

# TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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## Lessons from the Borders: Empowering Participants with

### Disabilities and Transgender Participants

By Nico Amador and Jana Schroeder

We, Jana Schroeder and Nico Amador, met at the "Super T" training for social action trainers held May-June '06 in Ontario, Canada. In January '07 we both participated in a workshop led by George Lakey called "How to Do Transformational Work" that took place in Philadelphia. While in Philadelphia, Nico initiated a conversation with Jana about the possibilities for natural alliances between transgender people and people with disabilities based on similar concerns (e.g., needs that both groups have for physical accessibility and attitudinal barriers both groups may face because of mainstream assumptions that marginalize our identities and our bodies.) We decided to write this piece together to share our experiences with other facilitators and to encourage increased awareness and greater inclusion of people with disabilities and transgender people in all types of workshops and trainings.

In the process of writing this piece, we came to realize that much of what we had to say might be applied to other marginalized identities as well. We wondered if our original thinking about particular commonalities between the experiences and needs of transgender people and people with disabilities were accurate, after all, or if whether what we had to say could all be applied to people with other marginalized identities as well. We decided it was important to us to keep the piece focused on people with disabilities and transgender people because these two identities are ones with which some facilitators may have had less experience and may benefit from more resources that focus specifically on working with participants who are transgender and/or who have a disability.

Through individual reflection, conversation and writing, we have both come to recognize some ways in which the Training for Change direct education contributes to greater inclusion for people with disabilities and transgender people. At the same time, we believe that there are things that can be done by all facilitators and people handling workshop logistics, whether they are familiar with direct education or not, that tend to contribute significantly to transgender and disabled people's abilities to participate fully in a training or workshop.

This piece is not a how-to guide or a list of do's and don'ts. Rather, we identify some of the practices that we believe contribute to creating an atmosphere in a workshop or training where people with disabilities and transgender people will be more likely to feel supported and able to fully engage. We illustrate our learnings with stories of our experiences at the Super T. In the final section, we offer a set of queries that workshop facilitators and organizers might use to help gauge their own level of awareness and identify potential areas of growth for themselves.

#### **T is for Trepidation**

Going into the Super T, we shared an excitement about the opportunity to enhance our training skills, learn more about direct education and experiment with different approaches to anti-oppression work, issues of accessibility and inclusion. However, past challenges we had faced because of our identities meant that our initial enthusiasm was overshadowed with a sense of anxiety:

**Jana** - I wondered who would be at the training and how they would treat me. Some people are nervous which can lead sometimes to them avoiding me and other times to them being overly helpful and hovering. Sometimes people have had previous contact with other people with disabilities and are not particularly thrown off when they meet me. Occasionally, I also meet people who perhaps have had no direct experience with a blind person before but somehow are just naturally comfortable enough with themselves and with accepting others for whoever they are that we almost immediately fall into a very comfortable relationship. I may need to tell them how they can best help me, but there is a minimum of awkwardness.

Either way, I had confidence in my ability to navigate the training. In the registration process I had explained that I am blind and had asked that the workshop materials be provided to me electronically so that I could have the same access as other participants. I told myself that if people were strange or didn't accept me I could spend my time reading the books I'd brought along, thinking my own thoughts or developing a critique of why Training for Change didn't do a good job of accommodating people with disabilities.

**Nico** - I worried about how much support I could expect as a transgender man and if the group would be willing to accept my identity even though I'm still usually read as female. At other events my ability to fully participate had been derailed because facilitators or participants had failed to acknowledge me as "he" or support my visibility in the room, I was patronized, or I felt pressured to use my role in the group to educate others on my identity. There had also been a few occasions when I had been preoccupied by unsafe and inaccessible bathroom and shower situations.

I decided to go forward with the training anyway, knowing that not everyone would be a perfect ally but trusting that I could handle any situation that came up and maybe learn something in the process.

### **Setting the Tone**

Upon arrival, it was difficult not to feel a little shy. Present for both of us was the urge to withdraw and detach while we sized up the group and its facilitators. But the facilitators didn't give us a chance to withdraw for long.

The first session opened with a "Diversity Welcome," a greeting of identities backgrounds and feelings that might be present in the group, which included a recognition of both transgender and disabled participants.

Early on we were asked to spend time identifying our learning goals for the training and the behaviors and attitudes that would support each of us in maximizing our learning. These introductory activities concluded with the trainers emphasizing the personal responsibility each of us had to make the most of the experience and to use each session in a way that would help us move forward towards our own goals for being there.

We noticed, with some surprise, that in using this opening, the trainers had set a tone that both welcomed and challenged us:

**Jana** - The way in which the margins and mainstream were addressed in the Diversity Welcome and framed during the rest of the training supported my participation in the process. I came to understand that the same people do not always occupy the same place in relation to the mainstream and margins. This framework allowed me to look more honestly at my privilege and expand my awareness of ways in which others felt marginalized and when I was occupying a

mainstream position. This, in turn, presented me with opportunities for taking steps to be an ally to others who might be feeling in the margins.

There was not a lot of care taking of me in particular or the group in general by the facilitators. At first, I wasn't sure what to make of this, and I admit to some resentment even though I also realized that this treatment was actually what I often say I want. As the training progressed and I gained a better understanding of the principles of direct education, I realized that this approach is something that the facilitators did deliberately to allow the group to step up to the challenge of identifying their own learning goals and taking care of themselves and each other. I don't assume that all of the facilitators were necessarily comfortable with my disability but any barriers that would usually have created for me were minimized by how they approached the facilitation.

**Nico** - Hearing an acknowledgement of my gender identity during the Diversity Welcome gave me an immediate sense of reassurance that I belonged at the training and could bring my trans identity into the room. I also appreciated that the Diversity Welcome introduced the currents of mainstream and marginal identities, displacing the idea of what might be considered "normal" or expected in the culture of the group and inviting differences to come forward.

The flexibility of the trainers and the expectation to take charge of my own learning was a signal to me that the facilitators did not intend to exploit the margins of the group to bring about learning for the mainstream, something I've encountered in other models of anti-oppression work. I also heard the emphasis on personal responsibility as a direct challenge to the victimhood that myself and other trans people can sometimes fall into because we are so often a minority in our places of employment, families, social settings and other group situations. Having a different expectation from the facilitators helped me claim the reasons I was there without getting sidetracked by others in the group or my own impulse to sabotage my experience.

### **Outside the Comfort Zone**

As the training progressed it became clear that the direct education model encouraged learning through risk taking. All the participants were asked to stretch in order to take new steps towards our learning goals. At the same time we witnessed moments where facilitators also took risks to move out of their own comfort zones and that modeling proved to be a useful support in our process:

**Jana** - The fact that facilitators and participants were encouraged to step outside their comfort zones was a huge plus. The manner in which the encouragement was done acknowledged the fear and awkwardness of doing so but gave enormous positive reinforcement. It also helped to know that everyone had something that they feel scared and awkward about. Some people felt nervous about helping out a blind person while I, the blind person, felt scared about doing some of the physical activities that others could do with ease.

Facilitators also tended to be non-defensive about making mistakes. They were willing to acknowledge mistakes or to ask questions when they did not know things and then to go on. This openness helped me not only to be more open myself but also specifically to be more open to what everyone had to offer, even those from whom I might have had a tendency to close myself off.

**Nico** - Because I was being asked to do my own work to grow as a participant, it felt satisfying to witness facilitators who also made use of opportunities to stretch and even make mistakes. When facilitators modeled my choice of pronouns in front of other members of the group it gave me needed leverage to assert my identity in other interactions I was having with participants

without getting angry or defensive. When the facilitator made a mistake by calling me "she" and corrected herself in a way that felt respectful to me she helped to diffuse some of the tension that might have been holding others back from seeking a connection with me during the training. Towards the end of the training there was a session where a number of people in the room slipped and used the wrong pronoun in reference to me and another transman without noticing. I was surprised to discover that not only did I feel self-assured enough to make an intervention at the end of that session but I could do so calmly and with curiosity. I could intervene more from the place of thoughtful facilitator than someone who was upset and still fighting for acknowledgement in the room.

## **Learning Channels**

Part of the risk taking we experienced had to do with being willing to participate in a range of activities that employed different channels for learning. This allowed both of us the opportunity to exhibit our strengths to the group but also to explore areas that we usually avoid:

**Jana** - I found that the Adventure Based Learning section of the Super T allowed for exploration of many issues relating to how people with different abilities are included or excluded. One of our first kinesthetic challenges was the Stepping Stones game. I did not want my presence to limit what the rest of the group experienced and I worried that my blindness would slow my group down. Unexpectedly, I felt supported by my team which immediately set about coming up with plans of how we could succeed as a group. I was asked for feedback and suggestions and felt very included. After we accomplished our task we also had the chance to debrief about other invisible disabilities that we hadn't considered and which might have contributed to anxiety for others.

Later in the same workshop the group was asked to engage in an activity where small groups of participants stood in a line, closed their eyes, picked up a length of rope and tried to form a square. I was surprised to observe how scary and difficult many participants found this activity to be. It seemed relatively controlled and safe since everyone was connected by the rope. As someone who is used to being in the world without the use of my eyes, this exercise didn't just level the playing field, but gave me the advantage.

One of the facilitators commented to me that he noticed participants were far less resistant to doing activities with their eyes closed than in other workshops where he had facilitated such activities. I appreciated hearing from the facilitator that my presence as a person with a disability had contributed to the group having a deeper and more meaningful learning experience. Instead of feeling like my presence was something that facilitators must adapt to or accommodate, I came to accept that my presence could contribute to the group as a whole rather than being something that might take focus and energy away from others in the group.

**Nico** - At one point in the training I was asked to participate in a "Diversity Interview" that the facilitators wanted to model in front of the group. On one hand, I was nervous about being in the spotlight because of the attention that would bring to my physical body, something that can cause feelings of shame and discomfort to surface for me. I was also resistant to pursuing an activity that might become strongly emotional because of my fear of being seen as a victim or appearing mentally unstable or weak. On the other hand, the activity appealed to my sense of empowerment because I wasn't pressured into it and was given a choice in the identity we would focus on for the interview.

I made the decision to participate in the interview and as it turned out, it felt rewarding to be able to talk about myself in more depth in front of the group. I chose to talk about my identity as a

biracial person but in the course of the conversation I ended up sharing about how this had influenced my identity as a trans person. It was one of the first times I remember being able to share about myself as a trans person in a group where I could disclose the full complexity of that identity, how it was complicated by other parts of who I was and the meaning it held for me. It opened up new points of connection and understanding between me and other people who I hadn't shared with up to that point.

### **Taking it Home**

At the conclusion of the training both of us were moved by the incredible amount of learning we had achieved and the profound relationships we had formed with others in the group. Although the people in the group contributed considerably to this experience both of us were able to appreciate that the direct education approach also played a major role in creating an atmosphere where we could have such a positive experience.

What is significant to us is that our sense of inclusion did not come because the facilitators followed a formula for working with trans and disabled people. In our experience doing anti-oppression work or educating others about our identities we are sometimes asked to provide a list of do's and don'ts for people who want to be allies. While providing some basic hints can be helpful, trying to dictate rules for interaction does more harm than good and oversimplifies the needs of marginalized people in a group.

We hope that our experience with the direct education model as we've described it, demonstrates a framework that is helpful to other facilitators in their work in groups with transgender and disabled participants, or any margins that they want to support. In addition, we've provided a few queries that may also help shape an inclusive and accessible approach:

### **QUERIES**

**Queries are open-ended questions which provide a means for people to reflect, learn about themselves, identify areas they would like to work on and grow in their understanding and ability to connect with others. Queries can be used by an individual or in a group. It may be most effective to consider only one or two queries at a time in order to allow for fuller exploration of each area addressed by the queries. Some people and groups find it helpful to periodically re-visit the same queries as a way of keeping the issues addressed intentionally in their hearts and minds, realizing progress they have made and identifying new areas for exploration and growth. The queries offered here are meant to be a starting point, not an exhaustive checklist of what you should keep in mind or do when working with transgender people and people with disabilities. You may find it useful to write some queries of your own.**

Do you know who is attending your training and have you given participants an opportunity to express needs or concerns prior to the start of the training?

Assuming people may not "out" themselves or their needs from the outset, what strategies can you use to be responsive and flexible as the identities in the group emerge?

How can you keep in mind the accessibility needs of people with hidden disabilities such as mental illness, epilepsy, developmental disabilities, or multiple sclerosis?

Can adjustments be made to the physical space you are using for training and housing to make it more accessible for transgender people and people with disabilities (i.e. gender neutral bathrooms, private showers, wheel chair ramps, navigable floor space)?

What are your assumptions or fears about working with people with disabilities and transgender people?

What assumptions or fears are you noticing from participants towards people with disabilities or transgender people in the group?

What kind of design choices can you implement to support empowerment of transgender people, people with disabilities or other people who may be on the margins, to participate fully in the group and in their own learning?

If there is tension in the group around transgender or disability issues and identities, can you introduce a challenge that moves the group forward without relying on transgender or disabled people to be the teachers of the group?

What do you and the group lose when transgender people and people with disabilities are not present at all or when they are present but not included as fully as they might be?

Have you consciously considered ways in which the structures, images, language and attitudes you use in your work serve to include or exclude people with disabilities and transgender people?

What kind of additional learning about transgender and disability issues would be useful to you in your work as a trainer and activist? Are there community centers, events or support networks in your area that would help you expand your knowledge? Have you looked for books or online resources that address questions you might have regarding transgender or disabled identities? Do you have friends or colleagues who can support you in your learning?

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**Nico Amador** is a 25-year-old queer mestizo transguy from San Diego, California. He is a trainer, organizer and writer who has worked with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Critical Resistance and other organizations focused on social justice and youth leadership development.