My review of documents and Vera related materials took place on a continual basis during the data collection period and is therefore not reflected in Table Three: Summary of Data Collection.

Table 3: Summary of Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participant or Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Steering Committee Meeting</td>
<td>September 17, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Interview</td>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>December 18, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Drop In</td>
<td>January 12, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>January 15, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>January 17, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Drop In</td>
<td>January 21, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Bibi</td>
<td>January 22, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>January 22, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Drop-In</td>
<td>January 25, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>February 2, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Drop In</td>
<td>February 6, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>“The Bro Show” – Seattle Hip-Hop</td>
<td>Feb 15, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>February 28, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>“Graveface Roadshow” - Indie rock tour</td>
<td>March 2, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>March 12, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Drop In</td>
<td>March 12, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Drop-In</td>
<td>March 18, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Steering Committee</td>
<td>March 18, 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

I collected my data in tandem with analyzing my data. During this time I continued review documents and artifacts including the Vera Project’s website, artifacts collected from observations, and the Vera concert calendar and blog.

Analysis of interview data.

To understand my interview data I relied on Seidman (2006) for guidance in interpreting interview text. I followed Seidman’s first step with fidelity, “The first step in reducing the text is to read it and mark with brackets the passages that are interesting” (p. 117). I further followed Seidman’s advice, “Trust yourself as a reader. If you are going to err, err on the side of inclusion” (p. 118).

Immediately following each interview I transcribed the audio recording and sent it to the participant for review. Upon receiving feedback, I worked with a hard copy of the interview as I began the process of categorizing my data and allowing codes to emerge. I did not have an existing set of codes, as I wanted to read the interviews without any preconceived expectations or focus. I followed Creswell’s (2007) advice and developed “lean codes” (p. 152), with a limited number of categories. As I worked through each interview, I realized there were several reoccurring words or phrases across participants. Therefore I developed several in vivo codes to further focus my interview data analysis. The process was iterative; I revisited each interview many times both separately and in various groupings with the other interviews and observational data.
Analysis of observational data.

Analysis of my observational data began with the transcription of my observation notes immediately following the event. Working with hard copies of the transcription as well as my notes and any collected artifacts, I kept in mind both the broad categories and the in vivo codes that developed from my interviews as a lens to examine the transcriptions of my observations. The codes were not a perfect match, but did provide direction with which to hone in my work, given the large volume of my observational notes.

I constructed vignettes directly from the full transcriptions of my observations. Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2013) endorse the use of vignettes to present fieldwork observations, “The vignette offers the researcher an opportunity to venture away from traditional scholarly discourse and into evocative prose that remains firmly rooted in the data but is not a slave to it” (p. 183). I was careful to adhere to my notes during the process of constructing the vignettes. My wife accompanied me to both music shows and I asked her to review my notes and each vignette for accuracy as a way of establishing “referential adequacy” (Eisner, 2002) and to ensure that my vignettes accurately represented the work observed in the field.

Positionality

As a qualitative researcher I assume the responsibility of becoming the research instrument (Creswell, 2007). As such, my background and position in relationship to my participants must be carefully considered in my data collection and interpretation. My position as a researcher was important in this study. In their article, “Power and
Positionality: negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures,” Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, & Muhamad (2010) provide a definition of positionality that serves the purposes of this study. They write:

Positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’. More importantly, these positions can shift: ‘The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status. (2010, p. 411-412)

Discussions of race, sexuality, class, geography, and presence on a music scene are all a part of this study; therefore calibrating myself as an instrument with which to present and interpret this data becomes important.

As a white middle-class woman who was a long time participant on the all-ages scene, I share many of the demographics of my participants. As a member of Seattle’s LGBT population, I can speak with insider status as to the way Seattle’s gay community is included. My sexual orientation and relationship status often opened the door to conversations. For example, I would chat with teens at the Vera Project and (like all other teenagers) they would ask me questions about my personal life. Sharing that I was married to another woman led one teen to disclose her sexual identity and being able to gauge reactions gave a temperature read on the way teens at Vera accepted persons from the gay community. I am a middle-class educator and a resident of Seattle’s south side, but am not native to Seattle, although I have lived here on and off for nearly a decade. I am a long time participant in various music scenes, was active in all-ages music scenes as a youth, and have been involved with the Vera Project, my research site, in some capacity
for nearly a decade. My position informs my research, but I have been very careful to not let it dictate the way in which I gather data or interpret my findings.

**Limitations or Considerations**

There are potential limitations to this study. With this study I intend to impose both educational theory (curriculum theory) and educational research methodology (educational connoisseurship and criticism) on a venue that is not a traditional learning environment. While I believe that the concepts of curriculum theory will transfer to this community music and arts space, I will have to be cognizant that there will not always be a comparable experience or structure.

As with much qualitative research, a small number of participants and experiences generated an enormous amount of data, but there are hundreds of other persons who have and do intimately experience the all-ages scene and the Vera Project in particular and their voices are not present. Similarly, the Vera Project puts on dozens of shows each year and the shows observed for this study must be considered for their own merits and not as representative of all musical programming.

A further consideration, although not necessarily a limitation, is the nature of the participant pool. By default the persons who are participants at the Vera Project do so willingly and are therefore supporters of the institution. Many persons have learned a great deal and have benefited greatly from their time at Vera. This bias towards the institution at times made it a challenge to ask the participants to critically reflect on their respective experiences because they so willingly attended and many felt they owed the venue and organization a great debt.
Chapter Four: Describing Vera

The Scene on a Thursday

On an ordinary Thursday afternoon I head through the deserted Seattle Center towards the Vera Project’s front door. Seattle Center is seventy-four concrete acres and home to such cultural attractions such as the Experience Music Project and Pacific Science Center, five performing arts venues, a film house, the Seattle Children’s Museum, and a multiplicity of smaller galleries, all situated around the large circular fountain which is the congregating point for many festivals (Appendix E). Most notably, Seattle Center is home to the iconic Space Needle. The campus of Seattle Center is in Seattle’s Lower Queen Anne neighborhood, not quite at Seattle’s Center. Lower Queen Anne is a shifting landscape with expensive condos replacing older apartments, banks replacing record stores and upscale wine bars pushing out diners.

This Thursday is ordinary in its greyness and devoid of any fanfare as I cross through the campus and head towards Vera’s street level door. As I walk through the courtyard surrounded by squat concrete buildings, I see windows filled with colorful screen prints advertising concerts and events. A large white sign hangs above the door and bright red letters spell out, “VERA. all-ages. art. music.” A guy stands a few feet
from the door finishing a cigarette, his red shoes standing out against the grey sky. I have arrived at the Vera Project.

Immediately upon entering the Vera Project is what I can only describe as a punk rock reception desk. Three persons between the ages of fourteen and twenty are hanging out behind the desk, completely disinterested in anyone coming through the door. A tall, skinny, effeminate boy, clad in black, is leaning against the wall, reading text messages to two girls who are sitting behind and on top of the desk. The girl behind the desk is somewhat hidden behind the layers of a black dress, lace, and the ripped stockings she is wearing. Another girl is leaning against the wall in amazingly high combat boots, vast amounts of red lipstick, and layers of t-shirts covering her large frame. The three of them are engaged, laughing, and relaxed.

After a perfunctory nod to go on, I wander through The Vera Project. The walls are covered with flyers advertising for upcoming shows as well as fundraisers and community events. Near the desk is a bulletin board with advertisements for local LGBTQ advocacy groups, homeless student resources, and a stick figure drawing of a bike, “Call Chad. Cash. $50.” The upstairs is a web of walkways that connect the few offices as well as a conference room. A couple of teenagers hang out around the top of the stairwell and nod as I walk past.

**Gateway to Chapter Four**

Thursday’s scene is a gateway to Chapter Four wherein a vignette structure is used to weave together the narratives of many of the Vera Project’s different players with observations of activities that define Vera as an all-ages venue. This will serve as the
descriptive aspect of this educational criticism in which I follow Eisner’s advice (1976) to, “characterize or render the pervasive and purely descriptive phenomena one attends to” (p. 142). Intermingled with the narratives are short interpretations, which begin the next phase of the educational criticism, which is the interpretation, the “effort to understand the meaning and significance that various forms of action have for those in a social setting” (p. 145). The interpretations are intended to provide explanations and insights to the observations and interviews to aid the reader in appreciating the scene and then to segue one section to the next.

The Vera Project was founded as a non-profit in 2001. In Vera’s Articles of Incorporation, Shannon Stewart, the founder of Vera, responded to the query, “The Purpose for which the non-profit corporation is organized?” with, “To put on all-ages music and arts events for those 21 and under through participation” (Stewart, the Vera Project Articles of Incorporation, 2001, November 18) and with this statement, Stewart founded Vera as a tax exempt organization in King County (articles of incorporation Appendix F).

The Vera Project is governed by nine article bylaws that begin with Article One, “Name, Location, and Purpose” where the intentions of the Vera Project are solidified in print:

The Vera Project is organized and operated exclusively for purposes that are beneficial to the public interest, more specifically to provide innovative, community-directed and youth-oriented music and arts programming and designated venue. (Vera Bylaws, 2001, amended 2007).
The bylaws go on to outline the structure of the organization, the conditions of membership, the role of the board and various committees, as well as minutia such as the fiscal year and what constitutes consensus.

In all of Vera’s documents, the clearly articulated intentions are to provide an all-ages space for youth to participate in a music scene. The Vera Project is intentional to promote participation above the concept of attendance because the organization clearly values the voice of youth and their active participation within workings of the venue.

As I gathered data and spent time with the persons who care about Vera and at Vera Project events, I amassed hundreds of pages of words and images. When I began the process of coding and organizing my data I saw themes emerge and natural groupings developed. This chapter is presented to reflect those themes and groups. My interview participants naturally fell into three groups: those who were a part of Vera during their high school years, persons who came to Vera post high school and with more practical intentions, and finally the programming director.

Equality in voice and an equal distribution of power across age brackets was a reoccurring theme, as was the power of being a part of a space where one felt essential to its ability to survive and thrive. This chapter touches on, and Chapter Five will continue to explore, how an organization’s explicitly stated values and mission around safe spaces, inclusion, and acceptance manifest in practice and how this can shift across time and space. Closely linked to the conversation on values of inclusivity and safe spaces is a conversation on the demographic make-up of participants at the Vera Project. The Vera’s
project’s milieu as shaped by the city it resides in, and more specifically the neighborhood of the city.

**Reception: Night of a Show**

This Tuesday in particular is a busy one at Vera. Two separate committees are meeting and there is a show at 7:30. At five o’clock the reception desk is manned by two teenagers\(^6\), one of who had just dyed her hair an extraordinary shade of violet. It is the topic of comment for anyone who walks by the front desk where she and another teen are ignoring the fairly silent phones.

A conversation about the violet hair is disrupted by its owner, “You got that shit wrong! Why did you put tape all over the thing?” The mission at reception was apparently to tape new phone lists to the phone and other assorted logistical places.

The other girl responds, “To protect the phone from soy sauce.” Laughter. Leaning on the counter is a flannel-clad man who looks to be in his late twenties. He is counting change in preparation for the night’s show, refraining from participating with the hair, the tape, and the soy sauce. Several times he asks logistical questions to one of the girls working the desk (the phone protector). She is prompt to reply and her mannerisms demonstrate she knows exactly what is going on. They dialogue as needed.

I am checking out the new stacks of rotating fliers that sit stacked on top of, next to, and near the stairwell opposite the reception desk. Seattle’s best-known weekly paper, The Stranger, is always available. Flyers for vegan activism are posted as well as queer youth allies, rock camp, a DJ class, and an ad for Permazine – “a radical digital zine

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\(^6\) The Vera teens will not be referred to by name as individual teens were not research participants (participants had to be over 18 years old), but rather part of Vera’s scene. I use general descriptors to designate the teens within each scene for descriptive purposes.
library”. A semi neglected magazine rack has a copy of the 2013 Gay and Lesbian Film Festival program as well as copies of the punk magazine, Razorcake.

I get drawn into the conversation when one of the girls turns her laptop to me and asks if I would eat the displayed photo of an enormous cookie dessert. “Definitely. Dinner of champions.” Laughter. I’m leaning on the reception desk while the girl scrolls through pictures of additional desserts. We evaluate each in kind.

The conversation turns to movies and in an attempt to impart my age-old wisdom I inform the reception desk that they don’t know clever until they’ve seen my favorite move, Clue. I offer to quote lines. It is (semi) politely declined.

I become far less interesting when another teen walks through the door. She is also asked to comment on the new violet hair. It is affirmed to be amazing. The girls chat and I hear the new girl complain she can’t attend the show tonight because it is testing week at the high school and her mom wants her home. Condolences are given, the phone rings, and Internet surfing resumes, presumably on a quest for further desserts.

**Interpretation.**

Thursday’s scene and the Front Desk are constructed from two drop in observations. The Vera Project has open hours from two to six p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and during this time the venue is open for youth to hang out with committee meetings or show set up often taking place. Walking through the door you are immediately confronted with Vera’s logo, a fist holding a lightening bolt surrounded by a circle with the words, “The Vera Project. All-Ages.” The logo guards the reception desk and its teenage gatekeepers.
The vibe at Vera is casual and the youth are in charge. Each afternoon two teenagers run the reception desk. When entering Vera it is teenagers you see and first interact with. When you call Vera, you get a teenage volunteer on the line. Vera’s youth are front and center.

While there is little formality to the work at the front desk, there is ultimate professionalism when needed. When the phone is answered it is done so in a polite and professional manner. Questions are answered and advice given and unless you were standing there, it would be difficult to discern if you were talking to a teen in a Dead Kennedys T-Shirt or an adult in business casual.

The man, who is preparing for the evening’s show, counting cash and making arrangements, is at least a decade older than the front desk staff. However, this difference in age does not impact the way either party interacts with one another. There is no noticeable power differential. The ease with which persons move across age designation can be further seen with how the teens and I interact. I am a familiar face, but not a part of the Vera staff or regular culture. The ease of the place extends to the way in which the teens talk with me; our conversations are easy and friendly with the teens solidly in charge of the space.

Vera Mafia

“I’ve referred to myself as a Vera kid more than I think any other identifier.”

Megan was a Vera kid.

She found Vera during high school and stayed involved into her college years. I found Megan nearly ten years after she was first involved with the Vera Project.
Megan’s teenage life and into her college years was embedded with Vera. For Megan, being involved with Vera during its infancy was transformative for her. She found in Vera what her home in neighboring Gig Harbor couldn’t give her: an outlet to the city, a place where she felt she belonged, and a place where her presence was essential.

Megan’s punk rock vibe is still present and she is animated as she shares what it meant to finally find this space:

Seattle in general was really awesome to be in, but Vera was this very particular space where I was – it is not just like I feel welcome here, it is like they want me to be here as much as I possibly can. There isn’t a lot of volunteer opportunities in Gig Harbor. It is just this weird, small waspy town. At Vera… I also feel what I loved about it right away is that I walked in the door and I thought, “Nobody here looks like me and that is awesome.” Because I grew up in a town where everyone looked like me.

The Divorce, an indie-rock band, was playing at the Vera Project and brought Megan to Vera’s doors for the first time:

I found out about Vera because (it is sort of an embarrassing one) I was really obsessed with the band, The Divorce, and I think it was my junior year in high school and they were playing at Vera. This is when it was downtown at the Fourth Avenue space. And I didn’t know about Vera at all, but I was really into this band, so I went to the show. Vera used to do (you probably remember this) a spiel before the performer would go on and someone would say, “This is
who we are and this is how we operate and you can be involved too.” So someone got up and did that and I was like, “Holy shit,” that this exists.

When Megan saw somebody young stand in front of a crowd and share about this youth organization that was helping put on the show and that they wanted her to be involved, she was enamored with the idea. “It was that first night, after the band played I went up to the front desk and said, ‘What can I do? How do I get involved?’”

Megan saw the opportunity to be a part of a place, not just the recipient of an experience. She was excited to find a place that was unlike anything she had experienced previously:

Vera immediately felt like somehow much, much more welcoming, like it was meant for me and I already liked the space and the show was really fun and everything was good. When this kid got up and I saw this person who was my age (at least within a couple of years) saying, “I am a professional sound person,” or “I do this, and this, and this here and you can do these things too.” It was super empowering.

Anne’s introduction to the Vera Project was similar to Megan’s. As a teenager Anne saw an ad for a band she was interested in that was playing Vera,

I saw in some concert listing a band I wanted to see and thought, “I don’t want to pay for this show, I am going to volunteer.” And I figured out how to. Maybe it was listed in the Stranger or something…? I was like, “Hey I want to volunteer for the show,” and they were like, “Great.” They signed me up and then I just
joined the Yahoo groups and started signing up for shows. So every Saturday that’s what I did. It was just assumed that’s what I would be doing.

Anne started volunteering in 2002, after her first show and before Vera had a permanent home. In the earliest days Vera started hosting all-ages shows at the Electrician Union’s Hall, “the Local 46.”

Anne’s high school years were marked by two different worlds, her private high school where she studied daily for the SATs and her punk rock world of Vera, where she learned how to run a soundboard with cool older dudes that were a part of the music scene. Anne spoke of her movement between those worlds,

Vera was punk rock. I was not punk rock at all. I went to a private school, I did all of my homework, all of the time, I was going to take the PSATs in the morning and then coming to work Vera shows.

Like Megan, Anne was a part of Vera from the very beginning and today in her twenties, she is still involved with Vera.

Anne works as a production manager for Northwest Folklife, a massive festival that takes place on Seattle Center each year. Her offices share Seattle Center with the Vera Project so not only is she an active participant, but she is also a neighbor. When Anne and I met up she shared that she had just spoken about Vera to another person for a fundraising thing. She told me she is always happy to talk about Vera. Anne and I talked for over an hour and it took a little while to move from perhaps the ‘sales pitch’ feel of her last interaction to reflecting upon her time and the learning and messaging of Vera. Anne was incredibly reflective and my questions seemed to lead her on a continued
chronological account of her time at Vera through the years. It was Anne who shared
with me the term “Vera Mafia.”

There was actually a Facebook page called, ‘The Vera Mafia.’ I think the idea of
being intergenerational is really important. The family idea—these people are my
family and friends. That idea of a true and sincere friend—many of my good
friends have come out of the Vera Project.

Being a part of Vera was finding a new and different community of friends and family for
Anne, a community she is still very much a part of today. Each mafia member felt
similarly, the Vera Project offered up a circle of persons not defined by age or status, but
a large familial group where everyone had a voice and everyone felt essential.

Paula’s time at Vera was also Megan’s and Anne’s. Paula was searching for
something that wasn’t a part of her high school and home world:

At that point I was a sophomore in high school, so you know there weren’t that
many opportunities outside of high school. And it’s Friday night and you can’t
drive, you can’t go anywhere, so you are going to go and hang out with friends.

And Vera was a space to do that.

Like Megan and Anne, Paula jumped at the opportunity to be involved at Vera
and quickly became embedded in the organization:

First I started as a volunteer and then quickly became a member and then started
getting really involved. I was on committees and I was the chairperson on
different committees.
Paula is now also in her twenties and has many friends within the Seattle music and art scene, many of whom she connected with during her time at Vera. Paula and I chatted briefly about a record released on Porchlight records (a small Seattle label with a corresponding coffee house); she is a good friend with its owner, another Vera kid. There are only a few degrees of separation between many persons on the Seattle music and arts scene and Vera.

As a teenager, Paula’s involvement was driven by the way being part of Vera made her feel, like Megan who felt welcomed at Vera, Paula felt validated and at home, “This was definitely the first place I’d been at that treated youth as adults in terms of responsibility and having a voice.”

As Paula struggled with high school, Vera became more and more important to her, and she directly credits her involvement with Vera with being able to navigate her teen years and make decisions about her future:

I struggle with school. And after I became involved with the Vera Project my sophomore year of high school, I actually left the private school and just did community college instead, but it was because of those experiences I had with the Vera Project that I felt capable and there were always older folks who believed in me and trusted me that I could just go straight to college and just do that instead, which wouldn’t have happened otherwise.

The Vera Project was not just a music venue for any of the “Vera Mafia.” It was more than just a place where these women met friends and spent time; Vera was essential
to the development of these three teenagers. Vera was an identity, a home, a world different than what each teen was presented with.

Vera is a deep part of Megan’s identity. An identity she carries to this day. During her college years Megan worked as a show manager at other venues on Seattle’s Capitol Hill. To anyone who would ask her where she garnered her skills her answer was always, “I was a Vera kid.”

Paula’s comment captures the sentiment for all, “It was really more than about the space … Vera was just a home.”

**Interpretation.**

Paula, Anne and Megan all volunteered to be interviewed separately, but through conversation with each, they inadvertently referenced the others. It is clear that when Anne referred to “the Vera Mafia”, Paula and Megan were card-carrying members. The three women were all interested in music and were looking for a place to be on the very limited Seattle all-ages scene. Megan, Anne and Paula were all immediately drawn to the way the Vera Project invited youth to not only be a part of the show, but to run the show. This invitation, the opportunity, and its sincerity all made an extraordinary impact on the three women.

Prior to the band taking the stage one of the Vera volunteers would take the microphone and explain what the Vera project is, how it is run, and encourage youth to get involved. Vera wanted you. And then the show began. This was the “spiel” that Megan made reference to and said I probably remembered it. I think I do. Moreover, in this sense I think it was my position as a semi-insider that led the Vera Mafia to open up
so very much. Their respective and collective time at Vera, especially in its early days at the Fourth Avenue location, were absolutely crucial. That I knew about the space, that I could describe the space; this gave us common ground. More than once different participants would say, “You probably remember this…” and whether or not I clearly remembered, the possibility that I could remember made me enough of an insider to hear the story.

The opening “spiel” is of great significance. It was the “call to arms” that both surprised Megan, Paula and Anne as teenagers and then pushed them to each take Vera up on the offer. Megan’s sentiment of, “Holy shit, that this exists,” was echoed in spirit by both Anne and Paula, and all took action.

Interviewing persons who started with Vera as young teenagers and have maintained involvement for a decade as the Vera Project as it has grown and changed proved to be one of the most informative experiences of this study. As I worked with each participant I was able to begin to understand what made the Vera Project essential to her as a teen and how Vera has transcended teenage years and into adult life.

**Explicitly Intolerant.**

When you walked in the door there was a sign that said, ‘We will not tolerate these things.’ I kind of remember what the sign looked like. I think it was black with pink writing on it. So it was kind of like, maybe the first couple of times you read it, you might feel like I don’t understand that yet, but you ask someone or you talk about it and then the conversations start because that was put on the wall.
Paula referred to this sign several times during our interview. She couldn’t remember the exact language of the sign, but she knew the sign was pink and that it was front and center in the space. The sign clearly said that all kinds of discrimination and intolerance were not tolerated at Vera. Paula felt it set the stage for the way things were.

I didn’t remember the sign at Vera, so after my interview with Paula, I went in search of the sign. On a first walk through I didn’t find anything resembling the sign Paula spoke about. I looked among the show posters hanging on every wall and between fliers and in corners, but I didn’t see anything resembling Paula’s sign until I went to the bathroom. Under the “No Smoking” sign was another sign:

*You are entering a NO HATE ZONE.* Racist, homophobic, sexist, ageist, ablest, and other hateful speech and actions are not acceptable. Any persons violating Vera’s No Hate policy will be removed. Thank you for making the Vera Project a safe space for everyone!

The poster had a peace sign surrounded by a speech bubble with what one can assume is hateful speech to the left and a fist to the right, each with a large red X through the middle. The sign that Paula felt set the stage for the inclusivity that all felt was an articulated presence at Vera was no longer front and center in the space. However, it was in a high traffic area.

Adjacent to the *NO HATE ZONE* sign was a posted notice:

Vera provides you a space to tag on the painted areas, but please keep your art OFF the tile & mirrors. They aren’t Vera’s property, and we have to clean them
with harmful chemicals to remove the tags. Please think about who has to clean up after you.

Scrawled in lopsided blue ink on the bottom of the sign is, “Strippers come every day at 5.”

Both gender-neutral bathrooms are covered with graffiti ranging from unidentifiable tags to the type of teenage musings you might find in a high school bathroom. The graffiti ranges from the silly, “I’m pooping,” to the inappropriate, “I am shit and so are you,” to the occasional cause for alarm, “I’m going to kill myself in a little bit. Don’t worry. It’s okay.” This seems to pretty closely mirror the tags in a high school institution, but here they are sanctioned.

The line-up of signs, “No smoking,” “NO HATE ZONE,” and instructions for tagging are a curious combination. The “NO HATE ZONE” is taped up several additional places in the bathroom, as well as on one of the bathroom doors. Each sign is identical, each sign clearly notifying its reader that intolerance is explicitly against the rules.

Interpretation.

The Vera Project has a very clear policy on inclusivity and absolute intolerance to any person who exhibits behavior that is of a hateful nature. This forward statement, in any of its iterations, made a great mark on Vera’s early participants. Paula felt the message was front and center and spoke to it many times during our interview and the other participants felt the message on the sign set rules that governed the space.
Vera’s stance on creating a safe space is echoed by all persons involved with Vera at any juncture. It is interesting to see that in the current space the only place this policy appears in writing is in the bathrooms. From the early days when the message was posted front and center to its current posting on the bathroom walls is a noticeable shift. In a bathroom the sign will be seen, but left to appear only in a toilet, it has the possibility that its message has less value than words that are printed front and center. However, it is obvious that the message is clear.

As an organization, the Vera Project clearly promotes tolerance and acceptance and in the case of the some exceptionally marginalized communities (e.g., the transgender community) helps facilitate that acceptance in very concrete ways (e.g., gender neutral bathrooms). During this important conversation, it is significant to remember that the persons who are establishing the safe space are the predominate group at Vera. Which is to say a group of persons deeply committed to this mission of tolerance and acceptance are a very white and middle-class group

**Twenty-Somethings**

The “Vera Mafia” found Vera and each other during their teen years. They all lived at home, attended high school, and were subject to the restrictions of both school and family. There is another group of persons drawn to the Vera Project, although smaller in numbers. This group of persons is made up of youth in their late teens and early twenties who are looking to Vera in a way that is more intentional than the ways in which a high school student stumbles through the door.
Bibi, Alejandro, and Vanessa all found Vera after high school, and each with a mission. Alejandro came to further his audio engineering skills, Bibi to run the art gallery committee, and Vanessa in search of volunteer opportunities and to explore the music world. Alejandro’s and Vanessa’s stories are similar in that both feel a great debt towards Vera. Each is respectively employed as a direct result of his or her time at Vera. Knowing this helped make sense of each participant’s answers.

I met up with Alejandro when he was home for a month between touring gigs. He is an audio engineer both in Seattle clubs as well as at large festivals. He also runs sound for bands on tour both throughout the country and at times across the globe. His next destination was Germany.

Alejandro graduated from high school out of state and moved to Seattle when he was twenty. In his early twenties he wanted to pursue audio engineering and the Vera Project had opportunities for youth to learn how to do so. This was 2004. Alejandro:

When I was growing up my dad had a recording studio so I was always listening to music and I was always playing with audio stuff and I was interested in getting into doing live sound. I went to Vera because I knew you could volunteer and I basically learned how to do live sound there – well I started there. I just wanted to pursue the audio stuff more and I wanted a place where I could get a chance to do that. I think I was still young enough to where it wasn’t weird.

For Alejandro, his time at the Vera Project was the direct springboard into his current career. When asked about the trajectory and nature of his involvement Alejandro shared:
I kind of used the space. That’s how I learned a trade there. That’s what I do for a living. That’s my main income. I work at tons of different venues and I go on tour with bands and it all started with Vera. I was trying to learn a trade. Even though I did become part of that community.

In our conversation, Alejandro was able to provide the lens of a practitioner to the conversation, as his position was one of an engineer and technician, but he was also a young twenties punk with great reverence for the founders and those that ran Vera:

I thought it was just so cool; you know Shannon was so cool. I really liked where they were coming from they were interested in pushing Vera and growing it. They came from that kind of background and went to like Fugazi shows and were into that kind of stuff and it was kind of coming from that place and it was pretty awesome.

From his vantage point, Alejandro was able to reflect as an insider who was an integral part of the Vera Project, but not necessarily the high school social scene. He was a part of the essential multi-age component of Vera. He had survived high school and was able to connect with teenagers while he honed his craft, working beside teens as they also learned.

As he learned more and moved beyond mentee into running the show, Vera would become not just a social network, but a professional one:

I have a bunch of people I know and that I talk to. In December I did a tour where I was mixing for a house and my friend Scott was doing monitors and the
first time I went to Vera was Scott’s first time there too. And now almost ten years later we are on tour together.

Vera seems to have a way of reaching persons and then distributing them across space and time.

Vanessa made her way back to Seattle after a short sojourn in New York City. She was looking for an experience that was not college and a community in which to belong. She has great confidence and commitment to learning and found her path to do so outside of the “college track” many of her friends were on. Her pride at learning in a community environment and the success it brought her was present throughout our interview.

Now in her thirties, Vanessa’s journey with Vera set her up to earn her paycheck today; from Vanessa’s account, Vera opened the door to opportunity but her curiosity and work ethic led her to be at the center of the organization for years:

I didn’t want to be in college, but I definitely wanted to learn and was very interested in music. My friends had all gone away to college and I was in Seattle and was looking for things to be involved in and for community. I was in an AmeriCorps position and I would go to shows at Vera. I was in awe of the idea that it was volunteer run.

Vanessa was able to channel her natural desire to learn and the deep passion she felt for the Vera project, and volunteerism in general, into a deeply embedded place within the organization. Vanessa became the first paid staff member at 21, an honor that she continues to hold dear:
I was hired as the first employee outside of the founders, James, Shannon, and Kate. There were house managers and I think the sound engineer was a paid position. But those were freelance; when there was a show. But they needed someone to be a house manager on a daily basis, to deal with all the classes and all that sort of stuff. It was my dream job.

Vanessa’s dream job evolved over the years she spent with Vera, eventually leading her to learn bookkeeping and when the time opened up, to be gainfully employed as Vera’s bookkeeper. Vanessa:

I was still the operations manager for a while, but I started to move towards just being the bookkeeper, which I had taken on at the Fourth Ave space. I also volunteered for an organization called The Service Board who also serve young people and emphasize volunteerism and that is where I had originally learned bookkeeping. I was able to expand my knowledge and learn with the support of the Vera board members with accounting experience. Having that community, the board members who could give me instruction, but also my peers and the artists who would ask questions because I had a little bit more knowledge and I wanted to learn more so that I could share that learning with the community.

Being involved with VERA as a volunteer, eventually led to my staff position, which then allowed me to develop professionally to where I had my own bookkeeping business, and in 2010 decided to move to LA to do production accounting for film and television. Now I am a production accountant in LA on a TV show and so much of what I learned and the encouragement that I got for my
current career is from working at Vera as someone without experience but a willingness to learn.

For Vanessa, the community she desired she found in Vera. Her initiative coupled with the community of persons Vera attracted allowed her learn and grow in a way that she feels would be unlikely to happen elsewhere. For Vanessa, like Alejandro, her time at Vera segued into career training. She was able to fulfill her desire to learn that she continually referenced and that did not necessitate a college environment. She eventually turn that learning into a sustainable career.

Bibi is a visual artist who has worked for Seattle arts non-profits for nearly a decade. She is a twenty-something, but her experience with Vera is somewhat unlike the other participants. Bibi was recruited by a friend specifically to assist in the development of the Vera Project’s emerging art gallery. This appealed to Bibi as both professionally and personally she is committed to bringing art to youth:

I’m really interested in youth empowerment and helping support youth and helping create opportunities for them, especially through the arts. I’m a visual artist so I gravitated towards that. A friend of mine was one of the co-chairs of the gallery and then my friend was moving on and the other co-chair was as well, so they tapped me to fill the position after they were gone. Which actually was really exciting because the gallery was something that some of the Vera members had been try to make happen for a long time. So it was an interesting challenge and really exciting, it lined up with my day job, which is working with the public art program at 4Culture. I could take all my admin skills and help create a new
system for the gallery and a more professional kind of space. Programming it out for the future and all those kind of things.

Bibi was something of a specialized recruit. She was already a professional in the art community when she came to Vera. She was pulled into a leadership role, with the objective of providing arts opportunities for interested youth. For Bibi, her time at Vera was enjoyable, but not personally beneficial as it was for Alejandro and Vanessa, nor did she become as deeply embedded in the Vera culture.

Bibi is passionate about the arts, and equally so about youth in the arts. Prior to diving into our questions we chatted about the Seattle art scene. An animated speaker, her ring stacked fingers waved while we talked about youth in arts and as she methodically counted off all the activities happening at the gallery.

Bibi doesn’t have emotional ties to Vera (although she has an appreciation for the culture of the space) and this was evident in our interview. She was thoughtful and her passion for the project of helping to facilitate an art gallery for youth was evident, but the passion was for the youth gallery, not necessarily Vera.

Bibi shared that the art gallery as a project felt somewhat separate from the goings on of the rest of Vera, “We were trying hard to build bridges with the other committees because there wasn’t a lot of interest in the visual arts at that point.”

Even though Bibi felt the gallery was somewhat separated from the general goings on at Vera, “There was a small amount of people that were really dedicated and really passionate about it, but the rest of Vera was a little bit like, ‘Okay…you can go do your thing….’” It seems as though this was more of a challenge than disheartening to
Bibi. She methodically went through the structures she helped put in place with the hope of bringing more youth into this world that she saw as so important.

Bibi helped orchestrate a panel that would aid in putting together a call to artists and then facilitate selecting shows. She saw her role and expertise as an administrator to make the process happen for the youth involved. “When I was chair we started having a regular call the artists and a program. I think we did six months to allow space for things to crop up.” Bibi went on to share the work she did with the youth committee members to provide a place where they could take ownership of the gallery themselves. She saw her role:

The way that we approached it, the other co-chair and I, was to try and stay out of the way as much as possible. To just create this container that had enough structure to function well, but leave the decisions to the committee and get them to take charge of all the different things that needed to get done to put up a show. So we outlined all the different tasks that needed to be done and created positions within the gallery and committee – one person was the outreach person and one person was the facilities manager and so on. We had a full Google site, with lists of positions, and timeline and responsibilities.

As a member of the arts community, Bibi knows what it takes to get a job and wanted to help youth make their time at Vera as valuable as possible. She wanted teens to come away from the experience with not only the enjoyment, but she wanted to give them anything that could help them move forward. Bibi:
So they could have something they could really take ownership of, and if they wanted to and use it as a resume builder they would have an actual title they could attach (facilities manager, for example) instead of just saying, ‘I was on this committee.’ We had a number of those and I think that people, for the most part, had really excellent follow through. It was really smooth after we got it going. People really took charge and took it seriously.

As someone who was slightly older and works in the arts, Bibi was naturally a part of that across ages (intergenerational is how many of the participants refer to it) structure that was so vital to Vera. She was able to socially connect with the younger members, but she was out of high school and working in the community. From this vantage point she was able to slide smoothly into the intergenerational and casual mentor-like style of Vera.

**Interpretation.**

Alejandro, Bibi, and Vanessa’s interviews had a more practical feel than their Vera Mafia counterparts. Although the “Twenty-Somethings” have emotional ties to Vera, their age of involvement and the nature of their respective participation made for distinctly different viewpoints.

For both Alejandro and Vanessa, their respective times at Vera directly led them to their current professional work. Alejandro and Vanessa’s relationships with the Vera Project are, and I believe will remain, ones of gratitude, reverence, and perhaps a feeling of debt. Vera gave both of them so much. In exchange for volunteering, they both learned separate trades that now pay their bills. This relationship that each participant
has with the Vera Project undoubtedly frames how much he or she are willing to consider certain aspects of Vera.

Bibi is a unique participant and invaluable voice for several reasons. Unlike the other five participants, Bibi was recruited to be a part of Vera. Prior to her engagement she didn’t know much about the Vera Project. She had a friend who was involved who convinced her to be a part. Bibi was an imported leader of kinds. She was a regular on the Seattle arts non-profit scene, but was pulled into Vera for a specific reason. Most importantly, Bibi was an immediate mentor type figure. I qualify mentor with “type” because there is no formal mentoring agreement at Vera, but a natural structure of persons across ages with various levels of skills working together and transmitting those skills to one another, but not with what one would think of as a traditional mentor-mentee relationship. Bibi’s involvement with Vera started in 2009, which was after Vera’s transition to Seattle Center, a pivotal move for the organization.

**Intergenerational equilibrium.**

It was called to my attention over and over again that one of the most significant aspects of Vera as an organization was the intergenerational structures and the value put on youth voice. Paula was passionate when she talked about having a voice at Vera:

I never felt so equal you know, it was regardless of age and whatever else, it was just sitting in these meetings or you’d go to board meetings and people were maybe five to thirty years older than you but your voice and your opinion and your space was valued, it wasn’t like, now we’ll hear from the younger people. It was very equal.
For Paula, she felt that much of the confidence she derived from being at Vera, the ability to build the relationships, and the eventual support she felt aided in her leaving high school, was a direct product of value her voice had at Vera.

Vanessa became a part of Vera post-high school, but she was very much still a part of that across generation structure. She recounts when she was fully brought on board by Vera’s founders, “James and Shannon were probably thirty at the time and I was 21 and they were so cool; they were grown-ups.” She continued to see the strength of the intergenerational, yet reciprocal structures during her years at Vera:

One of my favorite things about the place is the multigenerational aspect. It is not just a space for teenagers, but for young adults as well as adults and the learning that happens when everyone comes together to learn from one another. […] It is not just student-teacher or parent-child, it’s more equal.

Anne was the teen sound engineer behind the boards nearly ten years ago. She was learning by volunteering and given the responsibility to run the show once she showed her abilities:

I was working with two dudes (there were no women) who took me really seriously. They were like, you are smart and fully competent and we can give you direction and you’ll execute and you work well under pressure, let’s go do this thing. Do you want to learn how to do this? Alright, let’s go. And I think that I was one of the first folks put in a position to do that, which was really cool and it was definitely an intergenerational thing. There was no other way I would have met these dudes. I couldn’t hang out with them at bars, because I was 16-17 at
the time, they would go get a drink after the shows and I would go home, but there was still a sense of camaraderie and bonding.

Anne had her mom’s van to drive home and the SATs looming, but on Saturday night, she was a credible audio engineer who could hold her own with a couple of dudes on the scene. And they encouraged her to do so, in spite of her age and high school ID.

**Interpretation.**

The value on youth voice and participation is neither coincidental nor something that evolved over the years. The last words in the Articles of Incorporation are, “Under 21 youth participation,” and Vera’s organizational chart is built on concentric circles with “Youth-Led Membership & Board of Directors” as the inner most circle (Appendix E).

Vera by the youth for the youth is intentional by design.

At Vera, youth voice and participation is not of the token variety. As Paula said, it was not, “Now let’s hear from the youth.” It feels authentic. All of the interviewed women felt that as teenagers their voices were not just heard, but asked for. In the early iteration of the Vera project, the blurring between “generations” seemed to be at its greatest. With the urgency of pulling together a new venue, of learning how to build from the ground up, the distribution of work was spread across all those there, without much consideration of age.

Youth voice in decision-making was one part of the intergeneration aspect and the other was the ability for youth to learn skills and knowledge directly from older (slightly and a bit more so) persons involved with the organization. It was not a formalized mentorship; youth were not apprentices, but rather spaces existed where, if as a youth you
wanted to learn and were willing to put in the time, and you can do the job, you should be there. Anne made very clear that she was given control of the soundboard, without consideration for her age, because she had proven herself competent. Vanessa learned how to manage finances by working with persons on the board and then took the initiative to learn the details on her own. When Vanessa mentioned that persons began coming to her with questions, it is a demonstration of how the cycle of informal teaching and learning is perpetuated. Just ask and learn.

If one person wanted to learn, another person would show them. Questions were asked and competence was assumed. So much of it came down to a familial like setting that was characteristic of early Vera.

**Captain**

Beth is the acting director of programming at the Vera Project. Beth has a long history of non-profit work, specifically in the world of all-ages music, and was imported from Pennsylvania specifically to work at Vera.

A year and a half ago Beth took over the ship from Vera’s longtime director of programming. Beth faced some of the challenges of that can come with moving into a leadership role in a place with a tightknit community that has bonded over a shared history and a very definitive vision.

Beth’s work in Pennsylvania started with her own articles of incorporation, as she is the founder of the Pennsylvania chapter of Girls Rock Camp:

When I first started Girls Rock Camp I had been to the one in New York. I went home to Philadelphia in 2006 and was like, we should have it here, and then we
got started. “What do you do to fill out paperwork for a non-profit?” Really starting out from scratch.

Beth has the understanding of what it is like to look at her community and see that it was lacking in programming for its youth (specifically girls) and start from square one.

I asked Beth to contrast her experiences founding a non-profit with coming into the Vera Project as a fairly well established space. Reflecting upon her experience starting a non-profit from the ground up, Beth shared:

Starting something with a group of people was really stressful in a very different way. We had to relax a little bit, figure out where funding was coming from, keep it small; there was really no checklist. I would try and call non-profit incubators and be like, ‘What do we do?’

When Beth came to the Vera Project, it was clearly in the safety zone. The Vera Project is supported by the city of Seattle and has permanent residence on a city property. Vera has a large community base and is able to fundraise successfully. Beth talked about the differences between steering an organization that was fighting each day to get by and being in control of a well-established program.

It is definitely easier to not have to figure stuff out from scratch. In general it is much more of a time saver and I think it is nice for people to be able to say ‘Are we big enough now that we can have a professional person do our taxes for us?’ And my answer for that is, ‘Yes’ because it actually costs us less that way. It is just too big for one person to do anymore and they are not trained in it.
You can plan out two years in advance. We just finished our next five-year plan. And I need to find someone to design it. We were thinking we would get a seventeen year old volunteer to do it, who is really good at it, but she’s applying to schools and hearing back soon, so chances are that won’t happen. So things like that. It would be great if we got one of our members to do it, but we don’t need to necessarily. And its more important in one sense that we get it out in the community much more than it is to wait for this person to do it if we can pay a few dollars to an independent artist. So it is a slightly different place. We are in a space now where we can pay people the rate that they ask for the work that they do and that feels extremely important.

Beth brings a logical and sensible lens to her work at Vera, which is a necessity in guiding programming for an organization that has grown past legitimacy into a staple of the community.

Beth acknowledges some of the tension coming into the Vera Project as an outsider to Seattle, even though she was an insider to all-ages non-profit work.

There was a little bit of change when I came in here and I am like, ‘I am going to be different than people who have done it before because I am different.’ And for a while, I think that was frowned upon. But now it feels much more relaxed and now it is like, here are the programs we do, and it’s okay to try different things and to have different events.

In both conversation and watching her interact with the volunteers and members, Beth seems very much at home running the ship. When we talk she is articulate about
each facet of Vera and cost-benefit of each decision. Her common sense pervades her answers. As we completed the interview Beth let me know her upcoming priorities, which is hiring a volunteer coordinator to help formalize and direct the process of volunteering and to mail Vera’s taxes, three weeks early.

**Interpretation.**

Over the last year and a half I’ve had the opportunity to have many conversations with Beth. The words captured are from the recorded interview that was part of the formal data collection process, but my knowledge and relationship with Beth predates this encounter. In addition to the interview protocol we worked with, I asked Beth to spend time talking about her work prior to Vera. Her range of involvement with the non-profit world of all-ages music was invaluable as it allowed me to gain perspective of a leader who has gone through the work of building from the ground up, of running an organization when it was “scrappy” and trying to keep its doors open, as well as someone who has now come into a larger organization that has its feet firmly on the ground.

Beth’s position as an imported leader, but not historical founder, seemed at first to be a tricky one. Beth seemed aware of not only a resistance to change, but of a protective insider culture. Beth has had to navigate carefully in order to allow her own experience and philosophy guide programming. She seems to bring a logical perspective of what it means to run an ever more established non-profit. Her cost-benefit analysis of the importance of putting the Vera Project’s strategic plan out into the community at an early date by contracting to a local artist to do the design versus extending the timeline or perhaps missing the deadline but having a youth member do the design work, is a good
example of Beth weighing the value of homegrown versus the obligation to community stakeholders.

Beth is thoughtful about the decisions she makes and is looking to the overall health of the organization. However, with growth and the ability to move beyond a dependence on the youth and members comes a loss of the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture and homegrown nature that many of the early members feel exceptionally tied to. However, Beth can see past the emotions of Vera perhaps because she wasn’t there from the start. Beth’s disposition as a leader also comes across as cool headed and strategic. And it is because Vera doesn’t have to fight to stay open that Beth can move it forward.

**Bathrooms are safe spaces.**

Posted between the two bathrooms at the Vera Project is a sign with both the men and women’s bathroom icons and the writing:

**JUST BECAUSE YOU FIT DOESN’T MEAN I DO. Safe bathroom access is not a luxury or a special right.** Without safe access to public bathrooms, trans & genderqueer people and people who don’t fit gender stereotypes are denied full participation in public life. For many of us, finding a safe place to use the bathroom is a daily struggle.

Trans & genderqueer people and people who do not fit gender stereotypes report being harassed, attached, or questioned by authorities while trying to use the bathroom; many avoid using publish washrooms altogether, leading some to develop health problems. This is not equity. Everyone should be able to use a safe public bathroom so that they can pee in peace.
Beth shared that one of the ways she felt Vera succeeded in being inclusive was through supporting the continued use of gender-neutral bathrooms. Vera sees having gender-neutral bathrooms as a show of support and inclusion to the transgender community. Beth:

The gender-neutral bathrooms sign is accompanied by another sign. This sign gives instructions on, “How To Be A Trans* Ally”. Multiple sections read:

**Just Ask!** If you are unsure of a person’s preferred pronoun, simply ask, “What are your preferred pronouns?

**Transphobic Words:** Calling someone a Tranny or too butch to be a girl etc. demeans and trivializes the wide variety of experiences held by those who identify as transgender.

**Gender Identity is not Sexual Identity:** Remember that no matter how someone identifies their own gender, they may still identify with any sexual identity.

**Show Your Support!** Make sure to show your support for your trans* friends by challenging transphobia when you see it.

I asked Beth about the history or decision to take women’s and men’s rooms and formally make them gender-neutral. Beth explained, “It has been around since the building was built, in 2007. And it is something that we kind of take for granted, it is just a thing that we do.” I asked if there was push back against the gender-neutral designation and if so, what that looked like.
Yes. It was a lot of, who is an ally? Who are we for? And a general lack of knowledge or empathy for the trans experience as well. And that has come a huge distance, at least publically, in the last 12 years. I can’t speak to who made the signs at the space originally, but it came out of working with GREAT space, to try and get it right.

Beth’s reference to “ally” is more than the posted sign; the concept of “ally” is familiar in the LGBT community (an “ally” is someone who is not a part of the community (i.e., identifies as heterosexual), but is an ally to cause of equal rights for the LGBT community). At Vera, the intention of the gender-neutral bathrooms⁷ is to promote safe spaces and raise awareness for the Trans* community by cultivating “ally” language.

The bathrooms themselves have not been altered from their original design, which was as a men’s room and a women’s room; this means that one bathroom has urinals. The contents of each bathroom are clearly posted on the door. A blue sign covers the original gender designation sign and reads, “GENDER NEUTRAL RESTROOM.” On each sign is a picture of either a lone toilet or a toilet and a urinal, followed by tiny text spelling out, “Toilet,” or “Toilet and Urinals.”

During shows and events, gender-neutral bathrooms can appear on the radar, because as normalized as they are to those who live and breathe Vera, gender-neutral multi-stall bathrooms are not overly common. At shows I was purposeful to pay

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⁷ Gender-neutral bathrooms are a point of advocacy in the LGBT and transgender community at large. The Transgender Law Center has resources, projects and publications dedicated to the effort of safe bathroom access on their website “Peeing-in-Peace” http://transgenderlawcenter.org/issues/public-accomodations/peeing-in-peace.
attention to the way in which persons interacted with the bathrooms. Most teenage boys and men head for the bathroom with a urinal and most teen girls head for the urinal free zone, but the fact is that either is a possibility.

I asked Beth if the teens talked to her about the bathrooms and their signs as the experience of multi-stall gender neutral bathrooms is not something that is a part of a high school system or the vast majority of public spaces. Beth told me that she doesn’t have much teen initiated conversation over the bathrooms:

They don’t to me as much, they are more whispering to one another, so really it is more about putting it out there and letting people get used to it. You have this fixture, people are going to see it over and over and over again and then it is just there. And that is part of what makes us different. And I usually tell someone, ‘If you don’t want to risk seeing a urinal, use this one.’

Beth is passionate about the deliberate move, which is one the majority of spaces do not make, to be an ally to the trans community. She feels this step is a way to explicitly promote an important issue of safety and inclusion to a very marginalized community.

**Interpretation.**

When spending time at Vera, there are mixed reactions to the gender-neutral bathrooms. During open hours, when the persons at Vera are mostly members, those deeply involved with the organization, no one seems to think twice. A dirty bathroom is just a dirty bathroom. A person might have bathroom preference (one bathroom does have urinals), but the bathroom situation is a non-issue.
For those less familiar (show goers), I am not able to tell if there is a lack of comfort with the bathrooms. Gender-neutral single stall bathrooms are fairly common and many see as the safest and most inclusive situation. However, if all you have is multi-stall bathrooms to offer, the considerations are for a larger demographic, women. The response to the concerns on women’s safety are often times responded to as an issue with women’s bathroom use as a whole, not limited to gender-neutral spaces. As noted in the Transgender Law Center’s (2005), *Peeing in Peace*:

The truth is that the current bathroom situation does not adequately ensure women’s safety. Putting a sign that says “women” on the door of a bathroom does not stop people who want to harm women from entering.

There is no disagreement that safe bathroom use is important for all and that considering women’s safety is a larger question. At Vera, the consideration is not necessarily physical safety, but emotional safety for all concerned. Considering the oppressed trans community and the very real problem of bathroom safety is an important and impressive step for a youth space. However, to do so without considering the emotional safety of women and girls could be problematic.

**12.9%. of Seattle’s Population identifies as LGBT. Loud and Proud**

Move over San Francisco. Seattle now has the highest concentration of gay-couple households among America’s large cities. That pencils out to about one in every seventeen coupled households in the city. (Balk, G. Seattle Times, September 27, 2013)

Amongst the stacks of fliers surrounding the reception desk and bulletin boards are several that speak directly to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community. The Seattle Gay and Lesbian Film Festival Guide are neatly stacked and a
A stack of rainbow cards advertises Camp Ten Trees, a LGBT summer program for youth and their families. A copy of Seattle Gay News is buried amongst The Stranger and copies of City Arts. Vera’s bathroom has “Dyke pride,” tags. None of this makes the Vera Project an LGBT organization. Vera has no statement specifically addressing the LGBT community, but rather an all-inclusive statement. These artifacts provide note that there is evidence that the LGBT community is welcome.

Alejandro is not a member of the LGBT community, but it is his distinct impression that Vera is a safe space for LGBT youth:

I feel like they were really good about pushing stuff and there were a lot of queer youth involved and it was a really good space for them. There was one person who worked there who did a lot of social work and who did a lot of stuff with sexual education and that sort of thing. I feel like they were pretty good at addressing issues that were pretty relevant to high school kids.

Alejandro’s impressions had a presence in my other conversations. Like Alejandro, Paula felt that Vera’s universal inclusiveness very much included the LGBT youth and that Vera attracted youth that socially may have felt marginalized by society, a common experience for LGBT youth:

You know, maybe you weren’t going through exactly the same things. Maybe you know it was like gender, or sexual identity, or class, or whatever it was, but we all banded on not fitting in.
Paula felt welcomed at Vera and it felt like a place where conversations on sexuality and gender could happen. For Paula, Vera was the first place where those conversations were present:

I think it was the first space that I was able to have those conversations. Yeah, it was really just the first place that I had those conversations. Maybe not with a moderator or facilitator, but they were just encouraged in that space. Because they weren’t necessarily things you could just ask your friends about and you were just confused about it and they might not know or have insight.

It was Vera’s multi-age structure that encouraged Paula and created a space where she could ask questions and have conversations that she reported she either couldn’t have with peers or questions she was not sure how to make sense of yet. At Vera the ability to engage in safe dialogue with older persons was essential for her.

I also feel the safety for the LGBT community at Vera and the normalizing of the experience. When chatting with youth during my visits to Vera, they ask about all aspects of my life, with the lack of filter characteristic to most teens. Chatting with a few teens one afternoon, one of girls made a comment about my necklace, “That is rad. Where did you get it?” And my response was that it was a present from my wife, but that I could ask her where she bought it. The girl was not so interested in my rad necklace that she needed me to query, but this is notable because she did not skip a beat when I said that the gift was from my wife.

At another front desk juncture (as this is where much of the afternoon action takes place) another teenage probing question led me to reference my wife. To this, one of the
girls responded that she had a girlfriend. In stride we chatted about how we met our respective loved ones and she openly shared some of her experiences with me, and I shared mine with her. Conversations about sexuality seem to be taken in stride. I have met youth who openly identify as gay, whether that be wearing a Pride Flag symbol or talking about her girlfriend.

**Interpretation.**

The sense is that Vera is very welcoming to LGBT youth, both explicitly and in tone. During my time at Vera, I sense this as well. I believe part of my ability to see this is my membership to the LGBT community. I have “insider status” and can engage in a conversation wherein I am automatically a safe person, as the narrative is also mine. However, the milieu of inclusivity and normativity is well established.

Seattle has one of the largest gay populations in the country at 12.9%. Seattle’s mayor is openly gay as are other public figures. Seattle is city that is supportive of its LGBT population, beyond the traditional “Capitol Hill” neighborhood, across the city. Due to the demographics and social culture, of the difficult conversations around marginalized groups, Seattle can much easier talk about sexuality and gender identity than race. In this way, Vera is acting as a mirror of Seattle in 2014.

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8 The American Community Survey collects data on sexual orientation and the numbers reflect persons who will identify on a survey that he or she is gay or lesbian as well as those in non-married same sex partnerships. Same sex partners were first able to marry in December 2012 and expected the survey data for 2014 forward in WA will include married same sex couples. There is no specific metric that formally collects data on the transgender community.
Indie Rock is Really White

The U.S. Census Bureau reports Seattle demographics as follows:

- Asian: 14%
- American Indian or AK Native: 0.8%
- Black or African American: 8%
- Hispanic or Latino: 6.6%
- Native HI or Pacific Islander: 0.4%
- Two or More Races: 5%
- White Alone: 66%
- Foreign Born: 17.5%

Alejandro:

It is interesting because thinking back on it because most the kids were white and kind of well off, that is one thing about it. You didn’t really see kids coming from Rainer Valley and stuff. That’s one thing it did cater, I shouldn’t say cater, it attracted, people who were more into that northwest rock sort of scene – educated white kids more.

Alejandro has not been involved on a regular basis for the last couple of years, but the demographic he saw has remained largely unchanged. We talked about it and I asked if he thought the demographic was dictated by the music programming. Alejandro thought it did to an extent, “I feel like it did, kind of. It attracted mostly people into that kind of stuff.” As we talked further, Seattle as a city entered the picture, “The northwest is a pretty white place. But at the same time, there is still a huge black population in Seattle.” Alejandro’s statement on Seattle’s population is somewhat at odds with the statistical make up.

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9 Census Bureau Statistics 2010.
What Alejandro wanted to make very sure was clear was that Vera knew about its homogenous demographics and was actively trying “to do something” about it:

They tried having more hip-hop shows. Shannon, I know she tried to get more hip-hop shows, more break dance classes, stuff like that, to attract different types of people. So that was a struggle maybe, to appeal to a wider range of people and different sub cultures. Do you know what I mean?

Alejandro again reflected on the Northwest, specifically Seattle, “And some of that is Seattle. I wonder if that would have been the same in someplace like LA, where you have a lot more Latino kids or black kids?”

Anne and Megan each generated responses that were very much aligned with one another and with Alejandro’s sentiments. Vera was a mostly punk and indie rock venue, and as Alejandro mentioned, punk and indie rock are very white. Megan also saw a relationship between the concert calendar and Vera’s demographics, “I think that as far as programming goes, yes, absolutely, it definitely reflects a white middle class fan base.” Megan had further thoughts about race, ones that begin to reveal the many layers and nuances within the conversation on Vera’s racial demographics:

One thing that hasn’t been addressed, it wasn’t addressed explicitly, but I think was an underlying thing was it was sort of assumed that everyone was on the same page with was race.

That assumption of coherence of viewpoint and the direct avoidance of the topic of race or racial make-up of Vera’s youth was also called out by Beth, “Race. People just don’t talk about race. But I do think that is a larger Seattle thing, too.” Beth’s comment on
Seattle relationship with “the race conversation” is a reminder that Vera and all that happens within is deeply embedded in the culture of the city. While Megan and Beth both address the avoidance of the explicit topic of race, at various times they both respectively highlight Vera’s push for a more diverse membership.

Anne’s involvement has been continual from Vera’s near genesis to today and her observations are consistent with Alejandro’s. Anne is aware of Vera’s demographic and has watched the many movements over the years to try and alter the demographic by bringing in different music, specifically hip-hop:

I think the Vera Project for many, many, years was really white, really indie-rock and there were movements to try and bring in the R&B and rap element, hip-hop element, but if it’s not a space where folks come, where they see other people like them, it’s not a place where they necessarily feel safe or interested. That is something (diversifying) that has really needed to happen. The music may have been represented there, but the folks who produced that music weren’t represented at Vera. And feeling like you are a part of a community is really important.

Anne is able to understand the larger considerations; it is not just about bringing in music that might appeal to a specific demographic (e.g., hip-hop attracts a black crowd), but she recognizes that if the environment isn’t one wherein a person feels at home, the music won’t really matter.

Anne followed up her reflection with sharing that she (and many others involved with Vera) clearly want to make Vera a place that can be home to more than one
demographic. Every conversation that addressed race, explicitly stated that it was problem Vera was trying to fix. Every person shared how much Vera wants to change this, wants to be a space that does not just feel like home for white middle class kids. And most persons seemed to believe the way to do that was to try and bring in hip-hop shows.

**Interpretation.**

White. Middle-Class. College bound. All persons clearly note the white and middle class demographic that make up the all-ages scene at Vera. When each participant brought up the lack of racial diversity, she or he immediately articulated that Vera was explicitly trying to attract youth who were not middle class and white. All persons saw the lack of racial diversity as a problem to be fixed. Furthermore, each person seemed to focus on the lack of a presence of Seattle’s black community and that hip-hop shows seemed to be the answer to the problem.

It is interesting to note that being racially inclusive seemed to be focused on bringing in the black, specifically African American, community. Seattle does have a black (including but not exclusively African American) population that represents 8% of the city’s population. Seattle’s Asian population is nearly twice as large as the Black population and Seattle’s Hispanic population is seen as its fastest growing. Seattle’s black population is very important to consider, but in addition to considering the black population, there was a notable absence of any conversation about larger make-up of Seattle’s non-white population.
Downtown Metro Routes: C, D, E, 1-316. Seattle Center Routes: 1, 2, 13, 16, & 18.

Seattle is a city of proud neighborhoods: Capitol Hill, Beacon Hill, Georgetown, U-District, West Seattle, Ballard, Downtown, Rainier, Queen Anne, Belltown... Seattle’s non-white population is concentrated predominately in the southern parts of the city\textsuperscript{10} and Seattle Center is situated in the increasingly gentrified northern neighborhood of Queen Anne, and is not the geographic center of Seattle.

The Vera Project’s long time home was in Seattle’s downtown. “The old space” that was so very dear to the Vera Mafia was on Fourth Avenue downtown\textsuperscript{11} near the heart of Belltown with its share of music venues, bars and coffee shops. This well loved and well-worn venue was in the middle of downtown/Belltown and very much accessible by dozens of bus routes.

The Vera Project’s move to Seattle Center\textsuperscript{12} (2007) was an enormous change for the organization on so many fronts. And the impact of the location change was significant. Megan:

I think something that is lost at the new space is that the old one, because it was downtown, because it was more central (it’s actually kind of tricky to get to Seattle Center) and so access is a big issue and so getting to fourth and Seneca

\textsuperscript{10} The city of Seattle produces a demographic map of the metropolis that shows the concentration of persons of color by neighborhood (Appendix G).

\textsuperscript{11} 1916 Fourth Avenue, Seattle, WA 98101

\textsuperscript{12} In 2006 the building at 1916 Fourth Avenue was sold and the Vera Project was forced to move. Vera went through an extensive search process to determine the new location. With assistance from the City of Seattle, Vera was able to secure a permanent location at Seattle Center. The new location would be designed from the ground up with specifications determined by the Vera Project.
was never a problem because all the buses ran on Third, so you were always a block away from every bus line to any neighborhood in the city. And I remember having that conversation when we were moving into the new space was, “Are we alienating a lot of people, a lot of young people, by moving to a place that is not as accessible?” and I think the answer to that is yes. I think that for anybody from the south end of Seattle, even from Capitol Hill, it is a pain in the ass to get there.

Megan’s comments on location stemmed from her comments on race. While she felt the Vera Project didn’t really address race, her feeling was that the Fourth Avenue space was in a neighborhood that had some diversity and reasonable access, although this still did not change the racial makeup of the Vera participants.

Anne thought about equity when she considered the challenges with moving from downtown to Seattle Center. She understood that access was about resources and resources are not equitably distributed in our society:

It is also a matter of resources. It takes a lot of time to get from the South end to Seattle Center and also the transportation issues, and literally having the time and trying to hold down other work.

Anne knew that her personal resources allowed her freedom to spend time at Vera because she did not have to be reliant on public transportation. She shared that in high school:

When I started working at the Vera project, if I didn’t have a car, then We got out of shows at like 2 a.m., if I didn’t have my parents’ beat-up soccer mom van; I don’t think I would have been able to be as involved as I was. That’s always been
an issue and that is something I thought about when we were moving to Seattle Center.

The extent of Anne’s participation was aided by her personal access to transportation as well as her resource of time. This was true for Megan and Paula as well.

When Paula shared her thoughts on Vera’s relocation, she stressed the importance of neighborhood in Seattle. Paula saw it as not only being able to get somewhere with ease, but on the characteristics of the neighborhood itself:

Location was actually a really big, a really, really big thing. I think, Belltown, downtown area was such an accessible place, was such a neutral place too. Belltown has its share of culture and issues and identity and whatever else, but it was on the edge of Belltown and downtown, so there wasn’t people living there, it was just neutral in that it wasn’t necessarily, this is a rich neighborhood, this is a poor neighborhood, this is associated with this class, or this type of people, or… it was accessible in that way.

To Paula, the accessibility went beyond transportation, extending to the characteristics of a neighborhood that felt like a more neutral stomping ground. The type of foot traffic, of persons who would naturally be downtown, is quite different than the people that are around Seattle Center. Downtown was less residential and Vera’s proximity to businesses not only equaled more foot traffic, but more options of things to do. Paula also saw downtown as “culturally neutral” place, because it was not residential it was less associated with a particular demographic, whether that is a demographic defined by race, income, or language.
Vanessa also saw the characteristics of the neighborhood and the structure of the space impacting Vera’s crowd. She felt that the Fourth Avenue space attracted persons who were less a part of mainstream culture, a social diversity, not necessarily a racial diversity. She saw, a more “mainstream” crowd begin to fill the Seattle Center space:

When it was on Fourth Ave, it was kind of off the beaten path; the people it appealed to might not have felt comfortable in the bigger space. Because there might be more looks, it is more mainstream, and if you are not part of the mainstream, you might feel alienated by the presence of the mainstream.

Belltown is socially diverse. There are dive rock bars in proximity of sushi restaurants and the pop-up punk rock flea market. In the Belltown neighborhood you will see a cross section of persons out on a Saturday night; the neighborhood is busy.

Beth never saw Vera in its Fourth Avenue iteration, but she has certainly seen Fourth Avenue and knows Seattle’s downtown. Without the emotions of the transition she can see Vera’s position in Seattle Center impacting the persons Vera reaches. Beth:

One of the things we are trying to do is make our space more inclusive to people of all different backgrounds and reaching out to different communities. Not being downtown anymore we get a different group of people.

Beth arrived at the Vera Project when it was well established in its Seattle Center home, but she is acutely aware of Seattle’s culture and the way different neighborhoods feel and function. In addition to being less central with regard to access, Seattle Center is in a neighborhood that is rapidly changing. Beth sees the neighborhood everyday as she comes and goes to work at the Vera Project:
Lower Queen Anne has become a very different neighborhood and it makes people less likely to come and hang out. So it means you have to really make an effort to come here. We are less in the way of foot traffic. You have to really intend to be here. You are not necessarily hanging out in Seattle Center. And the neighborhood around is changing. When I moved here a year and a half ago, there were two record stores within five blocks and now they are both gone.

Lower Queen Anne has changed greatly in a very short time. The blocks surrounding the Vera Project are nearly void of any attraction for most youth. A couple of coffee shops are open until early evening a few blocks away and there is a local pizza place, and an independent movie theater, but the rest of the landscape is dotted with high end restaurants, banks and bars.

Given some of the acknowledged limitations of Vera’s setting, Beth sees community outreach as a possible way to engage more persons with Vera. Beth was very much aware of the central demographic present at Vera and equally as committed to have Vera’s mission reach a wider audience:

One of our main goals is to go out into the community more and to host shows – have Vera sponsor shows at other venues. For that we need to expand our ‘street cred’ a little bit as well.

Beth seems to understand that in order for Vera to pull in different participants, Vera must be able to “walk the walk.” Part of being able to be inclusive is to have insider access into various communities. It seems as though Vera has struggled with that and Beth is looking for ways to move beyond that struggle.
Interpretation.

The issue of access to a location does play a part in the persons who will participate in your space, especially in a city that is de facto segregated to a certain extent. Megan, Paula and Anne, clearly see the relationship of race and social issues to access, which inevitably led the conversation to the change in Vera’s physical location and accessibility.

Nearly consuming the conversation on access was the conversation about a changing and growing Vera that was aided by relocation. For all those involved, moving from Vera’s downtown home to Seattle Center was a turning point in Vera. For every person who brought up race, the conversation led to access, which inevitably led to a conversation of “the different Veras.” The conversation of old space and new space, the way things were when Vera was young at the Fourth Avenue space and how things changed with the move to Seattle Center is deeply embedded in issues of race, class, accessibility and equity for all persons who were involved in both spaces.

Doors at Eight: “The Bro Show”

It is 7:48 p.m. and a cold and rainy Saturday night in Seattle. According to the weather app on my phone it is 52 degrees, but the rain makes it feel much, much colder. Outside the Vera Project is completely empty. There is a white piece of paper taped to the inside of the glass door reminding persons that the doors will not open until eight.

So we have twelve minutes of staring through the glass doors at the two teenagers sitting behind the ticket counter playing on their phones and eating Cup of Noodles. They seem to have no care for the two women shivering just feet from them in full view
through the glass doors. Neither teenager seems to be acknowledging one another either as they tap away on their phones. Across the courtyard from the Vera Project is Key Arena, the massive structure that tonight is hosting a bout of Rat City Roller girls.

At eight o’clock there is a bit of a production over opening the doors, although it remains solely for us, as we are the only two persons in line outside. Five dollars cash bought us a stamp for in and out privileges. After paying the somewhat disinterested teenagers, we walked into the entryway to warm up. The show entrance is downstairs and separate from the reception desk that guards the daily workings of Vera.

We walk through the doors and try to warm ourselves in the lobby area, a large open space outside the door to the venue housing the stage. We are immediately faced with a teenager leaning over a worn glass case in front of a wall full of stickers, old show posters, and pinned up drawings calling out what must be inside jokes. The case holds a sad assortment of chips and sour candy, and for a dollar you can buy a soda.

The venue stage at the Vera Project is through a doorway to the right of the snack case. The room is completely black, except for a couple of large art pieces on two opposing walls. A Vera flag hangs from the second story catwalk. To the left of the snack case opens the Vera’s gallery space; a grey square room that shares a wall with the staircase leading to the top floors of Vera with the daytime entrance and office space. A couple of sadly mismatched benches line the wall and a table is stashed under the stairs, its current occupants holding court over take-out and gossip. Past the gallery are the gender-neutral bathrooms, which are guarded by a graffiti adorned newspaper dispenser.
An installation piece facilitated by seven dated televisions on various podiums is the subject of the gallery, but the screens are off for the night. Dormant on the podiums they seem a bit more mom’s garage than art. Across from the TVs there is a row of small prints on the wall, in front of which a man is setting up a small table to sell band merchandise.

We score the mismatched benches and turn our focus to the assembled crowd, all of whom seem to understand that “Doors at 8” does not require punctuality. Very slowly persons trickle in. Over the next 45 minutes several people straggle in, mostly groups of three or four teenagers. The groups that enter seem to be racially similar in that white teenagers come in with white teenagers and non-white teenagers in come together. The vast majority of the younger teenagers are girls. Several of the girls seem to know one another, as well as girl facilitating the snack situation. Three girls each have soup containers that they in turn reach over the snack case to heat up in a dilapidated microwave. The girls then commence running about the space eating from their soup containers and chatting. I am guessing that they are Vera regulars or volunteers.

On an aging and neglected folding table near the snack case is an 8.5” x 11” sign. The sign is lying down on a corner of the table; it looks as though it has been tossed there a while ago and forgotten. It reads:

**WELCOME TO VERA!** The Vera Project is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization powered by individuals like you. Vera offers concerts, art shows, classes in silk screening, audio production and recording, concert lighting, music journalism, and DJing and much more.
Vera is a true to life ‘choose your own adventure’ story – you can run shows, help in the silkscreen studio or recording studio, curate exhibitions in the gallery… anything you want really. Volunteers get to see live music shows for free, have access to Vera’s resources, and participate in one of the most fun communities in the Seattle area.

**WANT TO BE A VERA VOLUNTEER?**

**GO TO A VOLUNTEER ORIENTATION!**

Learn about Vera’s history and all of our different programs and services and meet other volunteers you will be working with.

This information is followed by a list of the next volunteer orientations, the first one being Thursday, November 14th and the last posted orientation Saturday, January 12th. Today is February 15th. Following the dates of orientations and the email information to sign up is further information about Vera:

Vera was founded in 2001 during a time when a law called the Teen Dance Ordinance made it basically illegal to present all-ages concerts in Seattle. Vera partnered with the City to be the first presenter of legal, all-ages concerts. Since that time, Vera has moved to Seattle Center, grew to offer additional programs, and has become a home for creative young people from throughout King Country\(^\text{13}\) As a small non-profit organization, Vera fundraises for about 70% of

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\(^{13}\) The text is transcribed as posted on the flier. It is assumed that “Country” is supposed to be “County,” but I remained faithful to the document.
its annual budget. The names of our biggest supporters can be seen on the gold records on the wall. Thanks for being here!

Watching the people mill about the lobby, I think it is safe to say we are of a select few that might have seen the sign this evening.

The show tonight is Seattle hip-hop, with six acts sharing a bill and an MC to run the show. At 8:45 there are still very few persons in the space (maybe thirty altogether) and the median age appears to be about sixteen. We venture from the lobby/art gallery into the show space. The performers seem to know one another and are slightly older than the crowd, most likely in their mid-twenties and are all black men, with the exception of a white man who we later find out is from Montana.

Lining the walls of the theater are booths and benches salvaged from Vera’s original downtown location. One or two persons occupy a couple of the booths that line the back wall, the old black vinyl at times indistinguishable from the black walls behind them. The lighting is very low and it is difficult to make out the characteristics of the persons in the room.

On stage is a DJ who is ‘spinning’ music from his computer. The DJ looks to be older than both the crowd and the performers. He looks uncomfortable on stage and the way he interacts with show’s MC and the hip-hop he is spinning seems a bit awkward. He plays songs that call to the “bitches” and “niggers” with lyrics such as, “A bunch of bitches and money is all I even need.”\(^1\) This seems decidedly uncomfortable to him. The MC tells him to turn it up.

\(^1\) I am not sure of the names of the artists the DJ is playing.
We grab a seat on one of the benches along the wall and the distinct smell of now legal marijuana is acute. Groups of teenage girls run back and forth between themselves, talking and laughing, moving from the stage to the other areas. They seem fairly disinterested in the music events of the evening and more interested in hanging out. The DJ is spinning a song, “Damn bitches I can call / I smell pussy.”

The preteen and teenage girls seem unaware of the music coming from the stage as they are lost in their cellphones and gossip. The MC takes the stage and tries to bring the stragglers together to form a crowd. Not having much success, he defaults to a Seahawks football cheer hoping for some leftover Super Bowl enthusiasm, “Make some noise for the Seahawks. We just won the Super Bowl. Sea! Hawks! Sea! Hawks!”

Most people are distracted and the enthusiasm is warm at best.

The assembled crowd is two thirds white and about fifty percent female, with the females looking distinctly younger than the males. Still waiting for the first act, the MC gets off the stage, and the DJ resumes playing. The MC walks around the room shaking hands and introduces himself to all assembled. He makes his way around the perimeter of the room; he is warm and friendly when he shakes our hands and asks our names.

After a quick lap around the room, he takes back the stage and grabs the mic, “Fuck. Sorry man, I just have to express myself.”

“Fuck yeah,” affirms a member of the crowd.

“Welcome to the Bro Show,” and with that the MC passes the mic to the first act. Kase Closed takes the stage, “Pussy is where it’s at.” Kase Closed is a physical odd couple; a shorter white man sporting a 1980s tie-dye wolf t-shirt pulled up next to a
taller black man in unremarkable jeans and sweatshirt. Kase Closed works the stage with an enormous amount of energy for a very small crowd in a large theater, “Ladies wanna choose / Wanna choose / I be like / Bitch what the fuck / You gotta life.”

Both members of Kase Closed take turns with the mic. They are equally passionate and intense performers. They work hard to get the crowd involved and some hands hit the air in response to the call.

During Kase Closed’s set one or two people trickle in, and by the end of the set the crowd is about thirty-five strong. This one’s for the ladies, “I’m just trying to get it on ‘til the night’s gone / Cheap wine / You’re blacked out.”

The white half of Kase Closed notes he has had quite a few shots of Fireball, “To get the show going.” And then they finish. Kase Closed.

Chief is the next act and they open their show with, “I’m gonna switch your luck/ I’m gonna show you how to fuck / Hey girl / I see what you’re doin’ / I got money on my mind so my dreams I’m pursuin’.”

As Chief takes the stage the “ladies” in the crowd consist of 15 or so teenage girls, only half of them tuned to the stage. Three or four girls hug and chat in a tight circle near the doors of the venue and a couple of other girls come and go or hang back and text on their phones. Chief works the stage calling to the “bitches” and “bros.” Like Kase Closed before him, Chief has incredible energy and feels very committed to putting on a show. He works the stage up and down and calls out to the crowd with every bit of enthusiasm he has, as if there was a crowd of hundreds.
There is a small circle of black men at the front of the stage. They are all various parts of the Bro Show – some performers, others friends. They congratulate each other and call out to whomever is performing. But they stay very much to themselves, in a small space on the right of the stage, near the break room entrance. As at home as they are with either other, they put off the vibe of feeling out of place at Vera. During the show they remain in that space and predominately with one another other. No one else looks like them.

There are three black girls at the show and their headscarf attire leads me to believe they are a part of Seattle’s large immigrant and 1st generation Northern African community. They stay with the group they came in with, not mixing with the other show goers or the performers of the Bro Show, who when not performing, are in the crowd, stage right, supporting the other artists on the bill.

**Interpretation.**

During each Bro Show set, there is a split in the crowd. Maybe half the crowd is intently focused on the music, dancing or bobbing heads in time. The other half comes and goes with great frequency and spends a lot of time holed up in the booths and hugging one another. This half is comprised mostly of younger girls.

Noticeably missing from the beginning of the show is the introduction by a Vera volunteer, with the explanation of what Vera is and the call to get involved. This is especially noteworthy given that there is a very intentional push to attract a more diverse community to Vera and many persons have felt that hip-hop shows are an avenue to doing so. To not put Vera front and center and to openly ask persons to be a part of Vera
feels like a missed opportunity. It also doesn’t necessarily tie the show to being a part of Vera; it felt like just a stage in a space where not a lot of people were watching.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Graveface Roadshow}

On the suggestion of The Stranger\textsuperscript{16} we bundle up to see a lineup from indie label Graveface Records. Tonight two different teenage girls are working the door and as I hand over our cash the girl whose fire engine red hair matched her lipstick stamps our wrists and ushers us in.

Tonight’s crowd is of the indie-rock persuasion Seattle is best known for, so when at nearly twenty past eight two women and a bearded, flannel clad man take the stage, it looks all too familiar. “Hi, we are Dott,” comes the introduction from the front woman, who then opens their show with an optimistic relationship song, “Let’s do it / Let’s fall in love / Let’s start this all over again / Let’s talk about it / Let’s not fight ever again / How can we move on from what I said / I didn’t mean it that way.”

The two women fronting the band sweetly harmonize over their guitars, while the man in plaid plays bass guitar. Another plaid clad band member is safely squared away behind a drum kit playing percussion for Dott and also plays for the subsequent acts.

\textsuperscript{15} As a researcher, I have to acknowledge my struggle with this experience. When researching the acts that were playing I came across lyrics from many of the acts that were blatantly sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic. The words “bitch” and “faggot” were thrown around and there were several references that implied taking advantage of a woman who was drunk/passed out or that implied forced sex. It was an important experience for me to be a part of this show as it was a part of Vera’s offerings and part of the intentional push to have an increased hip-hop presence. It was important to see how this show was run and the crowd it drew, but the artists’ messages not only made me uncomfortable, but also enraged me.

\textsuperscript{16} The Stranger is Seattle’s weekly alternative paper. The Stranger staff posts suggested events for each week in the paper. The Graveface Roadshow was on the recommended list for the first week of March 2014.
The fairly small crowd is nearly all white and while I am sure each person would adamantly assert their stylistic individuality, all look to shop from the same hipster catalogue. A few persons take refuge in the dark booths that line the back wall, but most persons are up close to the stage and bob their heads along to poppy lyrics, moving, but not quite dancing.

Throughout Dott’s set a few persons drift between the black box theater and the lobby where Graveface Records has a merchandise table and where the glass case remains full of mismatched snacks for purchase. Dott closes with indie pop break-up song, a thank-you, and a pitch to buy their new EP, “I haven’t seen you lately / I haven’t heard from you lately / I want to know if I’m still your baby.”

A teenage girl is running sound for the show. As the Stargazer Lilies go through their pre-set sound check, she fields demands from the Stargazer Lilies’ lead singer, a dramatic looking woman with unbelievably long black hair and an ethereal ballerina type dress. From my seat just feet from the soundboard, I can see the teen sound engineer becoming frustrated, or perhaps losing confidence, with the demands and criticisms of the Lilies’ front woman. Seamlessly an older engineer appears at her side, adjusts the levels, checks in with her, and then disappears.

The Stargazer Lilies turn out to be more performance art than indie rock, which judging by the reaction of the crowd, seems to be surprising to them as well. The Lilies’ set opens with a projector screen materializing behind the stage and flashes of color saturated fields splashing across the two members of Stargazer Lilies and melting onto the screen behind them. Low currents of classical music play on top of the projections
and then the Lilies begin a slow and interactive song, wailing, “The storms are in our head / The flowers are in our heart.”

The lyrics are delivered in a long and drawn out fashion and are jumbled with the orchestrated music. The performance art aspect seems to intrigue some, but the younger teens have fled the theater for the lobby. We follow suit.

**Interpretation.**

This show brought out the ‘typical Seattle Crowd’, a demographic consisting of mostly white indie-rock kids all somewhat scruffy in their skinny jeans and Converse. There was a distinctly different vibe at Vera that night; it felt more relaxed. The separations in the crowd present at “The Bro Show” were absent tonight, with one group intermingling with another. To be noted, groups seem to be defined by collegiality; there did not seem to be larger characteristics (e.g., racial demographics) that defined the persons that clustered together.

The Graveface show had a teenager running sound and it provided an opportunity to witness the way in which Vera truly gave the venue over to being run by its youth. Of note was the supported nature of this experience. The teenager running the sound was clearly not alone and not being left to fail. When a situation arose that might have been outside the teen’s experience or comfort level, an older person (assumed to be the lead engineer who was in charge of the event) stepped in to assist, helping the teen recalibrate. Rather than take over and relegate her to a lesser role, he simply assisted until things were smooth again, and then dropped back into the shadows. She continued to run the board for the duration of the show.
Also missing from the Graveface show was the introduction to the Vera Project. The *who we are and what we stand for and this could be you and we want you and we need you* plea that engaged and hooked the Vera Mafia to become a part of Vera was markedly absent. Is this because it is no longer needed? In a time when there is a website dedicated to volunteering and with so many hands on deck, is it intentional that the “We are Vera and you can be too,” is not a part of the show? Or has it just been lost in the transition?

Tonight the same 8.5” by 11” “WELCOME TO VERA!” sign is still there; this time it had moved to a different table. The call to participate is now lying topside down on a table with a “No Smoking Please” sign, and a flyer with a picture of a pig, “How you can help animals. Don’t eat them.”

**DIY in the Tightknit Early Years**

Megan, Paula and Anne were teenagers in Seattle during the remnants of the ever- oppressive Teen Dance Ordinance17 (TDO). For teenagers the opportunities to see live music were few and far between. It was the desire to see music that brought both Megan and Anne to Vera’s door. It was the ability to be a part of something bigger that made them stay. For persons who have been involved during the trajectory of Vera’s growth, there remains some resistance to those that were not in the early trenches. Anne shares how many feel:

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17 The Teen Dance Ordinance was a set of draconian regulations that governed the operation of all-ages shows in Seattle from 1985-2002. The regulations included mandating clubs to carry a million dollar insurance policy if they were to admit youth. In addition, a club that admitted youth had to hire at least two off-duty Seattle police officers. Youth were also barred from most dances and concerts (http://seattletdoproject.wordpress.com/).
For folks who didn’t fight the TDO to come in and be from a different city where that wasn’t the same, I see that as being a – falling into that DIY sense – It’s not understanding the term DIY.

Anne shares a sentiment that was shared by others; an important part of what Vera meant was to be a fighting for its very existence, to know that Vera was born out of a resistance and built by a few.

“This very little start-up and the space existed,” Anne was reflecting on the culture of the Fourth Avenue space, “and if you had an idea and could figure out how to do it, they said, ‘Go for it, this is awesome’.” Do It Yourself (DIY) culture was central to early Vera. The Vera Project was run by a “collective DIY.” It was the culture of Doing It Ourselves that brought people together and built Vera, and those who were involved are very protective of it.

Part of the early culture of Vera, was grass roots, DIY, civic engagement. In the early days of Vera, Paula saw a definite push towards pushing civic engagement:

I know that when I was involved in the old space there was a lot more civic education and a lot more civic involvement. Things like getting more young folks registered to vote and getting them involved in local politics but not even in the formal sense, but just politically involved in the world. We were just having all those conversations and at the front desk you would come in and there was a box where you would put in your voter registration.
As the years went on and Vera moved spaces, the political seemed to get left behind:

That is something that I’ve seen Vera shy away from as they moved from the old space, or maybe it is something that just got lost in the shuffle.

Paula seemed to feel that Vera used to play a larger role in promoting active citizenship, but that as times changed, so did this. Early Vera, in its original iterations, banded youth together with cause, fight the city, fight the TDO, and build a space. This mission was grass roots and facilitated civic engagement and DIY empowerment. This time also built a culture for the Vera Mafia where survival of the organization was questionable and the fight was on.

**Interpretation.**

The politics of the fight banded together those from Vera’s early days. The Teen Dance Ordinance was the adversary for punk rock youth and Vera was there to fight. It was grassroots, DIY, punk rock and all hands were needed on deck. As each of the Vera Mafia spoke about the early years, about Vera’s birth in response to the TDO, there was excitement that was tinged with wistfulness. For middle class teens it was life changing for them to feel empowered and political. There was a closeness that came from a shared fight and when everyone was acting together for a common cause.

Everyone mourned the loss of the fight. As Vera shifted the need to fight was gone and the politics had gone out of it. Paula mentioned that as an organization Vera used to be more political, asking everyone to “Rock the Vote” but that she hadn’t seen that manifest in the new space. Perhaps the push to be political is not as vital when there isn’t a battle to be fought.
From Scrappy to Sterile

Paula:

Now that I have my own understanding, I can see that at the time, you want to hold on to what you have and you want to keep it, because it is grungy, it is what it is and you don’t see why you would have to expand it to something brand new. One word that I remember, and I remember who said it too, she used the word, “sterile” for the new space. And that is something we fought for so long to turn this new, sterile space into something reminiscent of what we had.

Moving from the downtown space to Seattle Center was monumental for the persons closest to Vera. Paula’s recounting of having to move was emotional. The Fourth Avenue space was the place she first bonded with; it was a place she helped shape.

There was a feeling about the Fourth Avenue space. It was warm, intimate, grimy, and a bit punk rock:

One thing that I really loved about the fourth avenue space that I think is a little bit lost a the new Seattle Center is that, and I think it is a bit different for me, maybe than for kids who grew up in the city, but for me it was – it wasn’t clean cut, and it wasn’t - it was kind of grimy. It wasn’t some fancy place.

Coming from a small homogenous town, the grime, the punk, was essential for Megan. Vera was Megan’s other life, away from her high school and small town. It was the place she felt she fit and she loved the space. As did all the others:

I liked that it felt like the people who used the space really loved the space. It felt warm. The door at the bottom would go in and there was Vera written on the wall,
but that was the only indication that there was anything there and I liked that because it felt like a secret club.

The warmth and intimacy of Fourth Ave seems to be a universal feeling. Vanessa’s attachment to the Fourth Ave space is apparent in the way she described the space facilitating relationships:

I think the experience at the Fourth Ave space, because it was so close and cozy and comfortable, I think there were a lot of relationships built there that once we left that space, it was hard to maintain those close times. When you are having your membership meetings in a tiny little room where barely everything fits versus this huge room where the ceilings are so tall and there is more air in the room than there are people. I think that changes the nature of how the organization operations.

Vera’s decision to move was forced. As part of a growing city with a changing landscape, Vera’s landlord sold the building and commercial space was to replace the venue. Vera had to find a new home. Paula, Megan, Anne, Alejandro and Vanessa were all a part of that process.

Alejandro, “Everyone was bummed to leave the old space. It was really cool in a lot of ways, but we got to custom design a space at Seattle Center. We were able to make everything how we wanted to.” From the perspective of all things associated with producing shows, it was a much better space:

The new space I think is better. The facilities are bigger. It is easier for the bands to load in. It sucked for bands to lug their gear up the stairs, I remember that. It
was a big staircase, drums and amps and shit up stairs, it sucks. They are better off in that space.

Alejandro saw the new space as an opportunity to improve the quality of the shows, to provide a better experience for bands. He was not a teenager who grew up with Vera in the Fourth Ave space, in its Fourth Avenue iteration. On the change and growth that stirred much emotion from the Vera Mafia, he can reflect that it might be tied to age and development, “Maybe people’s feelings in the old space have to do with it being a really important time there, when they were kids and it was a certain thing or place for them.”

Vera at Fourth Avenue was a version of Vera as an organization, a venue. It was not simply an address, but the outlook and feel of the location. It was the home the Vera Mafia had outside of their school worlds: scrappy, hard earned, downtown. Moving was devastating.

As Megan recalls moving spaces, she reflects on how significant the move was and how difficult it was emotionally:

I feel a little bit bad about how a lot of us handled the entry into the new space or the growth. Because Vera grew exponentially as soon as we got in there and I feel like there was a very close knit group of people that ran things at the Fourth Avenue space that were established, the core group of volunteers, everyone was welcome, but there were a core group of people that were completely involved, myself included, and I think that when suddenly we were provided with more volunteers than we knew what to do with and being this more legit in the eyes of
the rest of the world, this more legitimate space, venue, organization, that I think there was a lot of resentment and a lot of bitterness and a lot of frustration.

Anne was angry, “I was really mad at the Vera Project. For years.” With the loss of 1916th Fourth Avenue came the loss of Vera, as they all knew it.

**Interpretation.**

The discussion of Vera’s transition was stumbled into accidently. The magnitude of this shift in logistics came to the surface with each participant individually, but it felt as though I was having a roundtable discussion. The very make-up of Vera was manifested differently in the spaces and the struggles of one space were magnified in the other (accessibility and inclusivity) and the meaningful challenges minimized.

Three of four persons called the Fourth Ave space “scrappy” and four of four called Seattle Center “sterile.” Megan wondered what Vera would be like if it was never forced to move, if somehow staying at Fourth Ave would have kept the Vera she loved.

There seemed to be an intimacy that came with the scrappy and shared familiarity, a forced coziness. The older space simply couldn’t hold anyone else; the persons who loved the space and ran the space, completely consumed the space. The building kept them together.

**Safe Struggle.**

And at the old space, things would break and you’d have to fix stuff all the time, and deal with the landlord – and now the landlord is the city, you have a ten year lease, you’re set. I think that struggle taught me a lot, because I got handed everything to me to me my entire life.
The struggle was defining for Megan. She found in Vera something real she had to fight for. If she (and others like her) weren’t there, Vera wouldn’t be either. There were regulations to fight, an old building to maintain, decisions to be made, money to be raised, and bills to be paid, and dirty work to be done. All of it was essential and nothing was guaranteed.

Like Megan, Anne knew the dirty work was about Vera’s survival and that she and the others who were doing the work were essential to that. Anne reflects on how things have shifted with the move to Seattle Center and the formalization of Vera as it has become seen as a more legitimate part of the Seattle scene:

At the Fourth Avenue space, there was work that had to be done. I scraped paint off of walls, I did some pretty gnarly tasks, but I saw that everything I was doing was making a difference. And I think that folks in the current space may not have that same work, having to do this onerous, task, like a survivalist instinct, like – if we don’t do this, then we can’t do this. Now, there is a staff that insulates the volunteer corps from the things that are kind of menial. And it takes a lot of self-motivation to get in and underneath to really push forward the things you want to accomplish. Now there is someone who is going to order the toilet paper; it isn’t a volunteer.

Scrapping paint and hijacking toilet paper could be seen as menial work, but for Anne and Megan, it was necessary work in service of a cause that was dear to them. For Megan, that work was essential, the struggle vital:
Maybe that is a very privileged thing to say that I want to keep that struggle, because I didn’t grow up having to deal with anything. So that’s probably coming from a really privileged place and to be fair, my girlfriends that I met there are all white middle class people as well. Again, none of us have had serious financial, class, or racial issues to deal with growing up, so maybe that’s part of what is going on, but if that isn’t your demographic…

Megan and her friends fit the dominant demographic at Vera and it is a demographic that is not fighting to keep their own bills paid. Their daily struggle was not one for survival or a battle against oppression, but this was something that felt, and was, real. Something to fight for that could very easily be taken away. This struggle was transformative.

Beth has worked on both sides of the non-profit world. She struggled to start and find a home for Girls Rock Camp and worked through the same struggles to keep the doors of music driven all-ages non-profit open. Beth then came to Vera in its new space with its found security.

She reflected on working with a fairly solid non-profit and what the implications of struggle and lack of struggle can mean:

If you are not worried about where your resources are going to come from every week, it changes the nature of your work a little bit, but it means it will you will probably take a little less ownership sometimes. Kind of ‘I trust this place will exist without me. It will be here.’ But you are not going to rely on people to have to clean your space or do other such things. Because once you grow into being an institution, we pretty much are in that, over a quick timeline, then this is not
something where people are like, oh, we’ll clean, or oh is that broken, we’ll fix that. I think if you frame it as learning opportunities, ‘All our cables are broken, let’s solder them.’ And that can be a learning opportunity for interns or for people figuring out how to make things work, but is not something we have to rely on.

It also feels a little disingenuous when you have this fixed building and then you say, ‘Hey everybody, we really rely on you to keep this place running.’ They might be like, ‘well what’s that for?’

Beth easily sees the different type of relationships that are built when one is struggling to keep a place alive and when one’s engagement does not play a crucial role in the survival of the space, but she knows that that inauthenticity is neither a learning experience nor a path to engagement.

Megan continually stressed how transformative her time being an essential part of the old space was and how much the struggle taught her, “I wonder if, in the new space, you would sort of have to manufacture that struggle. It just didn’t really exist anymore.”

The old space (Fourth Avenue downtown) had a survivalist quality to it. Everyone was fighting to keep it alive to make it work. That atmosphere fostered great value for the work everyone was doing. Without the work of each person, Vera might no longer be.

The fight was so important to Megan; it became part of what defined her time and place at Vera:

We were always fighting for what you wanted and fighting to justify your existence and fighting for money and it always felt like you were one step away from losing it all, but that’s what made it so important. And now that it is much
more established, its been validated by the city, but arts funding and by all that kind of stuff, I feel that because it is not on the edge of non-existence anymore that you lose a little bit of that--it can get taken for granted.

It was a real fight. There were real consequences and if each person didn’t pull her weight, this collective might not make it. Each person was absolutely essential to making the organization work.

**Interpretation.**

Megan has never had to struggle, so the struggle at Vera was transformative for her. There was a very real possibility that the thing she loved could be taken from her. There was a desperation and a real sense of importance. And she was essential to that fight. Megan shared this was also true for many of her Vera friends who, like her, came from middle class white households and did not face daily struggle or social oppression. This fight taught Megan to be punk rock, to be subversive, and that she was important to the fight.

For youth who do not have to struggle to meet their basic needs or face institutional oppression, having to work for and fight for something they care about, is a transformative experience. The fight helped define these teens, it helped them build friendships; it validated them. To face struggle with other like-minded persons helped them develop their outlooks. The proximity to others with a united cause built intense bonds and the intergenerational set-up of Vera allowed teenagers to learn how to fight from older persons who knew the scene, but still understood what it meant to go to homeroom.
Steering

Three pieces of chart paper are taped to the wall in the back of the conference room with the heading, “Safe Spaces.” Listed on the pages are the following:

- Assume positive intent
- Speak your truth (in a good way)
- Be open (yourself)
- Privacy (everyone has a right to it)
- Discuss how you feel
- All opinions are equal
- Be empathetic
- Be humble
- No more unilateral decisions
- Stop censoring emails to membership
- Restore power to members
- Restore group process
- Separate opinion from fact

The Steering Committee meetings take place in the same conference room as the “Safe Spaces” signs. Beth leads the meetings and she begins this one by passing out printed copies of the meeting agenda. The first item of business is an icebreaker, “Best show you’ve seen at Vera/most entertaining transportation story/your IDEAL show.” The agenda is carefully scripted with fifteen to thirty minutes of time allotted to a variety
of topics including signing up for upcoming shows, signs for bus routes and ATMs, and planning the volunteer appreciation party.

Beth sits in the middle of the large table that dominates the room. The table has been painted a kaleidoscope of colored designs and is surrounded by mismatched chairs. Beth sits behind a computer and is projecting its image onto a white sheet taped to the far wall.

The committee members alternately munch on provided snacks and text on their phones as Beth facilitates the group signing up for shows through the month of May. She asks for volunteers to take on specific jobs at each show. As she works through the list of shows she pulls up each band’s website and plays clips of the music so that the members can get a feel of what they will be signing up for. For each show Beth rolls through the jobs that need to be filled, letting the committee know who is already working the show or attending, “I’ll be attending the Perfect Pussy/Chastity Belt show, so if you work the door you can boss me around.” This elicits a member to sign-up for door managing.

Beth continues to roll through the shows and gives a bit of background on the bands where she is able and members chime in with any known knowledge of a particular act. One of the committee members pops another cracker in her mouth and then heads out, promising to check VeraVera\textsuperscript{18}.

Other than myself there is another guest at the meeting, the volunteer coordinator from a large community supported radio station, KEXP. The Vera Project is looking to throw its first volunteer appreciation party and Beth has invited Julie, KEXP’s volunteer

\textsuperscript{18} VeraVera.org is the Vera Project’s website for volunteers wherein they can sign up for duties and receive announcements.
coordinator, for tips. What follows is a somewhat awkward exchange. Julie has a few ideas to share, but the steering committee is fairly silent. The overall plan and trajectory for the Vera event seems a bit unclear and the committee members a bit unsure.

The awkward silence is weighing upon the room; I chime in with enthusiasm at some of the suggestions and then add a couple of ideas. Beth seems grateful for input and locates a white board. She jots down a few ideas and then looks to distribute responsibilities. There is a lot of silence, a couple of takers, and one of the guys on the Steering committee semi-volunteers to make up a flier. The situation feels fairly unresolved and Julie (the KEXP volunteer coordinator) makes a clumsy exit with the offer to answer further questions as they come up. “Email me,” she mouths to Beth as she heads out the door.

The Steering meeting is sporadically interrupted with sound checks from the stage downstairs as a show is scheduled for 7:30. Another steering committee member slips out, mumbling about needing to help with the show. Vera is buzzing downstairs as the band completes sound check and people mill about getting ready to open the doors.

Upstairs, business is forced to go on. The less exciting agenda items: where to post a map of ATMs (“Everyone wants to know where to get cash because we are all cash here.”) and if, and where, bus maps should be posted (“Because everyone just looks on their phone anyway!”) are discussed and then are agreed to be revisited at the next meeting.
By the time the agenda gets around to next steps, the momentum has fizzled out and Beth’s call for action items is met with silence. She lets everyone know they will regroup by email and then heads downstairs to check on the show.

**Interpretation.**

Prior to my observation, I asked Beth to tell me a bit about the workings of the Steering Committee. She shared:

It is mostly younger members and that steering role is mostly about the culture of the organization a little bit and it is basically volunteer management at shows. So handling the show and giving the introduction and going through updates of the show with the show manager and being available to bounce people as needed and provide security as needed. It’s just about being able to see a younger person in charge at a show, as well as having them be in charge. Knowing one of the main jobs of the Steering committee is to assist with, and be out in front of shows, puts committee meetings into context. Speaking to the component of the organization of the culture, Beth shared that Steering is one of committees that can hear and provide input on proposals to have supplementary activities take place in the space (e.g., dissertation research) or new ideas or opportunities for the organization (e.g., the first volunteer appreciation party). The Steering committee also has members from other committees (e.g., diversity committee) represented.

This particular meeting felt subdued and distracted, but so did the day. Only about half the members stayed the entirety of the meeting and business was dealt with in
an obligatory manner. It was one of those times where everyone was daydreaming out
the window.

The Benefits of Stability.

Beth notes that when the bills are paid, “Your time and energy can be spent
thinking about events you want to put on and reaching out into the world, rather than
trying to keep yourselves open.” Beth has helped Vera open its doors to events that are
possible only because of time and resources. She shared that the diversity committee was
hosting a group to speak about youth homelessness and the benefits of being able to host
such an event. Beth speaks to how she sees the Vera members benefit, “I think the more
we are able to partner with people, the more we are able to help inform the membership.”
The members can learn more about the world around them and become more connected
and concerned citizens. And she sees members being able to figure out how to give back
and what is appropriate for working with different communities.

As Vera’s members work to partner with organizations that are unlike Vera, the
members are on a steep learning curve. Beth talks about how she helps steer the youth
members:

Obviously your heart is in the right place and you want to do the right thing, so
you want to ask people what is the best way to have information? How to
function? As in for tomorrow’s event (youth homeless talk) we need to pay
people in cash because they may not have a bank account. And you are like,
‘Right. I wouldn’t have thought about that until the last second.’ So it is a good
way to get ourselves organized ahead of time.
Interpretation.

With security comes the ability to be a community resource. As a leader, Beth embraces the opportunity to push the Vera youth to do more than hang out. This is a significant shift in the type of learning experience of Vera participants. The early days of working to keep Vera running, the fight for survival, are behind it. In an old scrappy space, the volunteers were an integral part of survival. It was DIY to keep the doors open. Beth can appreciate the draw, the bonding, the community that comes from the down-and-dirty desperation of making something you care about work. She also knows that it is impossible to replicate that.

With a fully functioning space, Vera’s youth today will not be able to gain the satisfaction, confidence and bonds that came from the DIY nature of early Vera. But Beth can lead the group to look beyond its doors to the larger Seattle community. And that is what they are doing by hosting a workshop on youth homelessness. Beth’s hope is that not only will Vera reach into a different community, but that the participating Vera youth will gain something, beginning with the understanding that not everyone has a bank account.

Veri Et Recti Amici. True and Sincere Friends.

Anne:

That idea of a true and sincere friend – many of my good friends have come out of the Vera Project. And I know walking into a show like a cultural event in Seattle I am going to know the players on the scene because of the Vera Project.
The Vera Project takes its name as an acronym of the Latin, “Veri Et Recti Amici” and the idea of a true and sincere friend has been a central focus for most anyone I’ve spoken to about Vera. Whether like Anne, who above directly references the phrase, “true and sincere friend,” or the words of others, Vera has facilitated friendships for so many.

Paula found in Vera the band of outsiders she didn’t find in school: All of my friends were through Vera. That was the place I had sought out because school was not my priority, was not where I fit in, was not where I made friends. There were not people who understood me and the things I was going through, but at Vera were these other people who didn’t fit into a specific place and they understood that. They had different conversations, they identified differently, they were the people the school system, the culture, the society didn’t accept and it was great to have that and to just meet all these other individuals. You know, maybe you weren’t going through exactly the same things. Maybe you know it was like gender, or sexual identity, or class, or whatever it was, but we all banded on not fitting in.

Paula and Megan each shared about being friends with the other, as while recruited separately, each knew that I was speaking with the other. They didn’t know the content of the questions and it is striking how similar their thoughts were on finding friends at such a critical point in their lives.

Megan’s account:

My five best friends I met at Vera when we were in high school and they are still super good friends and we meet for holidays when we are all in town again and its
sort of this ongoing thing. Vera was the thing that brought us all together and (we are a fairly disparate group too).

Megan, Paula and Anne are three of the Vera Mafia who have remained family after their teenage years and they all shared it was the experiences that Vera provided, especially as they all grew with Vera, that fostered their friendships.

**Interpretation.**

To not fully give voice to the participants on how truly impactful being a part of Vera was for each of them would be to deny the tone that pervaded all of our interviews and further communication. For the people whose situations allowed them to become deeply involved with Vera, for whose characteristics made it feel welcoming and like a home, Vera was the place whose structures and lack-there-of facilitated a space where unlike persons from across the area could engage with one another and become lasting friends.

**A Not-School**

Bibi went to high school in Bismarck, North Dakota, “There it was sports or drinking.” We shared tales of being outsider teens with the above menu choices in our high school hometowns. At the end of our conversation, Bibi reflected:

Even though what I said earlier about not wanting to get back into that space in my life, but just thinking about how different it might have been if something like that [the Vera Project] had existed where I grew up.
For those that had Vera, it was an anecdote to the often stifling and alienating world of school. For Megan, Vera was the antithesis of school, and that was why it worked:

I think part of what I liked about Vera in the Fourth Avenue space was that nothing about it was really traditional, it wasn’t my school, it wasn’t normal structure, it wasn’t an organized sports team where I was going to score my goal. It didn’t resemble any of that and that worked really well for me, because it was different and I was bored as shit with the place where I was at and so Vera offered this new alternative that was super radical at the time.

For Megan school bored her, but she could make it through. For Paula, she needed something to give her the confidence to make another choice. She found that in Vera. The persons at Vera she felt validated her voice also gave her the confidence to move forward, “It was an important space because it was a not-school, definitely. It wouldn’t have functioned the same way if it had been a school thing.”

Of the Vera youth I spoke with, Anne was the only one who seemed to thrive at school. It is without complaint that she described her school life, including studying for the SATs and doing all her homework. In high school, Vera was Anne’s other life, it was a place where she had a voice and had to figure it out for herself, and that was important, “One of the biggest differences between Vera and school is that there is no one telling you what to do, you have to figure it out yourself. And that is huge.”
And Vera was also a place that provided the opportunity to do something that wouldn’t fly or wasn’t available in school. Vanessa saw kids come in and utilize that openness at Vera:

I think that one of the things it gave people – if you were fifteen and you had an idea for the kind of event you wanted to put together you could say that at the Vera Project and you could see if other people were interested in making that happen. I think that a space like that gives you room to make things happen with more freedom and more resources than if you went to your teacher in school and said, ‘Hey, we want to have a show.’

As captain of the ship, Beth spoke to the importance of space like Vera outside of school, “It is a very different feel than high school. I definitely see it as a way to get confidence and approach other people and have other people approach you.” In Vera’s current iteration, Beth sees the venue as a place where the social structures that govern a high school don’t really come into play and youth are freer to find their own way and connect with others.

**Interpretation.**

Vera’s intergenerational aspect that has provided validation for youth voice has also created a power dynamic that is very different than the one in schools. School is often difficult to navigate and can be socially exclusionary, “Or just boring as shit.” Vera’s teenagers came to rely on the venue to give them what school could not.

Vera’s existence was critical to so many youth as it was a place that had become a home. Over the years the reasons why Vera is important to specific persons shifts and
changes, but the common dominator is a space with power structures and opportunities do not look like high school.

However, like high school or any other social institution, Vera has an “in crowd” and an “out crowd”. For some persons the space doesn’t work, they cannot break into the circle of teens; it is not the home that is right for them. Due to the nature of a venue where participation is voluntary and a voluntary study of said participants, I was not able to represent the voices of the persons who chose not to engage with Vera.

**Captain’s last words**

I told Beth I had read all the Vera Project’s documents detailing its mission and goals, its stated intentions, and future plans. The end of our interview was winding down and this was also the end of my data collection. Beth was my final stop. I let her know that over a year after we starting talking about my doing this work, I was on the last leg. I had spoken with everyone and spent many, many hours at Vera.

As the one at the helm, the one who is helping guide Vera’s future and setting the tone on a daily basis, I wanted to know what Beth felt the intentions of the space were. After a long pause, Beth replied:

The best way it could go, for us, is that teens see a space and go, I am comfortable here, whether they think about why, or they just feel better in that space and they want to take that feeling and bring it to the rest of their world and how they move through the world. That is the best possible way it could go.
Chapter Five: Questions, Thematics and Forward Movement

Learning occurs in diverse sites and modalities, in ways we might not consider pedagogy, for lack of a broader understanding of that word’s possible meanings. Within these informal sites, learning often takes on a subtle, embodied mode, moving away from the cognitive rigor commonly associated with education and toward notions of affect, aesthetics, and presence. (Ellsworth, 2005 as cited in Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 339)

“What is worth knowing?” is the question that has guided curriculum studies since its inception. When evaluating the informal, unscripted learning experiences in a public space, I reconceptualize the question as, “What is worth experiencing?” The field of public pedagogy asks, “What makes something educative or pedagogic in nature?” (Savage, 2010, p. 107). And Eisner’s first question to an educational critic is, “What does the situation mean to those involved?” (2002, p. 229). In this chapter I keep these questions in mind as I consider each of the research questions guiding this study. As I address each question I situate the findings within a loose conceptual framework wherein I look to discover the relationship between educational commonplaces and curriculum in a non-traditional learning environment that is characterized by voluntary youth participation.
The intention of this study is to examine the educational experiences that naturally occur in an all-ages music venue. As a place where many youth find a voice, a home, and outlet, the all-ages scene is an important part of youth culture for many teenagers (Duncan 2007; Stewart, 2010). The intersection of all-ages music and youth leadership at the Vera Project fosters an environment where there are strong feelings of intergenerational equity and ownership of the space and scene. Vera is a place where youth undergo multiple types of educative experiences. In this space pedagogy and curriculum are ever present, but are contextual to the public sphere.

As the field of public pedagogy continues to develop, the need to study the learning experiences in a variety of settings that serve youth is essential, “The point is that non-school institutions and relationships are educative, they embody curriculum; therefore, they should be studied by using curricular lenses” (Shubert, 1981, p. 193).

In my study of the Vera Project I used the lens of a curricular theorist and the method of Educational Criticism to discover the elements of Eisner’s three curricula (2002) present in the space and the methodology of Educational Criticism to describe and interpret the experiences of Vera’s youth. In Chapter Four I provided descriptions organized thematically; as the study progressed I saw themes emerge and relationships develop, which aided the organization of the descriptions.

In this chapter I address each research question. The discussions are grounded by the conceptual framework, which reinterpreted and adapted the commonplaces (Schwab, 1969 and Uhrmacher, 1991) with reference to Vallance (2005) to be relevant to the examination of informal learning in a public space. I use this context to organize the
presented experiences with respect to Eisner’s (2002) three dimensions of curricula (Explicit, Implicit, and Null).

As I consider each research question and develop themes around this study, two narratives have emerged. As I mention in Chapter Four, when the Vera Project moved from a small downtown location (the “Fourth Ave space”, the “old space”) to the Seattle Center (the “new space”) in 2007, it signaled a shift in the organization, both in structure and in disposition. Although my data collection period was confined to the winter and spring of 2014, the nature of my participants’ involvement, as well as my own involvement, spanned both of Vera’s homes and therefore allowed for the emergence of Vera’s shifting narrative across both spaces and time. The learning experiences and curricular dimensions that were present at one space often shifted, changed, or disappeared at the other, while some dimensions remained consistent.

**Question One: Manifesting a mission statement**

The first research question guiding this study is: *What are the intentions of the Vera Project as an all-ages music and arts venue in a large urban city?* When considering the intentions of the Vera Project, I do so as an examination of Vera’s explicit curriculum. As defined by Eisner (2002), the explicit curriculum is the published or openly stated course of study. Because the Vera Project’s intentions were largely determined by a review of published documents and an analysis of artifacts, I consider the intentions of the Vera Project to be a component of its Explicit Curriculum.

The moment Vera was incorporated it was intended to be a space for youth and music. Hastily scrawled on the non-profit application to incorporate are the founder’s
words, “To put on all-ages music and arts events for those under 21 through participation,” (Stewart, Washington Application to form a Non-Profit, 2001, November 18). From the ink on the Articles of Incorporation came Bylaws that provided a purpose statement in article 1.3, “The Vera Project is organized and operated exclusively for purposes that are beneficial to the public interest, more specifically to provide innovative, community-directed and youth-oriented music and arts programming and designated venue” (Vera Project, 2001, revised 2007). In document after document over the years the articulated mission of the Vera Project remains consistent with its original mission, “To fuel personal and community transformation through popular music shows produced in partnership with young people in Seattle” (Vera Project Five Year Plan, 2008).

In writing, Vera’s intention is to provide a space for youth to be a participant in the all-ages music scene. This mantra is visible on their website and on signage at the venue. The organization is constructed to mirror the articulated intentions with youth led membership at the core of its organizational structure (Vera Organizational Chart, Appendix D).

Youth leadership is a powerful concept that has many manifestations and is contextual to each organization, the organization’s intentions, the space and time. In the field of out of school learning there is a continued emphasis on engaging youth in the democratic experience and in highlighting youth voice (James & Deutch, 2013; Kirshner, 2003; MacLaughlin, 2000). Meaningful youth engagement remains a challenge for many organizations. Often organizations default to having a token youth member on a
committee or a “youth representative” like that Kirsher (2003) refers to. Kirsher (2003) writes of groups that successfully utilize youth leadership:

Such groups are made up of youth leaders and adult allies who seek to reorganize hierarchical adult-youth relations and place youth in charge of significant decisions related to program policies and advocacy agendas. Rather than offering limited, circumscribed opportunities for youth input, in which youth serve as “youth representatives” on a decision-making board or learn leadership skills through planning school proms, these groups position young people as capable democratic actors, who have legitimate opinions about social policies and deserve to have these opinions heard in the public square. (p. 2)

There is a clear distinction between token youth representation and authentic youth voice and this distinction is critical to authentically engaging youth as leaders in an organization. Vera intentionally asks youth to take a seat front and center in the organization. Youth are not only represented, but it is the intention of the organization that youth voices aid in shaping the workings of the Vera Project.

In 2006 Adam Fletcher wrote a handbook on the “ins and outs” of youth voice in the state of Washington. In the Washington Youth Voice Handbook, Fletcher (2006) provides a definition of youth voice that empowers youth across demographics, communities, and situations. Along with Krisner (2003), Fletcher’s work stresses the necessity of authentic and meaningful youth voice. Fletcher’s (2006) definition is important for both youth and adults as they look to define working relationships with one another and situate those relationships within the community:

Youth Voice is the active, distinct, and concentrated ways young people represent themselves throughout society. To be Active with Youth Voice means engaging young people intentionally, instead of coincidently. Distinct means that young people are seen as having their own views separate from those of their parents or teachers. Concentrated means engaging young people in a focused way, including the personal, structural, political and financial support it needs to be effective. To Represent something is to take the way you see
something and share that perspective with someone else. Community is any place that a young person belongs to either physically, socially, or otherwise. (p. 13)

Fletcher’s definition of youth voice seems to align with Vera’s intention for its youth. Both published and structural, Vera facilitates youth voice, youth action, and youth ownership. Remembering Paula’s earlier words:

I never felt so equal you know, it was regardless of age and whatever else, it was just sitting in these meetings or you’d go to board meetings and people were maybe five to thirty years older than you but your voice and your opinion and your space was valued, it wasn’t like, now we’ll hear from the younger people.

It was very equal.

The Vera Project’s overarching intention, to create a participatory youth culture, seems to manifest in practice, validating youth voice and providing persons of all ages a place to experience music and actively participate in the scene.

As I ventured beyond the documents and into Vera, the next of Vera’s intentions can be deduced from the stories of the participants and the posted signs; Vera intends to foster a tolerant, inclusive, and safe space for youth to hear music. Early on Paula remembers a sign front and center that explicitly stated that hateful words and behaviors are not tolerated at Vera. A sign proclaiming that you are entering a “NO HATE ZONE!” proclaiming the very values Paula spoke of is currently posted at Vera. It might even be the same sign.

As a staff member Vanessa was in charge of the many duties necessary to putting on shows and events. She reflected that there wasn’t a lot of conversation as to what to
do if something “went wrong.” Everyone simply put faith in the fact that Vera’s policies on tolerance and inclusion were so pervasive that all situations were covered. Vanessa shared, “There wasn’t a lot of training. It was just a philosophy we all shared. This is an inclusive space and if someone isn’t showing respect for the space or the people in the space, they need to be asked to leave.” There was absolute faith in the mantra of tolerance, inclusive spaces and respect.

**Question Two: Unseen influences**

The second question guiding this study is: *What are the elements of implicit and null curricula experienced at The Vera Project?* The aim of the second research question is to understand the non-articulated and unseen influences that impact the experiences of youth at the Vera Project.

Of Eisner’s three curricula, only one is explicit. The other two curricula present (implicit and null) in all educative experiences are unseen. Eisner (2002) presents the implicit curricula as what is not explicitly taught or presented, but nonetheless learned via the educative experience.

Eisner’s implicit curriculum is conceptually similar to the concept of hidden curriculum. The implicit curriculum acknowledges that a vast array of lessons learned that are not those that are taught. However, Eisner’s implicit curriculum does not have implied the lens of social oppression that is characteristic of “hidden curriculum.” Kentli (2009) defines hidden curriculum, “Hidden Curriculum is acknowledged as the socialization process of schooling” (p. 83). So while it is with Eisner’s lens that the learning experiences are considered, I keep in mind some of the characteristics Giroux
(1983) assign hidden curriculum: unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted through routine and social relationships, as the transmission and adoption of norms, values and beliefs do play a role in understanding the unseen influences at the Vera Project.

The second unseen curriculum is the “null curriculum,” what is not taught. The null curriculum has two dimensions defined by Eisner (2002): intellectual processes and subject. Within these two dimensions are multiple examples that are all contextual to the teaching and learning that happens within a prescribed school day. To explore the null curriculum present at the Vera Project as an all-ages venue, I looked to Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton (1986) who write on the usability of the concept of null curriculum. The authors provide a simple way to make use of null curriculum that can be useful when examining a non-traditional learning environment that is void of scripted lessons or texts, “The null curriculum analysis simply offers an alternative perspective from which to view decisions of content inclusion and exclusion” (p. 40). I will use this perspective, of simple inclusion versus exclusion, to address the findings of this study.

The “Tale of Two Veras” is very much apparent in my response to question two concerning the dimensions of implicit and null curriculum. The Vera Project’s two homes, its first permanent home downtown on Fourth Avenue (2002-2006) and its current home on Seattle Center (2007-present) facilitate different types of learning experiences and therefore different curricula. In one space what was explicit becomes implicit or null, in contrast what was once explicit may become implicit. There are also
dimensions of curricula and learning experiences that are consistent across time and spaces.

When considering the multiple landscapes and participants, three overarching themes emerged: attachment to a place and time, emphasis placed on certain subsets of marginalized groups, and the notion of safe spaces.

**Place (and time) Attachment**

Place attachment involves dynamic but enduring positive bonds between people and prized sociophysical settings, such as homes. These bonds reflect and help cultivate group and individual identity. (Brown, B., Perkings, & Brown, G., 2012, p. 259)

For Megan and Paula, having a home at Vera was paramount to their teenage survival. Vera had many of the characteristics we associate with home: warmth, acceptance, and comfort. Megan says it explicitly, “I liked that it felt like the people who used the space really loved the space. It felt warm,” and Paula, Anne and Vanessa echoed the sentiments in many different iterations.

One had to be in the know to get to the Fourth Avenue space. Megan was visibly wistful when she said:

You kind of had to know where it was; I don’t think it was very common that you would accidently stumble upon that space. It was intentional that you would end up there. I liked that because it felt like a secret club.

In their writing on youth engagement in the out of school environment, Deutsch and Hirsch (2002) consider the importance of place. They write:

An individual forms an emotional bond with a particular space as a result of experiences that occur in that space over time. The physical space is then transformed into a place through personal significance and a sense of belonging. It may be assumed that the clubs are such places for their members. (p. 300)
The bonds Deutsch and Hirsch write about were very real for Megan, Paula, Anne and Vanessa.

The bonds built with Vera in its Fourth Avenue space are not only contextual to the physical space, but to Vera as a young organization. As a new venue, the Vera Project depended on its youth for survival. Anne and Megan recall doing menial tasks (e.g., scraping paint or folding chairs) with pride; this work was essential to Vera’s functioning and by doing this work, they in turn were essential to Vera. There was no reward for service, but an unspoken status that came with fighting the Teen Dance Ordinance, fighting to keep the doors open, and the enduring relationships that come from building bonds during battle.

Vera’s early days seemed to breed a strong insider culture and great worth was assigned to the contributions of each individual. As a young organization, the shared responsibilities and ownership was distributed amongst a few individuals. For youth who were there at the beginning, the responsibilities came with a sense of being needed and with that a validation that their contributions were important. Being a part of the organization in its early years imparted an “insider status.”

Vera’s move from Fourth Avenue to Seattle Center was fairly devastating for each of the Vera Mafia. The Fourth Avenue building itself stood for so much unsaid; so much value had been assigned to the walls. Each woman mourned the loss of a home she felt she had helped to build. In turn, Megan, Anne, Paula and Vanessa each described the sterility of the new environment. Seemingly sky-high white walls replaced the coziness and the warmth that Megan and Vanessa both reminisced about at “the old space.”
When looking at the words of Megan, Anne, and Paula in particular, I have to keep in mind Alejandro’s words, “Maybe people’s feelings in the old space have to do with it being a really important time there, when they were kids and it was a certain thing or place for them.” The Fourth Avenue version of the Vera Project, “the old space”, was so crucial to some because the space, at that address, in that time, felt like home.

Moving to a stable location, obtaining secured funding, and exponential expansion removed the need for youth volunteers to “do the dirty work” and help the space function and keep its doors open. With this security it is inevitable that the individual became less important. The demotion from being a crucial to being just another participant was deflating for Megan, Anne, and Paula. With the new space and a new found stability came the loss of the feeling needed and ability to build bonds forged by struggle and resistance. The struggle and urgency that was so important and so validating to the Vera Mafia are no longer.

For youth that come to Vera today, it is to a different home with a different feel. Today Vera is not dependent on any individual to survive, nor is there a question of the venue’s survival. The relationship with the space is different and the validation and status that comes with the “urgency” and “necessity” of one’s presence is missing. The urgency and struggle cannot be fabricated, as both Beth and Megan commented.

The message of, “You are needed!” is harder to come by today. Sitting through a Steering Committee meeting and watching youth sign up for show duties, there was no sense of, “I have to be there or else it won’t happen.” Because it will still happen. Beth
and Vera continually want to see youth out in front, but the youth are not necessary for survival. And they know that.

There is a very different set of experiences, a different message, when everything about your time is about surviving, when no task is too small, when all is “for the greater good.” For those who embedded their life with the Vera Project during its early years, it was the grassroots nature of the organization, the DIY sensibility, and the fight for survival that attracted youth as much as the music. The fight for survival is gone at the new space and with it the specific energy that comes with the fight.

The new space is a different sort of home. The building is large and open and the venue is big with equipment that rivals other Seattle clubs. Vera worked hard to bring enough of a scrappy feel to the new sterile space to attract today’s young punks. Many things from the old space were brought over to try and replicate the feel of the Fourth Avenue home. Paula recalls the struggle they felt when faced with the new space:

One word that I remember, and I remember who said it too, she used the word, ‘sterile’ for the new space. And that is something we fought for so long. And we had, after we moved in the space, we had these ‘Vera-faction’ parties, which were to turn this new, sterile space into something reminiscent of what we had.

And some of “old Vera” is very much a part of new Vera. I recognized the old vinyl booths that were salvaged from the old space. Their rickety nature and well-worn seats are signs that nothing had been done to the booths save for a change in location. Those who traveled with the space wanted desperately to bring a part of home with them.
At Vera’s current space, there is a definite sense that it has a comfort of home, but it is more in the atmosphere and less in the physicality of the space. There are certain areas that look to be especially well worn and well loved. The front desk, central to much of the action, is a place where teenagers make themselves comfortable under the large Vera banner, munching on snacks and directing the flow of traffic. To be at home implies a level of comfort and this is seen in the way Vera regulars hold court in the cozy spaces under the stairs or at the desk and in the way the current Vera “insiders” have access to the microwave behind the ancient snack case during shows, heating up their personal stash in an off-limits space.

Beth is hopeful that Vera’s is a place that where youth can feel safe and at ease, “The best way it could go, for us, is that they see a space and go, I am comfortable here,” and perhaps for some youth it can even feel like a home.

Selective Representation

LGB and T.

The bathrooms play a large role in Vera’s explicit inclusion policy. The bathrooms are host to the “NO HATE ZONE” signs and they are also identified as gender-neutral. In support for the transgender community, the Vera Project has designated both bathrooms to be gender-neutral. Along with this designation, posters and signs giving direction on how to support the Trans* community are posted between the bathrooms, “How to be a Trans* Ally” is accompanied by “What are your preferred pronouns?” and “Just Because You Fit Doesn’t Mean I Do.” This overt show of support for the Trans* community is unique in many public spaces, especially music venues.
Gender-neutral bathrooms are seen as a hallmark of Vera’s inclusiveness policy. As Beth says, “That is a part of what makes us different.” Safe bathroom access is a social justice issue for the Trans* community, one whose cause has been taken up by activists and allies (Transgender Law Center, 2005). It is a worthy cause.

The concept of “ally” is not unique to the “T” in LGBT; it is intended to apply to the entire Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community. There can be consequences in explicitly posting instructions on how to be an ally to only one subset of a community in which the concept of ally is intended to be inclusive. All members of the LGBT community are in need of allies in an often homophobic and dangerous world. But Vera’s only ally language is for the “T.”

The exclusive support of one subset of persons within a marginalized community has the potential to send implicit messages that one narrative is considered to be more marginalized than the other and therefore worthy of greater support or attention. This could indicate that Vera feels there is a greater need or value on supporting solely the Trans* community, or that there is no need to teach ally behavior for the LGB portion of the LGBT community. When considering these decisions, it is important to note that while there are flyers for LGBT organizations and a general feeling of comfort, there are no posted signs that explicitly address how to be an ally to the LGB and T.

**Demographic Battle.**

The Vera Project seems to be caught in an agonizing battle between who the demographics of the persons who are present and the demographics of persons Vera wants to be present. The youth at the Vera Project are predominately white and middle
class. This demographic has been consistent across the years and locations\textsuperscript{19}. The Vera Project sees the demographics of its current participant pool as a problem in need of fixing.

For the past decade Vera has tried to increase hip-hop shows in its musical line-up. Hip-hop remains a predominately black music genre and the rationale is that more hip-hop equals a less white Vera. For those involved with Vera, the assumption is that changing the music (i.e., bringing in shows that appeal to a specific demographic) will naturally change the participant demographic. Anne reflected that simply changing the music will not change the demographic; people have to feel at home, “The music may have been represented there, but the folks who produced that music weren’t represented at Vera. And feeling like you are a part of a community is really important.”

There seems to be a singular focus on engaging the black community at Vera. Seattle’s non-white population is predominately Asian with a growing Hispanic population (Census Bureau, 2010). By solely focusing on one under represented group, there is a danger of assigning greater worth to one specific community over the other. With the focus on a singular community, it can appear that the presence of this community is seen as more desirable. Vera is guided by a commitment to inclusiveness, but some of the explicit attempts at including certain persons (e.g., the black community or the Trans* community) by nature can feel exclusionary to members of other marginalized communities.

\textsuperscript{19} The Vera Project does not capture demographic data on the persons who attend shows. The demographics of persons at the Vera Project are observational as reported by each of the study participants as well as the director of programming and consistent with observations on site.
Promoting Inclusion

The Vera Project intentionally and explicitly messages a philosophy of inclusion to its youth. For those who have an extended trajectory of involvement, this message is all encompassing. In the “old space,” conversations around social issues occurred, but they were not explicitly facilitated. Paula expressed how she felt comfortable exploring social issues at Vera, “I think courageous conversations is a good way to put it. Maybe not with a moderator or facilitator, but they were just encouraged in that space.”

Walking through Vera today, the physical manifestation of inclusion or social justice is localized to the bathrooms, under the stairwell, and usually surrounded by a rag-tag assortment of stuff. Powerful words about what will not be tolerated and is punishable by removal is printed on signs, “Vera is a NO HATE ZONE! Racist, homophobic, sexist, ageist, ablest, and other hateful speech and actions are not acceptable.”

The “NO HATE ZONE” signs hang on the bathroom walls. The power of these words seems lost on the bathroom walls. The placement of the sign in the bathroom seems to imply that it is worthy of only a cursory glance while washing hands after a toilet break. Bathrooms do not seem to be places where the “Courageous conversations,” Paula referred to can start.

The Vera Project is an all-ages music venue with a participatory structure. The intention of the Vera Project is to be an all-ages participatory music venue. Part of that is to be a safe space where hateful language will not be tolerated. Vera’s explicit intentions are not to facilitate conversations on social issues such as racism, sexuality, or sexism.
Considered from this light, the bathrooms are high traffic areas and if the “NO HATE ZONE” is simply a posted regulation, then the bathroom is as good a high traffic location as any to post the rules.

While not an explicit part of the advertised experience, the nature of the space, the focus on youth, and the rules of tolerance have over the years naturally facilitated an environment where youth have felt both safe and supported to explore social issues. Paula and Megan both recount that Vera was the first place they respectively felt safe to do so.

Today Vera has a diversity committee with monthly meetings; the “Safe Spaces” signs witnessed at the Steering meeting are a product of the diversity committee. Vera has formalized what had been a natural underlying part of the experience; the comfort one felt with the persons in a space to question, explore or express ideas around certain social issues.

When a natural occurring phenomenon (e.g., conversation on social or intimate subjects) becomes an explicit part of the curriculum, the safety of natural engagement can be lost. The intimacy of Vera’s early environment was ripe for conversation because the youth felt intimately connected to a smaller organization.

With growth that intimacy cannot be replicated. In a larger organization it is necessary that things become more intentional and adding “diversity committee” to advertised menu of options demonstrates the value Vera is placing on “diversity.” The diversity committee is another way Vera is looking to transform the experiences that

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happened naturally in an intimate space to a larger organization with an extensive menu of programming that is available to many more youth.

**Violation of the “NO HATE ZONE.”**

Distinct tension surfaced between Vera’s posted signs and the messages from the stage of “The Bro Show.” While reading the “NO HATE ZONE” bathroom sign over the use of a paper towel, “damn bitches” can be heard from the stage. For a decade participants have shared that Vera has tried to bring in more hip-hop acts and has been trying to diversify its youth demographic through this musical avenue. Simultaneously, Vera is committed to its status as a **NO HATE ZONE**. These two worlds seem to have collided the night I attended “The Bro Show.”

This collision revealed many questions that dance between the intentions of a place, what it means to be a safe space, and what freedom of speech means. It is at this juncture that I raise questions that will not be answered in this study, but seem to be important when considering the implicit messages of a youth venue and what it truly means to be a “safe space.”

If a performer violates a policy of no-tolerance with misogynistic and homophobic language, is this a violation of the **NO HATE ZONE** policy? Does the performer get a pass? Under artistic license, can a performer say anything from the stage? Are there different considerations as this is an all-ages space? Perhaps these are the type of questions that should be considered by committee for reflection and scripted action steps.
**Question Three: Moving Beyond Vera**

Question three asks, *how do the implicit messages of the Vera Project transcend its walls?* When youth leave Vera, what do they take with them?

Explicitly, there are many measurable outcomes of how one’s time at Vera moves beyond the walls. Skills have been obtained at Vera, careers launched, and true and sincere friends made. The aim of this question is to discover how the messages of Vera, the unintentional lessons learned, stay with persons and as they move beyond the Vera Project’s walls.

**Identity Development**

For the youth who grew up with Vera, Vera shaped their identity. Vera was punk rock with a Do-It-Yourself survivalist quality that banded those who worked together across generations. Rebels with causes on a music scene, the teens that grew up in this environment were indelibly shaped by it. Megan is attributes her very way of moving through the world and her ability to advocate to her time at the Vera Project:

Vera was the first place I learned to be subversive. They taught me to be a punk and face things and see inequality and act and make a move to do something about it. It is really funny how often it comes up in my head and I owe so much to that organization in terms of my way of thinking about things.

The parts of her that Megan feels Vera influenced, she likewise feels influenced her friends. She spent time reflecting on each of her close Vera friends and concluding just how far Vera’s reach has been for all of them:
What it is interesting is that amongst my friends I think I have the most traditional or bureaucratic type job out of everyone. Its really funny to see how we have each taken these things from Vera and run with them in totally different ways, but I think all of us really consistently have the desire to – three of us work with youth (technically they’re adults, but they’re kids), we’ve all taken that and pretty consistently think about Vera as a thing that has strongly influenced where we are professionally.

Separately Paula spoke about how her time at Vera deeply influenced her values and attitudes that today shape the places and organizations she chooses to be involved with:

After being involved with the Vera, I became involved in many different non-profits. The non-profits I chose to be a part of and work with I sought values that Vera had pushed and that Vera really valued.

Vera shaped Anne as well. Her time at Vera built social and emotional skills that have led her through adulthood:

I know that working with Vera has been transformative for me. I don’t think that I would have the position I have now, at least in terms of my work, if I hadn’t been involved in learning skills, not just technical skills, but how do I work with a range of folks in terms of age and ability.

For the slightly older group at Vera, that initial identity development happened elsewhere during their respective teenage years. Alejandro, Vanessa, and Bibi’s time at Vera may not have necessarily contributed to shaping their values as impressionable teenagers, but each person felt their time at Vera had an impact on their growth as young
adults who were learning how to navigate the post high school world. As Vanessa shared, her identity at Vera was tied to her role in leadership. As someone between the ages of the teenagers and the early thirties of the founders and board, Vanessa was able to carve out a niche for herself, “For me the identity that it cultivated was also about my role and how can we share information and grow from that.”

**Confidence, Empowerment and Community**

From her vantage point, Beth can watch youth interact and develop as they spend time at Vera. She sees time at Vera as a way for youth to gain confidence and perhaps the social footing some teenagers aren’t able to elsewhere:

I definitely see being a part of Vera as a way to get confidence and approach other people and have other people approach you. It is a very different feel than high school. Coming to a show helps you develop. You have to talk to people, even if it scares you.

Beth sees Vera as a place that might push persons to interact socially as their engagement with Vera is voluntary, opposed to trying to navigate a forced landscape of school.

In Chapter Four Paula shares that her time at Vera empowered her to make the choice to leave high school and enter community college. Paula’s experience is a concrete example of how time at Vera was empowering. Megan and Anne also felt empowered to advocate, ask questions, and for Anne to run sound with “a bunch of dudes” as a teenage girl. Each person gained confidence from Vera and felt more capable and self-assured from being a part of the Project.
**Question Four: Significance for Other Communities**

Youth organizations stand at a unique developmental crossroads in the ecological framework of youth; they are able to support and bridge relationships across the settings in youths’ lives. (Jones & Deutsch, 2011, p. 1384)

The final question of this study considers how the findings of this study may be of use to other communities that bring music and art to youth. *What is the significance of the intentions and practices of the Vera Project for other youth orientated music and art communities in general and curriculum matters in particular?*

“The point of educational criticism is to improve the educational process,” (Eisner, 2002, p. 231) and in the world of public pedagogy, the educational process has left the schoolhouse and moved into the wider world. Shubert (1981) reiterates that learning is ubiquitous and studying educational process in schools alone limiting:

> The need for study of the out-of-school curriculum is implicit in a single assumption. Put simply, the better we know children and youth, the more fully we can be in a position to provide good educational experiences for them. This apparently simple assertion is fraught with complexity. It points to the fact that education cannot be equated with schooling. Education is more pervasive; it embraces and interpenetrates all of life. (p. 185)

Educational criticism allows the researcher to observe and interpret the world as a place of learning. In Eisner’s words, “Education is a process that fosters personal development and contributes to social well being” (2002, p. 231). This process is not relegated to the schoolhouse.

As this study progressed, several themes emerged which have potential implications for educative experiences at multiple sites of learning. This was not a study of schools; therefore the correspondence to definitions made with respect to schools will
not be precise. The themes are loosely organized using the conceptual framework that aided in this study.

**Teachers and Learners**

The teachers and the learners are not always the usual suspects at the Vera Project. The distinction between who is a learner and who is a teacher is often unclear and often in flux. In most places the role of “teacher” is assigned to the party of an older age and with the title of teacher usually comes a predetermined and significant power differential. Much of the teaching in the space is somewhat communal in fashion. A person, regardless of age, has a certain set of skills or knowledge and she will then impart that to others. This is central to the dynamics of Vera.

Vanessa’s time is an excellent example of the fluidity between the roles of teacher and that of learners. When learning bookkeeping, Vanessa shares that she was given guidance and mentoring by members of Vera’s board that had experience in finances and that as she gained confidence, she was naturally approached by others to share her skills, often in the developing phase:

I was able to expand my knowledge and learn with the support of VERA board members with accounting experience. Having that community, the board members who could give me instruction, but also my peers and the artists who would ask questions because I had a little bit more knowledge and I wanted to learn more so that I could share that learning with the community.
Vanessa’s experience is not unique. For self-propelled learners there were many teachers present who would participate in the cycle of imparting knowledge and skills, and then the learner can become a teacher in her own right.

**Significance.**

Learning in a music and arts venue is inherently informal and therefore characterized by voluntary participation and self-direction on the part of the learner (Sefton-Green, 2013). Teaching and learning at the Vera Project happen in a cooperative manner and both the teacher and the learner are participating in real work. There is great power in providing a space where those who have greater skill or practice are willing to teach side-by-side anyone who is willing to learn. Vygosky’s (1978) concept of the “More Knowledgeable Other” (MKO) can be a naturally occurring model. The MKO is simply a person who has more knowledge (or experience or skill) than the one who is learning.

Where Vera succeeds and can be replicated is the way a continual cycle of teachers and learners are created. The Vera Project has demonstrated that when the door is open to learning a skill in a space where the power dynamic is not fixed and attendance is not mandatory, there are many youth who will enter. The more knowledgeable others of the Vera Project helped teach audio engineering, bookkeeping and advocacy. For teens who want to be a part of the all-ages scene, the music or art is often just a gateway; they want to learn more and be a part of something larger.
A segue into schools.

As a field, public pedagogy is careful to advocate for keeping the pedagogy of the public separate from the learning that happens in school (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010; Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011; Schubert, 1982). However, there are themes from this study of a public space this that could inform the ways in which the K-12 system considers its work, which is to serve all children. A lesson to be pulled from the study of the Vera Project as an all-ages venue is the power of learning in an authentic manner with a loosely distributed power structure. This is not contextual to a music and arts venue or a specific music scene. Rather, these opportunities and this way of learning is natural to the development

“College and Career Ready” is on the lips of most everyone in today’s K-12 school system. In an age of “College and Career” standards, the mission of schools has become “readiness” for the world beyond, this readiness consisting of further academia and gainful employment. This readiness implies that when students leave schools, they are at the starting line of a race and prepared to run it.

The results orientated K-12 system might look to an organization such as the Vera Project for an example of a space where learning in “real time” is successful and the skills learned by the “students” reach far beyond the trade they are learning. There is enormous value in this. In a study of youth poetry activism as public pedagogy, “Refusing to Submit—Youth Poetry Activism in High School,” author Casal (2010) writes of the continual narrowing of the learning opportunities for high school students but the implied lack of value for certain trades by their now exclusion from the curriculum:
All the avenues for you to find where you excel are just narrow in school. And music programs are closing. We used to have shop in school. We never talk about trades; trades are things to fall back on and things to do if school doesn’t work out for you. But people just want to do what they’re damn good at and what they love. (Ayers, Hodge, & Casal, p. 393)

What is important to realize is that there are ways to learn that are not tied to the competitive nature of “College and Career Readiness for post K-12 life,” but that are deeply embedded in a self-motivated, practitioner expert model. This way of learning skips over readiness into actual work.

Youth volunteers aren’t training to be ready to be shot out of the gate green. In this space youth are participants in the trade they are learning. Vanessa learned bookkeeping as a self-motivated learner who had experts at hand to draw on and a real organization whose books needed keeping. Alejandro learned how to run sound next to a professional engineer in the thick of a show. He learned his livelihood on the spot, during the chaos, and was able to prove himself through action, under the supervision of an expert. Both Vanessa and Alejandro have enviable careers and neither was prepped by readiness, but learned by self-determination with access to experts and real work that had to be done.

**Milieu and Aesthetics**

The Vera Project is the subject of the criticism and its shifts in physical structures and locals very much impacted the experiences of its learners. When considering educative experiences, Schwab (1983) argues that the milieu of the educative space is equally as influential as the teacher, learner, or subject. He writes:

The locality I have in mind is exemplified by the locality of the students of a school, district, or town. They often are of a prevailing social class, ethnic or
religious background which has its own view of what should be taught and learned and its view of the value of education in general. (p. 241)

Schwab’s words resonate when considering the Vera Project as an educative space. Schwab sees the cultural landscape as determined by physical local dictating curriculum in the school setting. It does so very much for the curriculum outside of school as well.

In thinking about the milieu of the Vera Project we must consider it’s setting in Seattle, WA, as well as the two specific locations of each space within the city of Seattle. Because Seattle is a city with unique neighborhoods that are often distinguished from one another by the demographics of their population as well as cultural make-up, the venue’s address within the city was found to have great impact on the educational experiences of its participants. In addition, the shifting politics and culture of a decade must be kept in mind.

Several aspects of the Vera’s Project’s milieu must be considered. Vera has occupied20 two very different spaces in the past decade. The venues themselves are different in structure: the Fourth Avenue space was remembered for its low ceilings and “pain-in-the-ass” staircase and overall air of well-worn coziness. It was fondly called “scrapy” by many. Vera’s current home is an enormous two-story structure that was custom built. It was constructed from the wall shells and has been referred to as a “bank vault” in look.

As though using the zoom out function on the map, you can see the two different venues in their different Seattle neighborhoods. As discussed in Chapter Four, the Fourth

20 The Vera Project had multiple short-term locations over the years, but the Fourth Avenue space and the Seattle Center space are its only two permanent homes.
Ave space (the “old space”) was in the downtown/Belltown neighborhood and the Seattle Center space (the “new space”) is on the campus of Seattle Center, in the Lower Queen Anne neighborhood (refer to Appendix G). Location matters. The characteristics of the community the venue is in will dictate what the natural foot traffic is, what there is for youth outside the venue, and what sort of transportation is readily available to and from the venue.

Like other cities, Seattle’s neighborhoods have very distinct characteristics and varying degrees of accessibility. For the Vera Project, the shift in address with the move from the “old space” to the “new space” had implications beyond mail forwarding.

Understanding the importance of the physical setting and materials used in instruction, Uhrmacher (1991) articulated the dimension of aesthetics to refer to nature of the instructional space. The aesthetic dimensions of Vera can discussed through both what is intentionally a part of the space and that which unintentionally contributes to the aesthetics of the venue.

Zooming back in and through the doors, there is a great deal of importance on the way the inside of the space looks and feels. The aesthetic dimension of Vera is very much tied into creating the social environment at Vera. Across both spaces, the walls hold signs that define the nature of the space (NO HATE ZONE, How to Be a Trans Ally, etc.). To be considered is the placement and emphasis of signs that hold meaning not just for the structure of the organization, but signs that contain broad social messages. It is signs like these that help shape the culture at Vera, which has such a profound impact on its teens. At “the old space” participants remember the signs taking a role front and
center and the impact this had on the conversations. The “new space” distributes its signs differently, which assigns them a different place in the conversation.

**Significance.**

This study of the Vera Project highlights how important it is consider the multiple milieus that a venue inhabits and in turn creates. I imagine a venue to be one of the middle of a set of Russian nesting dolls. The venue sits within a neighborhood, which itself is situated in a city or town and within the venue nests the building and the aesthetics created within that space.

It is important for a venue, especially an all-ages venue, to consider the characteristics of its locality. The activities of the neighborhood and who can easily gain access to the space are of paramount concern. The locality can help define the space and conversely the venue can bring youth to a local they may not normally traffic.

As important as the venue’s geographical situation is the milieu it constructs within its walls. The aesthetics of a venue are not relegated to what looks good; more importantly the aesthetic dimension should be considered as to how the venue will choose to arrange its space to welcome its youth. For youth who find their calling on the music scene, a venue can become a home-like place and many of the youth on the music scene are teens that haven’t felt at home elsewhere. Given this, it is exceptionally important that an all-ages music and arts space establish spaces that are safe and feel inclusive. A venue’s walls have the potential to open conversation, assure freedom from hateful speech, and welcome all persons to the space. The messages that can adorn the
walls can hold power, so the content and placement of these messages and to whom exactly they are speaking should be given deliberate and continual consideration.

**Subject Matter**

In a music venue, the consideration of subject matter must begin with the “concert calendar.” As seen with Vera, there is a complicated relationship between music programming, youth participation, and the manipulation of the programming (subject matter) to impact the youth participation. The Vera Project is a part of the Northwest indie-rock and punk scene and has a fan base reflective of that.

Music is born of frustration, celebration, and identity; for a music and arts venue, defining the subject matter by orienting the space to a certain type of music or art (e.g., punk rock, street art, hip-hop, etc.) can have a ripple effect. There are naturally occurring demographics that come with different music scenes. They are not exclusive, but trends. This is significant because music is an important form of expression for many youth and identifying with a certain type of music can be a part of developing an identity.

When a venue publishes its calendar, it is putting forth the “Educational menu,” Eisner (2002, p. 88) refers to as the explicit curriculum. By doing so, the community can now choose from the array of options. Certain types of music will appeal to different crowds. And this is where a venue must decide if it is okay having a particular orientation.

Of the many all-ages venues throughout the country, most have specific music genres they specialized in. In her book, *In Every Town: An All-Ages Music Manualfesto*, (2010) Stewart (the founder of the Vera Project) profiles all-ages music venues across the
country. Steward asks each profiled venue to identify, “Music Genre of Focus,” and the majority of venues align themselves with a specific genre. Across the country there are venues that focus on Hip-Hop and R&B (e.g., Youth Movement Records, Oakland, CA, Batey Urbano, Chicago, IL) or Punk and Hardcore (924 Gilman, Berkeley, CA, ABC No Rio, New York City). The Vera Project (profiled in the book) identifies “Music Genre of Focus” as “popular music” (Stewart, p. 233).

The Vera Project’s popular music is heavy on the indie-rock front, with a sprinkling of punk and the occasional hip-hop show. The published designation of popular music is incredibly broad and allows the venue to maintain ambiguity, not committing to a certain type of music and a certain type of listener.

Significance.

For a music and arts venue, the subject matter it offers can shape the organization. Music is incredibly powerful and has cultural, political and identity overtones that appeal to various persons. There are incredible youth venues that focus on hip-hop and others that focus on punk. Others like Vera try to catch it all. A venue should consider to whom it hopes to reach and what the existing music and arts community looks like. There is such great benefit from having working musicians and artists in an all-ages venue that when a venue considers its subject, it must also consider who can be its teachers, who the more knowledgeable others are, and who wants to listen and learn.
Looking Forward

I find much work on public pedagogy invigorating for its commitment to reconceptualizing what pedagogy means in contemporary times and in providing lenses through which the power of informal spaces of learning can be understood. (Savage, 2010, p. 109).

I find myself invigorated writing this section. I went into this study with minimal knowledge, which was vague at best. I knew that there was important learning happening on the all-ages music scene, that the all-ages music scene can be a place of solace for some youth alienated by the mainstream, and that the expanding field of public pedagogy was pushing scholarly examination of pedagogy and curriculum of non-school sites. With only vague notions, I simply set out to listen and learn, describe and interpret. My discoveries are rich and varied and I see so many possible avenues to pursue.

Participants as Researchers

Looking forward, I believe that there is enormous possibility for engaging youth in participatory action research in public settings. Scholars of public pedagogy acknowledge that sites of learning stretch far beyond schools, however these scholars are tied to schools of their own. I believe that empowering those learning in public places with the tools of research is another step in stretching the educative experiences beyond the classroom. This study brings to mind two topics that I think would be well suited for participatory action research: safe struggle within a community organization and the DIY process on an organizational level.

There is much that could be learned by exploring the concept of “safe struggle.” The teenagers who were a part of the Vera Project in its infancy were profoundly
impacted by participating in real work towards the survival of an institution they cared for. The fight to keep Vera going, the urgency of the situation, and the responsibility and worth assigned to each individual in the fight was significant in shaping the teens’ identity. “Safe-struggle” in this manner is safe on the individual level in that a participant’s livelihood or personal safety is not in jeopardy, however there are real stakes.

Along with the notion of “safe struggle” is the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture that comes with fighting for an organization, being scrappy, making things work to get by. DIY ethos has long been a part of the punk rock scene as the emphasis is on homemade and anti-corporate, and personal empowerment from “doing it yourself” is a natural byproduct. The Vera Project was born out of the DIY sensibility; there were no all-ages venues, so they built one. Everyone involved was tasked with figuring out what to build and how to fulfill the vision of putting on shows. DIY organizing and event building is a complex process that involves multiple components of curricula and pedagogy and has the potential to result in not only observable outcomes, but to build enormous capacity in youth to be empowered, engaged, political, and active. The teaching and learning within this space is worth further study.

**Community Conversations**

There is a conversation to be considered around for whom an all-ages music and arts venue is intended for. This study highlights the struggle of one venue with its demographic base and raises many questions to be considered by all persons involved in building music and art spaces for youth: Is meeting the needs of one community enough
(e.g., one demographic group or one marginalized group)? Should a venue reflect the representation of the population of its city, town or neighborhood? Should a venue let its subject matter dictate the tone? These are questions in need of a conversation as many and varied communities consider the intentions, subject matter and milieu of all-ages music and arts venues and the youth who want to call them home.
References


Oakland: AK Press.


www.seattledoproject.wordpress.com
Appendix A

Interview Guide for Programming Director

1. Please tell me your current role at the Vera Project.
   a) How did you come to be involved with the Vera Project?

2. Prior to working at the Vera Project, what type of involvement did you have on the music and arts scene? On the All-ages scene?

3. What do you see as the intentions of the Vera Project?

4. What influences the ‘tone’ or atmosphere of the Vera Project?
   a) What do you see as the unarticulated or unseen influences at the Vera Project?
   b) Are there specific offerings/topics that the Vera Project refrains from addressing?

5. What role does the physical space play? The building? The art on the walls?

6. Describe the trajectory of involvement for some of the most involved youth.
   a) Are there internal factors you see influencing the degree of involvement?
   b) What are some of the characteristics of the youth who stay involved with Vera?
   c) What are some of the characteristics of youth who do not return to the Vera Project?

7. In what ways do you see youth participants learn and grow at Vera?
   a) Interpersonally? b) Self-discovery/growth?

8. How do you see the Vera Project influencing a youth’s perception?
   a) Of themselves? b) Of others?
Appendix B

Interview Guide for Youth Steering Committee Leader

1. What is your involvement with the Vera Project?
   a) How did you come to be involved with the Vera Project?
   b) How long have you been involved with the Vera Project?

2. Describe what it is about the Vera Project that encouraged you to become more involved with the programming and leadership?
   a) Do/did you have similar involvement in other community organizations?

3. What are some of the reasons you feel other persons are drawn to the Vera Project?

4. What influences the ‘tone’ or atmosphere of the Vera Project?
   c) What do you see as the unarticulated or unseen influences at the Vera Project?
   d) Are there specific offerings/topics that the Vera Project refrains from addressing?

5. What role does the physical space play? The building? The art on the walls?

6. Do you see the Vera Project influencing youth perception?
   a) Of themselves? b) Of others? c) Did having a large role at the Vera Project impact your perception of self? Those around you?

7. Is there anything else about the Vera Project, your involvement, or any other related topic you would like to share?
Appendix C

Interview guide for participants/volunteers

1. What is your involvement with the Vera Project?
   a) How did you come to be involved with the Vera Project?
   b) How long have you been involved with the Vera Project?
   c) Do you have similar involvement with any other community organizations?

2. Do you see the Vera Project influencing youth perception?
   a) Of themselves?
   b) Of others?

3. What are some of the reasons you feel other persons are drawn to the Vera Project?

4. What influences the ‘tone’ or atmosphere of the Vera Project?
   a) What do you see as the unarticulated or unseen influences at the Vera Project?
   b) Are there specific offerings/topics that the Vera Project refrains from addressing?

5. What role does the physical space play? The building? The art on the walls?

6. Is there anything else about the Vera Project, your involvement, or any other related topic you would like to share?
Appendix D

Vera Project Organizational Chart (http://theveraproject.org/about/, 2014)
Appendix E

The Vera Project at Seattle Center
Appendix F

The Vera Project’s Articles of Incorporation (2001)
Appendix G

Census map of Seattle showing residential location of persons of color overlaid with symbols indicating the past and current homes of the Vera Project.
Appendix H
Vera Project’s Support for Research

The Vera Project Support of Lesley Siegel’s Research
3 minutes ago 1:53 PM
From Beth Warshaw-Duncan
To Lesley Siegel

beths signature002.jpg 6.88 KB

"The Vera Project is aware of, has participated in, and fully supports, Lesley Siegel’s research investigating curriculum and learning experiences at all-ages venues. I understand the nature of her research and am glad to be able to provide some resources for her."

Yours,

Beth Warshaw-Duncan

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https://www.icloud.com/messaging/current/chat?view=pub:message%3A960%3F394