



Exploring the bicycle metaphor
as a vehicle for rich story development:
A collective narrative practice project

by Marc F. Leger

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Abstract

This practice-based paper describes a step-by-step outline of a form of collective narrative practice which uses the bicycle as its central metaphor. A significant theme in this collective narrative practice methodology is an interest in attending to individual and collective experiences of place, and to the possibilities that place-based narrative enquiries can provide in eliciting rich accounts of people's local knowledges and contribute to a 're-inhabiting' of the significant social geographies of people's lives.

Key words: *collective narrative practices, bicycle, critical pedagogy, place, community mapping, 're-inhabitation'*

During the summer months, when I am able to find the time, I like to hop on my bicycle and take the scenic route to work. On this ride, I wind past a number of lovely suburban parks with playgrounds, the local swimming pool, and soccer field, before tackling a steep bike path that climbs through a dense forest of maple trees before reaching a quiet, south Ottawa back road which leads me into the community I work for. During these rides, I am sometimes visited with memories, evoked somehow from the landscape around me. These memories are of some of the young people that I have had the opportunity to work with over the years. These memories don't have much to do with bicycling, but they do have something to do with movement, effort, and journeys. These memories are of the various steps that were being taken in response to some of the most difficult 'road conditions of life'. I am reminded of one young woman who would tell me about how she would go for walks along this very forested bike path, in order to help re-connect with her 'self-caring side'. I am reminded, at times, of a young man who once told me about how he would find temporary refuge in this very forest from the violence of his older brother. I am also reminded of another young person, who discovered his 'thing' – building and testing skateboard ramps with his friends on this very hill. I can still remember the look of exhilaration on his face when he tried to describe to me what it's like to launch off a four-foot ramp! I sometimes wonder if they re-visit these places. What stories would they tell about these places today? What stories might these places have to tell about them?

Opening reflections

In this paper, I will introduce readers to my narrative practice involving the use of the bicycle as a central metaphor in a version of collective narrative practice. This innovation in my own practice has involved a significant amount of translation work, drawing direct inspiration from the Tree of Life collective narrative practice methodology developed by Ncazelo Ncube and David Denborough (Ncube, 2006; Denborough, 2008). In many ways, it has been through a practice of 'copying that originates' that has helped make this practice route visible to me and served as a foundation to explore an alternative metaphor in my work with young people (Epston, White & Murray, 1992).

Inspirations

As a community-based youth counsellor, one of my roles is to provide counselling and psycho-social support services to students at a number of local high schools. A significant part of this work also involves collaborating with school staff and students to provide group programs that seek to

address issues ranging from mental health and wellbeing to anti-violence work. At the end of each school year, I take part in conversations with school staff to seek ways of further developing and improving the work we are doing together. A key theme that often emerges relates to student engagement and the desire among staff to spark meaningful student interest and participation.

In response to this challenge, I wondered if a form of collective narrative practice could be more engaging to youth and, perhaps, a promising alternative to the more traditional psycho-educational mental health curriculums that are often provided. Perhaps, I could tweak the Tree of Life or maybe run a Recipe of Life group (Rudland Wood, 2012)? Seeking inspiration, I went about looking for local community initiatives involving young people and finally ... Eureka! A colleague of mine alerted me to a recent community success story involving community-hosted Volunteer Bike Clinics that enjoyed large turnouts of young people over the spring months. How could there be so many young people needing their bicycles fixed? What might this turn-out say about the interests of these young people? What might this turn-out say about some of the challenges they may be responding to? My curiosity was sparked! I began asking young people about their relationships to bicycling and I was reintroduced to the many possibilities a bicycle can bring to a young person's life. I say reintroduced because these conversations had a way of re-engaging me with my own history and the possibilities that bicycling brought to me as a young person.

In this article, I provide readers with an outline of a collective narrative practice methodology that includes examples from work with young people in a community setting and also at a local school. The version of the Bicycle of Life program that took place within the school context was hosted by a grade 11 outdoor education class. The Bicycle of Life Team met with participants once a week for 70 minutes for a total 20 weeks. An important component of this program, which will not receive much attention in the paper, involved each group member learning to re-build an actual bicycle. In partnership with a local not-for-profit bicycle company, we managed to find used bicycles for each student to work on throughout the program and to eventually adopt at the end of the program. The Bicycle of Life activities, as outlined in this paper, took place on alternating weeks from the bike building sessions. The bike building component provided us with an incredible opportunity to build a strong sense of teamwork and provided a rich opportunity for us to witness participants overcome challenges, as well as enact newly developed and hard-won skills and knowledges. I am grateful that the young people met this project with enthusiasm, openness and curiosity!

Acknowledging the creative contributions of young people

Before delving into describing this work, I think it is important to acknowledge that it is through my explorations with this emerging collective narrative practice methodology with young people that my own understandings of the potential relevance, limitations, and usefulness of the bicycle metaphor has grown, and that it is also through these practice explorations that my own appreciation of narrative ideas has

been stretched and taken to places that I could not have imagined at the outset. With this being said, I believe it would be accurate to characterise many of the responses of young people to our engagement with this metaphor as acts of co-invention towards the co-creation of a form of local collective narrative practice.



A brief overview before getting started

In the pages that follow, I will provide a detailed outline of the key steps involved in all four stages of the Bicycle of Life methodology. The four stages are as follows:

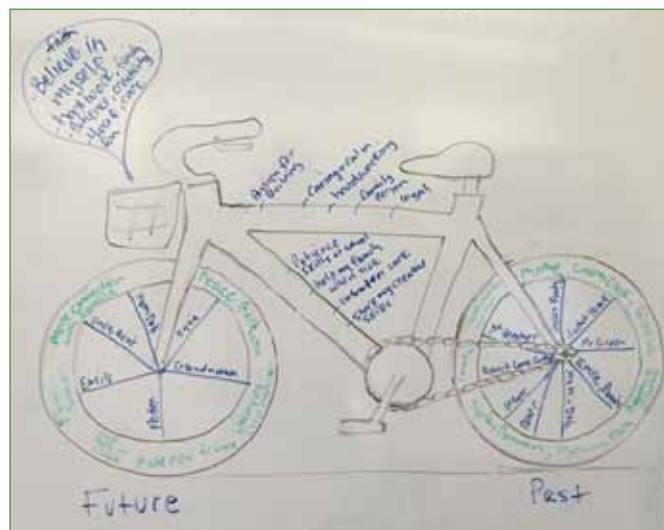
1. Creating a Bicycle of Life
2. Forming a Peloton and a Community Map
3. Exploring the Road Conditions of Life
4. Group Celebration and Community Rides.

In addition to providing readers with an overview of the key steps involved in this process, I will also include a number of practice considerations that have been developed in response to participant feedback, and from my own reflections on my engagement with narrative ideas and practices in the context of my work. In an effort to provide readers with a richer sense of this practice methodology, I will be sharing a number of practice examples of my work. These practice examples are drawn from both my counselling work with groups and with individuals.

Stage One: Creating a Bicycle of Life

Getting started: Introducing the bicycle

The Bicycle of Life process begins by asking group members to share some of their experiences with bicycling. This could involve sharing stories about when they first learned to ride a bike, who first introduced them to bicycling, or some of their most memorable bicycle journeys in the past. Facilitators can ask group members to share something about what they enjoy about bicycling. I have also found it generative to open up a group discussion about the many purposes bicycles serve in the local community, and then invite the group to think more broadly, to how bicycles are used in different places around the world. The bicycle can also be explored in ways that involve considerations of diversity in relation to gender, culture, social class, personal interest, and ability, for instance. For group members new to cycling, facilitators may want to ask about what sparked their interest in bicycling and what barriers might exist for people wanting to ride a bicycle.



Breaking things down: Drawing a bicycle and introducing its key parts

Using poster paper, group members are invited to draw a bicycle (or trace from templates). The different parts of the bicycle are then introduced by facilitators with the assistance of group members, and a brief discussion on how these different parts interact and interrelate takes place. The following key bicycle parts are then introduced by the facilitators: rear and front tyres, spokes, frame, bike chain, and carrying basket.

Of course, there are many other parts to a bicycle, but I have learned that creating space for group members to invent and attribute their own unique, experience-near meanings to the

many other bicycle parts supports a collaborative spirit within the group and enables greater engagement with the metaphor itself. As you will see, this process engages with people's imaginations in some rather significant ways, and with the support of narrative questioning practices, group members will be invited to identify and document on their Bicycle of Life some of their important skills, abilities, values, and hopes they have for their lives. They will also be asked to identify the significant figures in their lives, and to make links to some of their individual, and shared, relational and cultural histories which have contributed to the development and sustenance of these knowledges of life.

Step 1: Completing the rear bicycle tyre

The rear bicycle tyre represents both the near and distant past. In addition to time, the rear tyre is where participants are invited to document some of the most significant 'places' in their lives. In other words, the rear tyre is where time and space, or history and social geography, meet. By doing so, attention is drawn to the potential significance that 'place' has in contributing to a person's preferred sense of self and to the importance of context to the performance of local knowledge in everyday life. (In Stage Two, the community mapping activity, participants are able to draw from these documented knowledges.) Group members annotate the rear tyre on their bicycle drawings with answers to the following questions:

What are some of the most important 'places' in your life?

This can include specific traditional ancestral lands, the city you were born in, the name of the community you live in, the name of the park you play in, the forest you camped in as a child, and even the lake you cool off in during summer months.

What are some of the places in your life that are connected to family or community traditions? An exploration of 'place' can also include particular places that hold significance through their connection to particular family or community traditions and rituals, such as the favourite restaurant you and your family or friends spend time in, sacred spaces you gather in with other people in your community, a place you make time to visit and spend time in every year, or a place you visit during the holiday break or during the summer months when away from school.

What are some of the places where you play or spend time with friends? An exploration of place can also include some of the local destinations you spend time in such as school, hockey rink, friends' homes, and so on.

In addition to identifying one's most important 'places', I have found it meaningful to ask people about some of the cultural practices that they may engage in within these places, such as: *What kinds of special foods, if any, do you eat there? Is there a tradition of singing particular songs or dancing? Is there a history of people re-telling particular family stories when you are spending time there? What language is spoken? Are there any particular rituals related to spirituality that take place?*

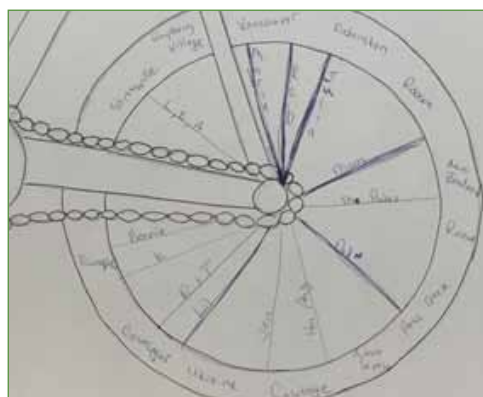
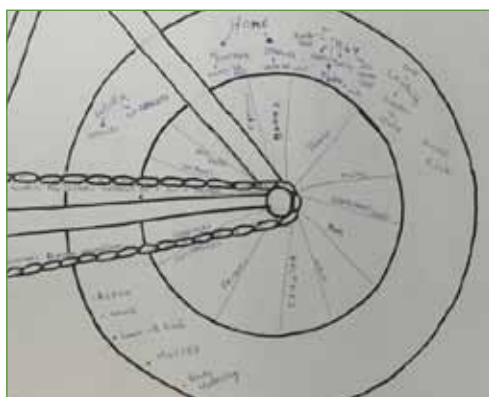
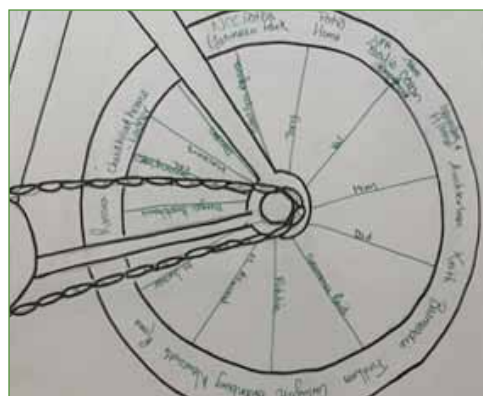
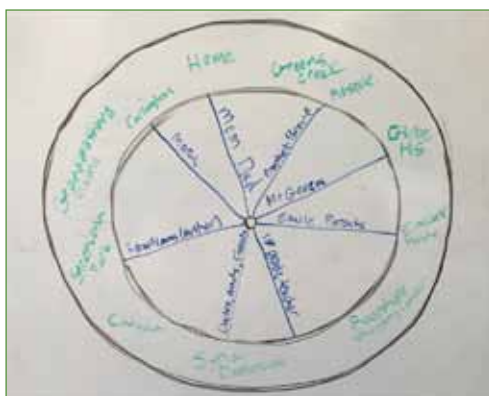
It seems important to acknowledge that when thinking about bicycle wheels, circles can hold very significant cultural meanings for some participants and their communities. For example, for First Nations peoples, circles symbolise the interconnectedness of all aspects of life and the many cycles that exist within the natural world. Specific examples of this are the traditional Medicine Wheel and the Circle of Courage. I have found that exploring the significance of some of the preferred 'places' that a person inhabits in daily life can serve as a wonderful entry point into the rich story development of the preferred accounts of a person's life. Here are some additional questions that I like to use early on when inviting people to identify significant places in their everyday life:

- *Where is 'home' for you? What makes this place home-like?*
- *What are some of your favourite places to spend time and why?*
- *Are there any sacred places or culturally-significant spaces that you spend time or have been to in the past?*
- *In your daily travels, what are some of the significant local places you visit and spend time in?*

Step 2: Completing the rear wheel spokes

The rear wheel spokes represent the significant figures in a person's life. Participants are asked to list the significant figures in their lives, up to now. This may include family, friends, teachers, community members, coaches, spiritual and religious figures, imaginary friends, fictional characters, and inspirational figures. Often, participants like to link some of these significant figures to some of the important places they have already identified on their real bicycle wheels. This linking of significant figures to particular places seems significant to me, and I am often drawn to asking people about the significance of these relational connections. Directly below is an image of a rear bicycle wheel with spokes created by Mo, followed by a number of other examples of rear bicycle wheels with spokes created by Lauren, Marco, and Monica.

To aid in readability, and give a sense of the diversity of content included during this stage, two of these wheels included: 'Mom, Dad, Miss K. – 1st Grade, Prophet Yusuf, Emile, Parents, Mr Green, Uncle A, Aunt A., home town friends, Rob Lange (author), Marty', and 'Home, Syria, Damascus, G.C.H.S, Greens Creek, Canada, Emilea Creek, C. Community Centre, Grandmother's home, Mosque, Strathcona Park, Bayshore Shopping Centre'.



Completing the Bicycle of Life frame

The bicycle frame represents a person's skills, abilities, interests, and know-how, along with some of the important commitments, understandings, values, and intentions they hold in lives and relationships. Here are some of the questions that I like to engage participants with when beginning to explore these territories of life:

- *What are some of your interests, hobbies, or favourite activities?*
- *What forms of ability or skill does this require?*
- *What do you need to know to be able to do this?*

In relation to the above enquiry, I have found it helpful, at times, to provide further scaffolding to participants who seem to be struggling to identify some of their skills and abilities, by gaining permission to consult with the group. By inviting the group to speculate about the kinds of knowledges that a particular activity or interest would require for a person to possess, a host of possibilities are generated for the participant to draw upon in their efforts to name their own skills and abilities.

Here are some further questions that I like to ask when inviting people to identify, name, and begin to describe some of their preferred identity conclusions and most valued understandings in life:

- *What are you curious about or really interested in?*
- *What do you really like to do? Why?*
- *What words could you use to describe yourself at the best of times?*
- *What comes easier to you now than it did in the past? What skills does this involve?*

By drawing on the potential stock of relational knowledges contained on the rear wheel spokes, I also like to invite participants to re-position themselves and to imagine their lives and identities through the hearts and minds of the significant figures in their lives. Here are some questions that I asked Mo which invited him to re-engage with some of the preferred social histories and geographies of his life:

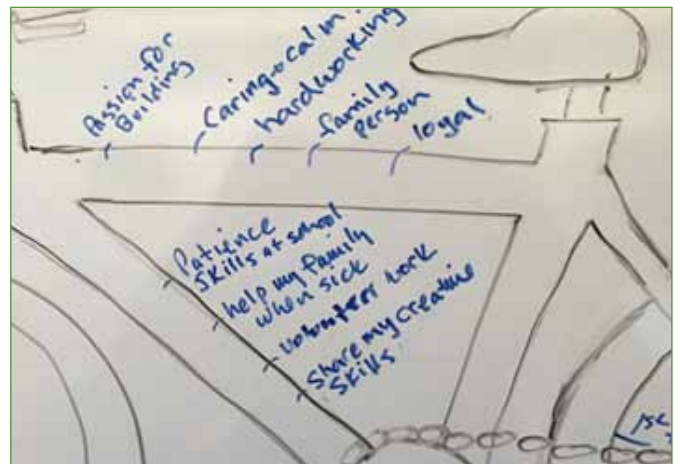
- *How would your best friend Marty – on your rear wheel spokes – describe you as a friend?*

- *On your rear wheel spoke, you identified your Grade 5 teacher, Miss Green. How would she describe the kind of student you were in her class? What effect would this have had on others? On her ability to teach the class?*
- *What would your Grandmother say if I asked her to share a few things about what she believes you really care about or stand for in life?*
- *Based on the places you have written down on your wheel, what do some of these places bring out in you? What do they inspire in you or enable you to do that you like? If this particular place could share a story about you, what would it be?*
- *If I were to see you being you-in-this-place, what would I notice about you?*

Below is an image of Mo's bicycle frame, where he identified a number of his important skills and abilities as well as some of his preferred identity conclusions.

These skills and abilities include:

- passion for building
- caring and calm
- family person
- loyal
- patience skills at school
- help my family when sick
- volunteer work
- share my creative skills.



Step 4: Creating 'links' in the Bicycle of Life chain

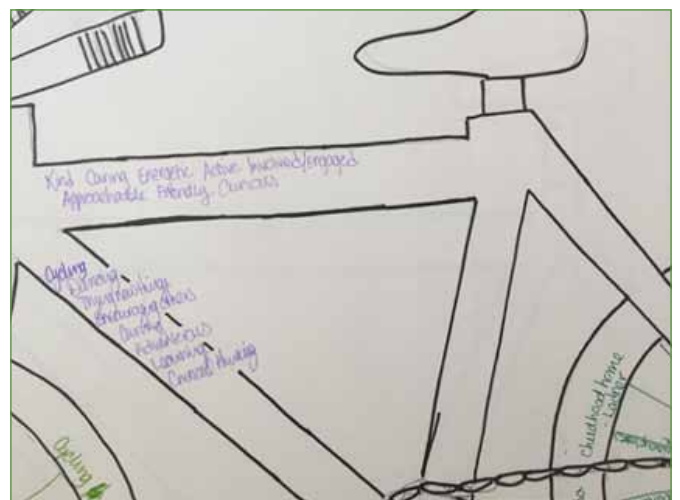
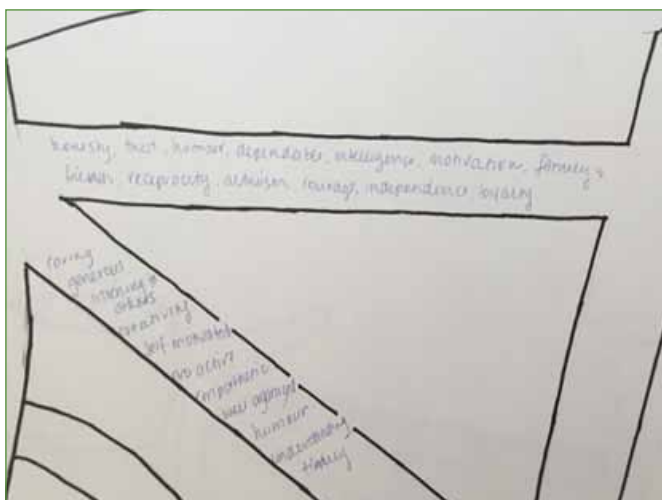
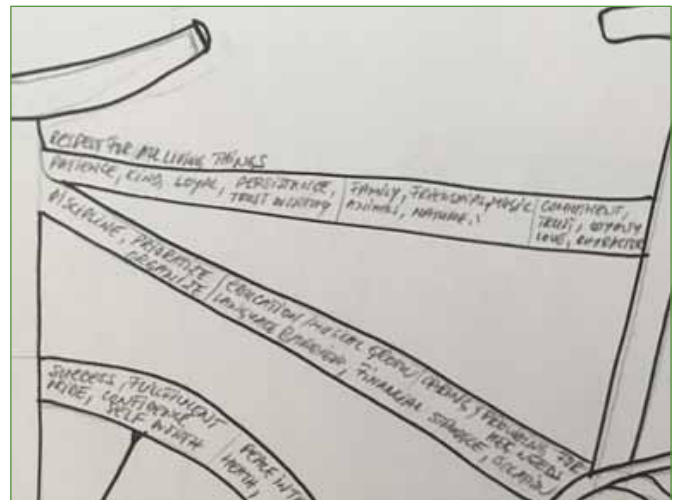
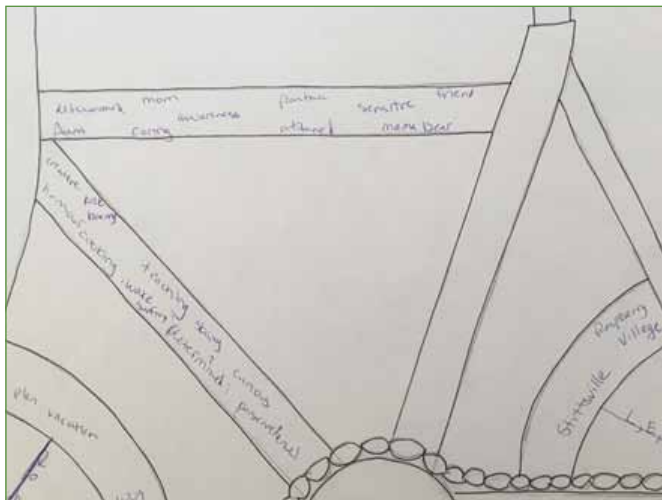
The bicycle chain represents the significant 'links' a person has to their social and cultural histories. In the event of exploring the practice potential of the bicycle metaphor as a vehicle for rich story development, the metaphorical use of a bicycle chain with its many 'links' has proven to be of great significance! After all, a key task in narrative practice is to support people to make meaningful 'links' between particular events, actions, intentions, and themes in their lives. For this reason, the bicycle chain is of critical importance and holds relevance throughout every stage of this collective narrative practice.

In the context of exploring the bicycle chain metaphor with young people, I have primarily engaged with four types of 'links' or 'linking' enquiries which I will outline below and provide a few examples of some that I have engaged with in the previous steps. It is important to note, however, that this list of four is by no means an exhaustive list of possible 'links', but merely the ones I have primarily engaged with in my work so far. As you will see, each of the four 'links' or 'linking'

enquiries draw from either the re-authoring conversations map or the re-remembering conversations map of narrative practice (White, 2007):

1. 'linking' a skill or value to a significant figure (re-remembering conversations)
2. 'linking' a skill, intentional understanding, or set of actions to a particular hope or goal (re-authoring conversations)
3. 'linking' a skill, or intentional understanding, or set of actions to a unique outcome or response knowledge (re-authoring conversations)
4. 'linking' identity to place and vice versa (re-remembering conversations).

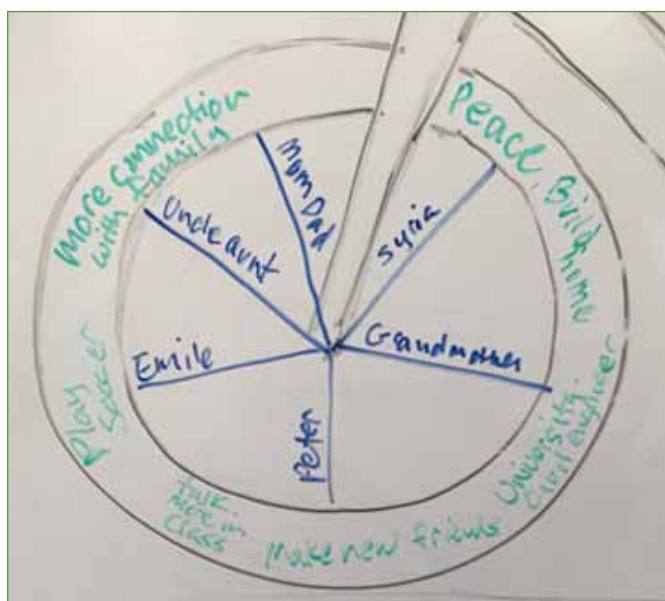
As you can see, the utility of the bicycle chain metaphor is found in how it can draw our attention to exploring with people the 'links' that their skills and insider-knowledges have to the particular social and cultural histories of their lives. It is through these linking enquiries that the Bicycle of Life methodology creates opportunities for participants to honour and strengthen their connections to significant figures in their lives and to help establish new storylines and uncover and further thicken previously neglected ones.



I'll give three brief examples of this 'linking' from practice. First, I asked Mo to describe himself through the eyes of some of the significant figures identified on his wheel spokes. In doing so, he was able to identify additional skills and knowledges to include on his bicycle frame. Second, I invited Mo to make a 'link' between a preferred 'place' inscribed on his rear wheel and the performance of a preferred identity story, by asking him to describe what spending time at Emile's home seemed to bring out in him. Mo was able to identify that spending time at Emile's brought out his 'creativity', and went on to share a story about how he and Emile built a large model aeroplane and that Emile's parents were surprised and impressed by the skills and 'patience' he demonstrated in accomplishing this achievement. Finally, in later conversation with Mo, in the context of exploring the effects of the difficult 'road conditions of life', we explored how his connection to 'creativity' helped him respond to the effects of 'depression' on his life. Exploring this 'link' as a unique outcome contributed to Mo drawing further 'links' to the contributions of a significant figure in his distant past, Miss K., his first grade teacher.

Step 5: Completing the front wheel

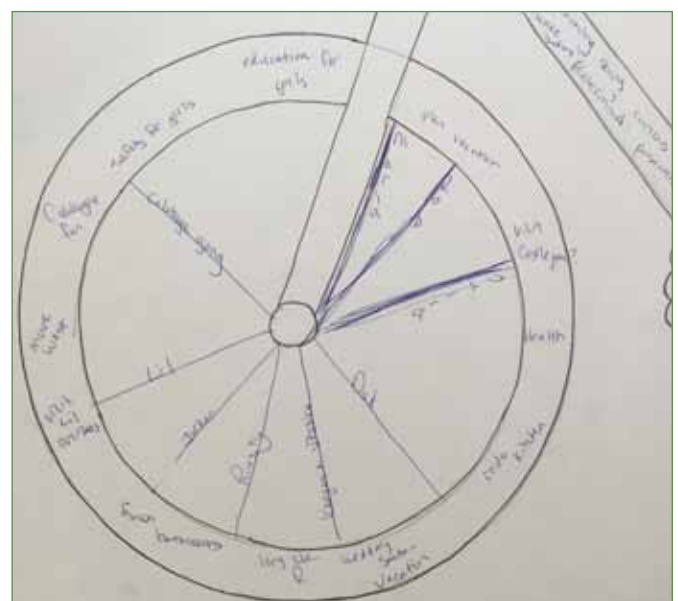
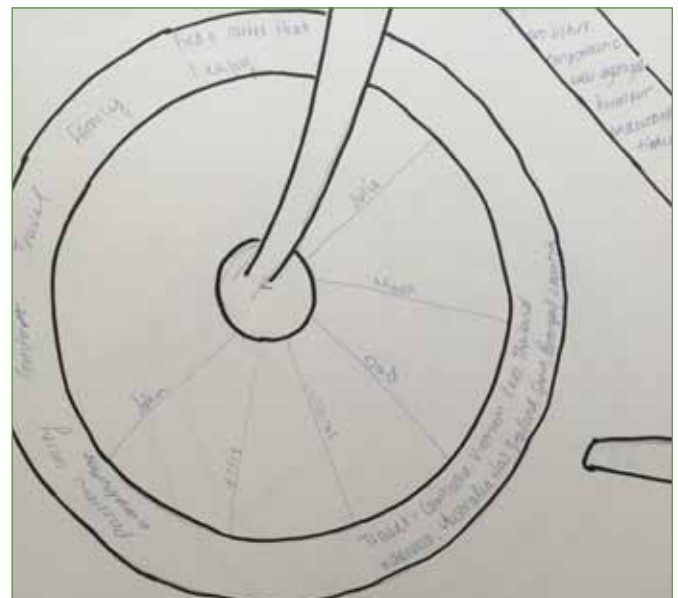
The front wheel represents the near-to-distant future and it is a space for participants to name some of the journeys they would like to take as well as some of the destinations they would like to reach in life. Participants are encouraged to write down some of the hopes, goals, and dreams they hold for themselves and for some of the significant figures in their lives. Participants can also write down some of their hopes for the community, the bioregion, and the world. Participants are also invited to write down some of the places they would like to visit, as well as the ones they would like to continue to keep a connection to as they move through life.



Step 6: Completing the front spokes

Participants are asked to write down some of the significant figures they would like to have in their future or would like to have join them on future journeys. For example, I might ask, 'Who would you like to share the road with?' Building on Michael White's (2007) idea of inviting people to re-negotiate their relationships with significant figures in their lives by forming a 'Club of Life', participants are invited to form a 'Bike Club of Life'. Facilitators can invite participants to make 'links' between Bike Club of Life members and particular hopes and goals identified on their front wheels.

In the example shown here, Mo links his mother, father, uncle, and aunt to his hopes for 'more connection with family' in his future. Below, I have also included the work of J.P., and R.S.



Step 7: Creating a bicycle basket

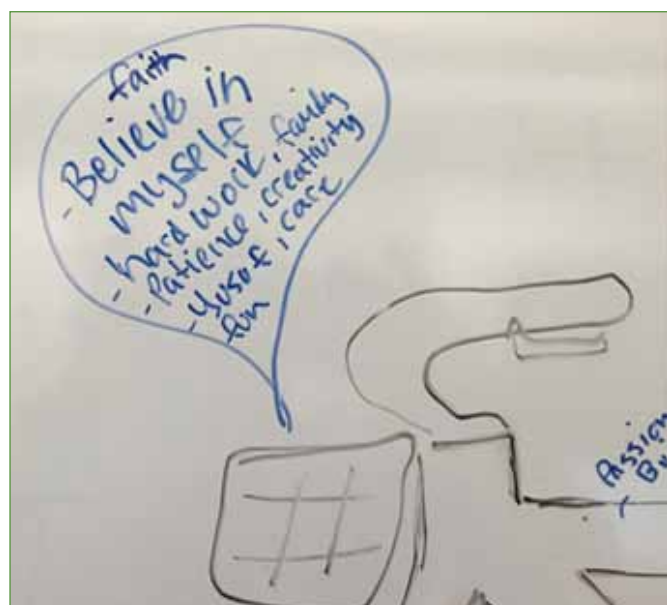
The bicycle basket represents the travel preparations involved with particular journeys. This includes the relevant skills and knowledges that participants will be bringing with them to meet what faces them on the road ahead. In relation to a particular hope or goal, participants are invited to think about how they could prepare for the road ahead. Some possibilities I have explored with people include:

- material objects of symbolic and practical value
- gifts of knowledge, wisdom, support, humour, and so on
- stories of overcoming past obstacles to hold close for inspiration
- best advice for yourself
- quotes, songs, words of wisdom, inspirational sayings
- and even a road trip music play-list.

It can sometimes be helpful for facilitators to support the 'linking' of particular hopes (on the front wheel) to relevant skills and knowledges found on the bicycle frame, to help participants generate ideas for their baskets.

Here are some questions that I like to use when exploring with participants what they would like to put in their carrying baskets:

- *On your journey towards this hope or goal, what might you need to bring along to inspire, energise, sustain, orient, or encourage you?*
- *What particular skills and abilities might you be able to put to use on this journey? How would you do this?*
- *Who might you take with you on this journey, even in spirit or in your heart and mind?*



Here are some ideas that Mo identified as relevant to helping him on his journey to become an engineer one day:

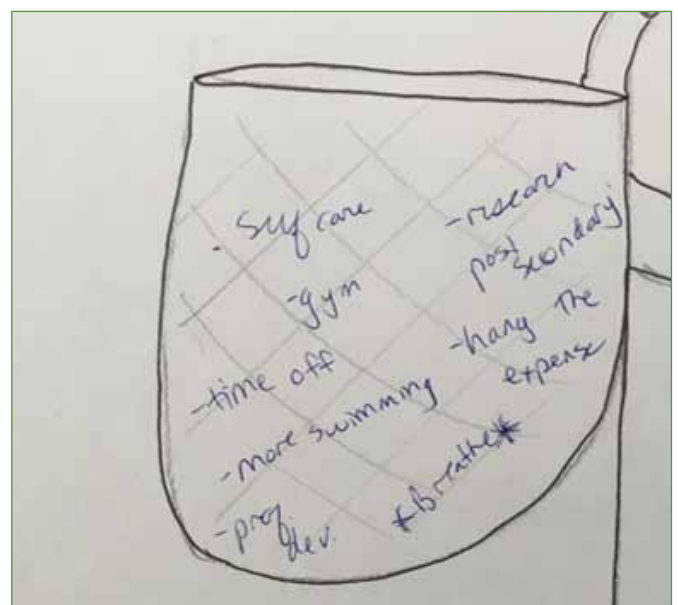
- faith
- believe in myself
- hard work
- family
- patience skills
- creativity skills
- Yusuf
- care
- fun.

Considerations of culture

It seems important to acknowledge that for some cultural groups, baskets hold special meanings as they are more than tools used for practical purposes, but they are also technological achievements and remarkable works of art that can have layers of meaning with direct links to tradition, identity, time, and place. For some participants, decorating their baskets with particular traditional patterns, symbols, and colours might be very significant.

Stage Two: Forming a Peloton and a Community Bike Path Map

In this stage, participants are invited to mount their Bicycle of Life posters together on a wall to form a peloton in preparation to begin the Community Mapping Activity. The word 'peloton' is a term used to describe a pack or group of riders which involves a highly skilled form of collective social movement. Pelotons allow for riders to collectively conserve their strength and energy in response to changing terrain and riding conditions. In a well-developed peloton group, each member can dramatically conserve their energy by taking turns sharing the lead, riding close to each other, and by shifting in and out of different group formations to reduce wind resistance or





drag. A well-developed group can conserve each member's energy as much as 40% compared to someone riding alone (Doherty, 2009). In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, Australian cyclist Mathew Lloyd describes the peloton he rides in as a 'moving community' (Miller, 2010). For this reason, the peloton provides a rich metaphor for exploring various understandings of community, collective social action, embodied knowledge, and of course, teamwork! After forming a peloton in the Bicycle of Life workshop, we discuss the significance of the peloton and how this metaphor may be relevant to everyday life. Group members are then invited to share with each other their Bicycles of Life, identify any shared themes, and speculate on any of the collective skills and knowledge the group may have.

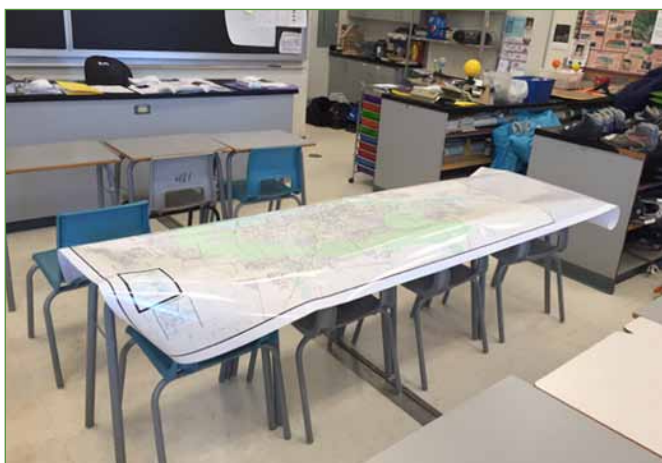
Community Mapping Activity: Mapping the preferred territories of community life

Make a map, not a tracing ... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting,

reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation ... A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing which always comes back 'to the same'. The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence'. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 7–13)

In the same way the Bicycle of Life activity works to contribute to the second-story development of people's lives, the Community Mapping activity also works to contribute to the second-story development of the local community. In an effort to resist totalising and problem-saturated accounts of our community, through only exploring what is 'wrong' and undesirable in the neighbourhood, participants are invited to identify some of their preferred places and spaces within the community. I have found it is not uncommon that, in helping to bring forth people's preferred accounts of their community, opportunities are created for them to bring forth preferred accounts of their lives as well. As Trudinger (2006) asked, 'What places do people find help put them more in touch with the preferred accounts of their lives?' (p. 17).

Below is an image of the Community Map that I created with some young people. On this map, different coloured star stickers act to locate the significant places and spaces that participants inhabit in their day to day lives. Lines are then drawn to represent the intersecting paths that link participants' across the significant places and spaces of their daily lives.



The Community Mapping activity can be understood as a form of 'co-research' (Epston, 1999) by engaging participants in an exploration of the particular geographies from which they act upon their local knowledges. I have discovered that engaging with maps in this way can provide a fun and interesting way to elicit story-telling with young people and to support a context for exploring values, know-how and sense of connection and belonging.

This way of engaging with maps, is inspired by counter-mapping practices found in the activist work of critical cartographers and it stands in stark contrast to state or corporate mapping and surveillance practices that we are increasingly subjected to in contemporary life (Harvey, 1975; Pacheco & Velez, 2009). Community cartography can be further understood as an expression of 'local knowledge' and a form of social action (Trudinger, 2006).

Critical geographer David Harvey encourages us to have a greater curiosity about space, and argues that dominant culture and broader social problems are intimately linked to geography practices (Harvey, 1996; 2005). Building on Harvey's analysis, I have found Yvonne Hung's (2011) research on youth activism and community organising very useful. Hung explores the importance that spacial concepts play in young people's experiences with their communities and the narratives they possess about their community's most pressing issues. Hung (2011) argues that an extended geographical imagination can help young people illuminate social and spatial injustice and imagine progressive alternatives for change. Drawing further inspiration from Harvey, Hung (2011, p. 581) argues for anti-oppressive mapping practices and counter mapping practices that resist and subvert dominant mapping practices and knowledges:

Given that much geographical knowledge has been used in projects of empire and colonisation, economic restructuring, and unsustainable development, a critical understanding of space is important in order to create alternative radical plans and geography practices that are 'tied to principles of mutual respect and advantage rather than to the politics of exploitation and domination' (Harvey, 2005, p. 250).

In attempting to keep with this principle of 'mutual respect and advantage', one of the key objectives of the community map-making activity is to invite participants to identify the spaces and places that are vital in contributing to their sense of wellbeing and belonging in community life. It is through this process of mapping and story-telling that participants also uncover the ways that they contribute to the liveliness of a place and contribute to a 'thick mapping' of their local community (Presner, Shepard & Kawano, 2014). This process can be considered a way of contesting the taken-for-grantedness of 'place' in people's lives, and a way to invite people to more fully inhabit their preferred geographies and stories (Trudinger, 2006).

Creating a Community Map


Step 1: Participants are introduced to the idea of creating a Community Bike Path Map in order to help them to locate some of their preferred places and spaces within the community and to help situate these preferred geographies in relation to other participants. The group discusses the practical benefits of having a shared Community Map for planning journeys and exploring potential routes that could be taken for group rides in Stage Four.


Step 2: Participants are asked to first develop a list of places and spaces that they share in common within the community and then locate these on the community map using a coloured pin or sticker. We use the following document to help


group members develop a list of their significant places and spaces before asking them to place their stickers onto the Community Map.


BICYCLE of LIFE: Community Mapping Activity


A LIST OF SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT SPACES/PLACES IN MY COMMUNITY


 (PINK) Common and Shared Places:


 (YELLOW) Calm, Relaxing and Carefree Places:

 (BLUE) Culturally, Sacred and Spiritually Significant Places/Spaces:

 (GREEN) Nature and Wildlife Spaces:

 (PURPLE) Important People and Places such family, friends, sense of home:

 (ORANGE) Youth Friendly and Welcoming Spaces:

 (RED) Unwelcoming Spaces:

Off the Map Places: Imaginative and Creative Places, Physical destinations beyond the map:

OFTEN A PARTICULAR PLACE OR SPACE HOLDS MANY DIFFERENT MEANINGS FOR US AND OUR EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS ABOUT A CERTAIN PLACE CAN OFTEN CHANGE. WE CAN HAVE MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT A PLACE AND MANY OF US MIGHT HAVE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF BEING IN SAME PLACE. TO REFLECT THIS, SOME YOUTH IN THE PAST HAVE ALTERED THE STAR THEY HAVE CHOSEN FOR A CERTAIN PLACE BY CUTTING IT IN HALF OR INTO QUARTER STARS. SOME YOUTH WILL USE MULTIPLE STARS FOR ONE PLACE. YOU MIGHT ALSO COME UP WITH YOUR OWN WAY TO DO THIS! GO FOR IT!

Step 3: To contribute to a 'thick mapping' of the community, group members are asked to describe the influence that these significant places have in their lives (participants may wish to refer to their Rear Tyre):

- *What are some of your preferred local destinations that you travel to and spend time at in your daily life?*
- *What do you like to do in this space and what does this space bring to your life?*

- *What do you think that you bring to this space?*
- *Whose paths do you cross in your daily life that are significant to you? What effects do these intersections have on your day?*
- *Who do you share the road with? What do you share that is valuable to you?*

Exploring the significance of 'nature' in the context of community life

I have often found in my work with young people that exploring their connection to 'natural' or 'green spaces' such as parks, forests, lakes and rivers can provide a terrific opportunity to hear about acts of self-preservation in a world that requires their constant and immediate attention. I have also learned from these conversations about young peoples' expressions of concern, grief and ethical commitments to how living spaces could be better treated and cared for.

- What are some of the green spaces in the community? How have you spent time there in the past? What do these spaces bring to the community?
- What sorts of wildlife and plant life live there? In what ways do these forms of life contribute to the community? How so?

Stage Three: Exploring the Road Conditions of Life

'I've learned that when you climb a steep mountain, you will pick up enough speed on your way down that the hills in front of you will become little bumps on the road.' K.T.

Stage Three involves four key steps:

1. inviting participants to name some of the possible journeys that young people take in life,
2. collectively naming some of the challenging terrains, road obstacles, and hazards faced by young people as they move through life,
3. exploring the real effects that difficult 'road conditions' have on the lives of young people and their journeys,
4. identifying young people's 'response knowledges' to these social problems while on their journeys.

As you can see, these explorations externalise social problems by separating problems from people's identities through inviting participants to think about problems as the 'road conditions', 'obstacles' and 'hazards' they face in their journeys through life. Furthermore, these conversations about social problems actively seek to contribute to a double-storied account of life which includes both a rich description of the hardships faced and people's responses to these hardships.

Step 1: Naming some of the journeys in young people's lives

To introduce this topic, participants are first invited to revisit some of the hopes and goals that they have documented on the front tyre of their Bicycles of Life, and to think about how they would name some of the journeys that they would like to take or that they are currently taking in life. Next, group members are invited to think more broadly, and to consider the many kinds of journeys that are presented to young people in the world:

- *Name some of the journeys that some young people choose to take?*
- *Name some of the journeys that some young people are required to take?*
- *Name some shared or collective journeys that young people and their friends, families or communities take?*

For example, as one young person said, 'My journey to earn my high school diploma is also a journey for my parents, because they didn't get a chance to finish school when we came to Canada'.

Step 2: Collectively naming the challenging terrains, road obstacles, and hazards

Here are some of the questions I like to use when inviting group members to collectively generate examples of social problems and hardships that affect young people and their communities:

- *What are some of the steep mountains that young people have to climb in life?*
- *What can be some of the bumps on the road that young people experience?*
- *What are some of the road hazards that young people can face in their day-to-day lives? At home, school, and in community?*
- *What are some of the risky, uncertain, difficult paths young people are required to take?*

Exploring and evaluating the effects of social problems on young people

After the group has named a number of social problems group members are invited to characterise the problems further by mapping out their effects on people's lives. When exploring the effects of problems, I have found David Denborough's encouragement to create space for both the collective 'we' and the individual 'I' experience helpful in supporting me to provide different options for sharing within the group (Denborough, 2008).

For example:

- What effects does the road hazard of 'Bullying' have on young people's learning, friendships, ideas about themselves, sense of safety and belonging in various spaces and places in their community? Is this okay, not okay, or something else? Why so?
- What effect does this road obstacle have on you and your friends?

Exploring the effects of social problems on the community

- How does the 'addictions problem' affect the way you and your family or friends think about your community or the important places you identified on the community map?
- What kind of reputation does violence try to give the community?
- How does poverty affect you and your friends' sense of connection, belonging, or community pride?

Mapping the influence of dominance and privilege in the context of place

It seems important to note that, for many people due to gender, ability, race, class, and sexual orientation, some roads and routes are simply not available for them to take. Some routes are unwelcoming, incredibly dangerous, or even unimaginable. In an effort to engage with the politics of experience in relation to how routes in life are constituted through operations of power and privilege, it seems important to make efforts to expose what can be taken for granted in relation to what it means to have 'choices' and 'options' related to not only taking particular paths in life, but also the differing road conditions that are presented to people living on the margins of dominant culture.

I therefore ask questions to explore this, such as:

- *In what ways might power and privilege be operating by smoothing out the path for some, while at the same time creating barriers for others?*
- *What are some of the places and spaces and roads in life that are unsafe and unwelcoming for women and girls? How so? Who benefits from this and why? Is this okay, not okay, or something else? Why so?*
- *What are some of the places and spaces and roads in life that are unsafe and unwelcoming for LGBTIQ youth? How so? Who benefits from this and why? Is this okay, not okay, or something else? Why so?*
- *What are some of the places and spaces and roads in life that are unsafe and unwelcoming for people of colour? How so? Who benefits from this and why? Is this okay, not okay, or something else? Why so?*
- *What are some of the places and spaces and roads in life that are inaccessible and unwelcoming to people who are not able-bodied? How so? Who benefits from this and why? Is this okay, not okay, or something else? Why so?*
- *What are some of the places and spaces and roads in life that are unsafe and unwelcoming to non-Christians in this society? How so? Who benefits from this and why? Is this okay, not okay, or something else? Why so?*

Deconstructing 'normative paths' in the lives of marginalised young people

- *Not everyone has the same access to certain paths in life because of their gender, sexual orientation, social class, or ability. What types of paths might be routinely taken for granted?*
- *What are some paths or roads that some people are not allowed or discouraged from taking in this society? Why so? What are some of the different obstacles a person might face due to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability?*
- *What ideas for action do group members have for responding to people who may not be able to relate to the spaces they routinely experience as safe and welcoming for themselves?*
- *What are some steps that group members have taken in the past to promote safety and inclusiveness for others?*

Celebrating the diversity of life's paths

- *What would life be like if all people took the same roads or paths? What path might you be taking in your life that is different from others you know? What sustains you as you take this path?*

Exploring people's responses to the hardships, hazards, and obstacles presented on the roads and paths of life

- *What are some of the things that young people do to manage hard times?*
- *What are some of the things that young people do to protect and take care of themselves when travelling on difficult terrain?*
- *What are some of the things that young people do to keep their hopes alive?*
- *What are some of the things that you do to bring calm and wellbeing to your life?*
- *What places and spaces (imagined or real) do you go to during difficult times?*
- *What do you do to fuel yourself? What do you do to conserve or sustain your energy and strength?*

Developing a Road Report: Documenting the 'Road Conditions of Life' with young people in the community

In the context of my exploration of the questions I have outlined above with young people, I have begun to work on a Collective Document (Denborough, 2008) in order to create possibilities for young people to contribute to the lives of other young people by sharing their insider-knowledges of the ways they respond to the effects of hardship and social problems. Below is a sample of some of the themes and related knowledges that have been generated as an outcome of exploring some of the difficult Road Conditions of Life.

Road hazards on our journeys:

- violence
- abuse
- bullying

- crime
- drugs
- pollution
- racism
- perfectionism
- illness
- gangs
- war

Road obstacles and difficult terrains in life:

- self-doubt
- fear, worrying
- tired
- not trying
- no money and no job, trying to find work
- racism in the neighbourhood
- homophobia at school
- depression
- pot
- parents' divorce
- lost friends to suicide
- bad memories
- moving to a new school
- Mom is sick
- not fitting it
- the unknown
- finishing high school with health problems
- family with other expectations
- being stereotyped

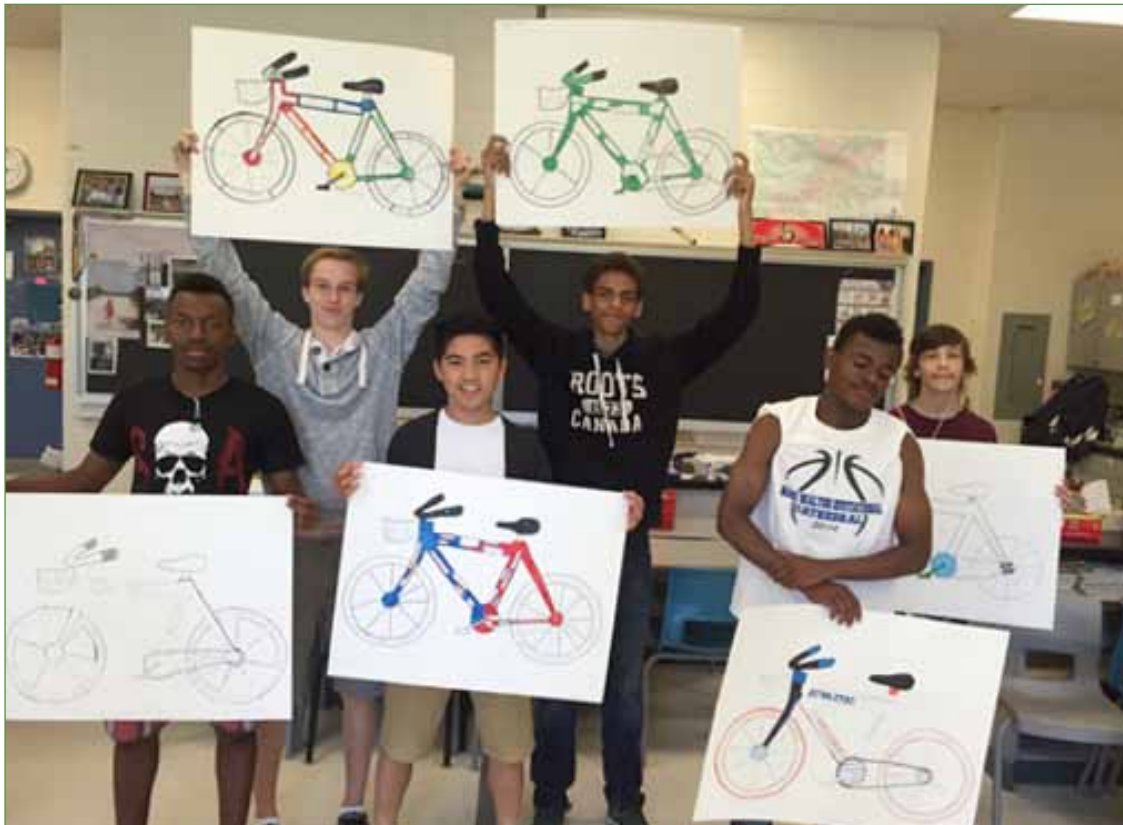
Road wisdom – Steering through difficult times:

- keeping my faith
- getting outside when I need to take a break
- remembering where I came from
- recognising the bullshit
- trusting in myself because I have been through this before
- I have climbed bigger mountains before
- I will get my education no matter what
- being with positive people
- my family is there
- helping others get through it helps me get through it
- talk to someone you can trust
- remember what I accomplished
- listening to my favourite music

Stage Four: Group Celebration and Community Rides

Stage four involves each participant experiencing a graduation ceremony where they are presented with a graduation certificate, listing both the bicycle repair skills they learned during the bike building process and a list the life skills and knowledges they had described on their Bicycle of Life posters. Drawing inspiration from the Community Map, we also plan to organise a number of opportunities over coming months for community rides with participants

and perhaps also friends and family. We hope to explore the community on our bikes and create opportunities for group members to introduce us to some of their favourite destinations. Next year we hope to create opportunities for graduates of the program to take on mentorship roles by sharing their mechanical skills and 'road wisdom' with other young people.



Creating opportunities for young people to make contributions to others

What forms of social movement may be sparked as an outcome of this project? There is a long tradition of cycling to raise public awareness of social issues affecting particular groups within society. Perhaps sharing these histories might spark conversations about taking up particular initiatives in the community. Here are a few of the questions we have in relation to the potential ripples of this project.

- *What ripple effects might a Bicycle Club have in the community?*
- *By training participants to build their own bicycles, what ripple effects might this have – not only on the lives of participants but also their friends, family, and the community?*
- *How might we, as community workers, support the creation of opportunities for participants to share their knowledges and skills with others in the community?*
- *What differences might it make to the lives of other young people if they could have access to a Bicycle of Life Road Report (collective narrative document)? What would it mean to participants to be able to share these knowledges?*

Some reflections on my engagements with theory and practice

At various stages of this Bicycle of Life methodology, I have outlined how I have endeavoured to explore with participants the ways in which place is constitutive of identity and, as well, how people are constitutive of the places and spaces they inhabit. Specifically, I have invited people to look at the ways that particular places have contributed to their preferred accounts of their lives, and how they contribute to the 'life' of the preferred places they inhabit. Mark Trudinger poses the following question which I have turned to for guidance in my explorations of place within the walls of the therapy and classrooms:

'How might we be able to listen more carefully for implicit or explicit references to spaces and places in our conversations with people, and the possibilities this may open in our work?' (Trudinger, 2006, p. 16)

In the context of my work with young people, I have been increasingly drawn to listening more carefully for references to places and spaces with an ear for what Harvey (1990) describes as a 'geographical imagination'. 'The "geographical imagination" is the knowledge, experience, and meaning one ascribes to a place, to produce and maintain these

spaces. It is a way of perceiving how a person's biography is shaped by the places he or she has been and his or her particular stance in relation to the immediate surroundings and the world at large (Harvey, 1975). By engaging with this imagination for developing a richer understanding of the geographies of people's lives, I am routinely drawn to wondering how particular events happening in our community may be having real effects on a person's sense of belonging, connection, and wellbeing.

In Stage Two of the Bicycle of Life, I provided a snapshot of how a 'thick mapping' of the preferred places in people's lives simultaneously opens up possibilities for the re-telling of people's preferred accounts of their lives. It is my intention that these counter-mapping practices will contribute to a double-storied account of both the participants' lives and the community itself. In an effort to resist the totalising effects of social problems on particular areas within the community, we have made efforts to resist reproducing single-storied mapping practices by not asking participants to engage in damage-centred community mapping (Tuck, 2009). Alternatively, we actively created space for multi-storied accounts of social spaces and we have engaged participants in externalising conversations exploring the 'Road Conditions of Life' in order to uncover the influences of broader social problems in their lives.

The influence of Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy on the development of collective narrative practices has been richly acknowledged (Denborough, 2008), and during the process of developing the Bicycle of Life methodology, I have been drawn to exploring how Freire's ideas might challenge my thinking and engagement with narrative practices. Freire's proposal to educators and community workers to take on the praxis of engaging learners to 'read the world' has been of great interest to me (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This pedagogical strategy of teaching people to 'read the world' – and that the texts that students should learn to 'decode' are the images of their own concrete, situated, experiences of the world – seems to link with the kinds of conversations that are made possible through the practice of externalising problems. Freire proposes that critical pedagogues should engage learners in what he calls 'conscientizacao', which he defines as 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1970/1993). I think, in many ways, the Community Mapping activity and the externalising conversations related to the Road Conditions of life stand in harmony with this idea of 'reading the world'.

Arguing for a place for 'place' within critical pedagogical practice, David Gruenewald (2003), draws attention to Freire's notion of 'situationality' and proposes what he calls a

'critical pedagogy of place'. Freire writes the following, which speaks to the constituting effects of place and, I believe, to the relevance of the praxis of externalising problems and co-constructing double-storied accounts of life to both decolonising work and social transformation efforts:

People as being 'in situation', find themselves rooted in temporal-spacial conditions which mark them and which they also mark. They tend to reflect on their own 'situationality' to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Human beings are because they are in a situation. (Freire, 1970, p. 90)

Uncovering and deconstructing the 'road conditions' of life and supporting people to articulate the ways in which social problems 'mark them' and the ways in which they 'mark' or 'act upon' these conditions, seems to stand in harmony with a critical pedagogical praxis of 'reading the world' and a double-storied account of problems. By attending to the significance and particularities of 'place' in the lives of group members; through mapping activities and place-based enquiries; both collective and individual experiences of local culture and local response knowledges were more richly described. Educational theorists McLaren & Giroux (1990) also argue for the explicit inclusion of 'place' within critical pedagogical practice and draw our attention to its relevance to community work:

At the most general level ... a critical pedagogy must be a pedagogy of place, that is, it must address the specificities of the experiences, problems, languages, and histories that communities rely upon to construct a narrative of collective identity and possible transformation. (p. 263)

Throughout the development of the Bicycle of Life collective narrative practice, I have found Gruenewald's proposal for educators and community workers to engage in a critical pedagogy of place useful in supporting me to make links between social problems, identity, and the broader community environment. Hung summarises Gruenewald's critical pedagogy of place as having two objectives:

1. identifying and decolonising ways of thinking and acting that hurt and exploit people and places, and
2. working to re-inhabit by creating, renewing, or conserving practices that nurture and protect (Hung, 2011).

The process of re-inhabitation can be described as 'learning to live-in-place or area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation' (Berg & Dassman, 1990, p. 35). Gruenewald (2003) argues that re-inhabitation and decolonisation depend on each other:

If re-inhabitation involves learning to live well socially and ecologically in places that have been disrupted and injured, decolonisation involves learning to recognize disruption and injury and to address their causes. (p. 9)

In conclusion, I will leave you with a few questions that I have packed in my metaphorical basket in preparation for my ongoing Bicycle of Life adventures:

- How might documenting and circulating 'Road Conditions of Life' collective documents further contribute to other efforts in the community to decolonise spaces and challenge ongoing forms of oppression?
- How might the practices of community mapping and community bike rides contribute to the 're-inhabiting' of some shared spaces within our community?
- How might exploring the significance of 'place' in people's lives contribute to a further 're-inhabiting' of these places and the preferred stories of their lives?
- What might this 're-inhabiting' make possible in their lives?

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