
Visualizing Inclusive Leadership: Using Arts-based Research to Develop an Aligned University Culture

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ABSTRACT Values of exclusive leadership characterize the administration of the neoliberal university, but are incongruous with values of inclusive leadership often enacted in the work of teaching, learning, and research. This article explores how an action research project to advance inclusive leadership at Royal Roads University adapted a visual data elicitation method and used metaphor analysis to reveal opportunities to align espoused, communicated, and enacted values. Images evoke metaphors (Mumby & Spitzack, 1983; Vakkayil, 2008) that enable researchers engaged in their own organizational development to elicit creative possibilities that are “covered up by the familiarity of everyday experience” (Koch & Deetz, 1981, p. 13). By eliciting desired qualities associated with inclusive leadership (Rayner, 2009), we have been able to make visible and model inclusive messages, structures, behaviours, strategies, and actions as the building blocks of a culture built on the value of inclusivity and collaboration, and the principles of diversity and interdependence. One key insight of the research is that arts-based action research effectively equips academic and administrative leaders to transcend deficit-based problem solving and the reductionism associated with neoliberal university management and to approach organizational development with the creative energy that arts-based research inspires.

KEYWORDS Arts-based methods, inclusive leadership, engaged scholarship, organizational culture, neoliberal university

The author of this study is a faculty member at Royal Roads University, a special-purpose public university launched in 1996 that has been mandated to offer graduate and undergraduate degree programs and graduate certificates, primarily to the non-traditional student—the mid-career, working professional. Born of a unique charter that expressly commits the university to supporting the economic prosperity and environmental sustainability of the province, the university has distinguished itself as a “life-changing” campus dedicated to producing transformative research and transformed graduates (Harris & Walinga, 2016) who are equipped to transfer their knowledge and innovation skills into in their spheres of influence. Through a process of extensive self-study aimed at understanding our own model and its value to our operations (Weimer, 2006), the university has articulated its identity as a provider of applied, professional, community-responsive teaching and research, espousing values of collaboration and inclusion (Grundy, Veletsianos, Agger-Gupta, Marquez, Forssmann, & LeGault, 2016).

From its inception, the university has championed and lived an ethic of engaged scholarship: its faculty members are actively engaged with diverse partners in co-creating transformative pedagogies, community-based research, and institutional partnerships that are of mutual benefit for all (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007).

At the same time, the university is also embedded in a wider education sector approaching the work of the academy as a competitive business with value metrics, ceaseless growth, and profit (Ball, 2012; Deetz, 1992; Gunter & Fitzgerald, 2015; Peters, 2009; Shultz, 2013). This has required engaged scholars working in administrative and other positions of leadership to work in a parallel organizational culture grounded in values of neoliberalism incongruent with the relational, collaborative values of engaged scholarship and teaching. From Schein's (1990) position that organizational culture is its communicated values, the university, like others, is caught between relational, inclusive values and subjectivities of scholarly and pedagogical engagement and the "financialized", individualist, exclusive values of neoliberalism (Mumby, 2015). This presents members of the university, and particularly educational leaders who work in the "messy middle" of the university's operations, with organizational systems that cut against the values of inclusive, collaborative learning and shared leadership that supports faculty and staff engagement (Cushen, 2013). Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008) have argued that, in addition to research and teaching, the institutional context of academic life is a third and vital site for engaged scholarship performed in the pursuit of collaborative inquiry and organizational learning. To that end, and in the spirit of living our learning/teaching, a group of women in various academic and administrative leadership roles at the university recently launched a research project aiming to align the values communicated by the operational side of the university's work with the values of the high-engagement experiences of course development, teaching, student service provision, and research.

Upon ethical approval from the university's research ethics office, the colleague initiating the idea for this research community sent an email meeting request to all female university leaders in her network. Included in the call were faculty members (most of whom are assigned administrative service at the school and program level), deans and senior administrators, and directors and managers from the full range of university service units (e.g., continuing studies, student services, computer services). Since the inaugural meeting, we have encouraged participants to invite other newly-hired female leaders or those who have not otherwise heard of the initiative. Bringing knowledge, skills, and experience from our various disciplines, ranks, and roles, as well as the insights from our work *as* women, we sought to collaboratively research "not just on the processes or management issues related to leadership but also the outcomes for communities we work with" (Thompson & Franz, 2016, p. 79). To move toward the goal of a values-aligned, more engaged organizational culture, we formed a research community committed to advancing inclusive leadership values in our various units and areas of responsibility. In theoretical alignment with the concept of engaged scholarship (Rayner, 2009), inclusive leadership is a "post-heroic" (Taylor, 2011) style of organizational cultural management integrating the four principles of engagement, engaged scholarship, orientation to possibility, and learning as transformation (Agger-Gupta & Harris, 2017). Inclusive

leadership theory does not expressly critique the managerialism of corporate environments nor neoliberal values in the university, but it implicitly offers a method of “dialogic change” (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) for transforming neoliberal organizational culture through leadership imagined as engaged, dialogical organizational communication.

In what follows, I report on how our research community used an arts-based research (ABR) approach called photo-elicitation to inquire into what inclusive leadership looks like in our own organization. It proved to be a powerful catalyst for clarifying shared values, deepening analysis of our organizational culture, transcending habitual thinking and professional subjectivities, and provoking dialogue constituting creative solutions to the seemingly intractable incongruencies between managerialism and the knowledge work of teaching, learning, and research. I explain the rationale for employing ABR, followed by the results of our process and a brief discussion of the value of ABR in fostering an engaged university culture.

Using Images to Catalyze Organizational Learning

The study described here is part of a long-term research project conducted by and for a group of university women leaders who seek to advance inclusive leadership values in various aspects and areas of university life. We adopted a participatory action research (PAR) design, a transformative, typically critical research approach that engages stakeholders in reflection and dialogue to define and co-construct solutions for the issues that affect their lives; it has the goal of praxis, offering a collaborative change-making framework for the people with intimate knowledge and skills associated with the issue at hand (Lykes & Coquillon, 2006; Bradbury & Reason, 2006). Adopting a PAR approach allowed us to frame our research agenda as a long-term research endeavour involving shifting levels of participation and the potential for any one of us to lead research projects with and about our group. Research process is just as key to PAR as are the outcomes of research (Ristock & Pennell, 1996; Bradbury & Reason, 2006), and thus PAR offered an ideal engagement methodology for this loosely knit research group to integrate our own organizational development goals with research on ourselves and our process. After securing ethical approval, a core group reached out to colleagues we know in academic and administrative leadership roles, and began meeting periodically to determine our purpose and scope. After a year of such meetings, we arrived at a loose consensus that inclusive leadership offered a conceptual touchstone for moving forward with our goal of organizational cultural transformation, electing to use an ABR technique to deepen our discussion and begin problem-solving the cultural discordances we had already identified.

The application of arts-based research has become part of the pantheon of education scholarship research methods (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017), valued because “they are capable of yielding outcomes taking researchers in directions the sciences cannot go” (Rolling Jr., 2010, p. 110). ABR is equally applicable to the operational side of academic workplaces, inviting unexpected innovation in business organizational cultures. In her study on the use of ABR in business contexts, Eaves (2014) explains ABR’s impact through the metaphor of the musical *fugue* state, a state which simultaneously harmonizes and creates new lines of improvisation. Eaves (2014) argues

that bringing arts-based research into business research offers a powerful way to promote innovation: “By building a discursive space that reduces barriers; emancipation, interaction, polyphony, letting-go and the progressive unfolding of thoughts are supported, benefiting ways of knowing, narrative (re)construction, sensory perception and capacities to act” (p. 347). For our research community, ABR offered a way to build a discursive space for developing a shared organizational language (Griffin, 2008) that could allow us to envision what inclusive leadership could look like in our organization, allowing us to transcend scarcity thinking to approach organizational development with the creative energy that arts-based research inspires. Using ABR within a PAR framework allowed for research productive of feminist transformative praxis (Lykes & Coquillon, 2006), creating space and focus for us to be both critical and constructive, to create energizing connections with women across our disciplinary silos and ranks, and to use our collective knowledge to explore the questions of “how we should live our lives” and determine for ourselves “what effective practice looks like” (Wicks, Reasons, & Bradbury, 2008, p. 24) within our own area of remit.

Images are powerful tools for advancing organizational change because they evoke metaphors (Mumby & Spitzack, 1983; Vakkayil, 2008). These metaphors then enable researchers engaged in their own organizational development to prompt creative possibilities “covered up by the familiarity of everyday experience” (Koch & Deetz, 1981, p. 13). By eliciting desired qualities associated with inclusive leadership, we have been able both to make visible and to model inclusive messages, structures, behaviours, strategies, and actions as the building blocks of a culture built on the values of inclusivity and collaboration and the principles of diversity and interdependence. In our case, we adopted an ABR called photo-elicitation, which involves use of images (usually photographs) “to evoke a different kind of information” (Harper, 2002, p. 13) in an interview or focus group context. Our use of this ABR allowed us to forge a “fugal” discursive space (Mann, 1965; Eaves, 2014) that temporarily enabled members of our group to become conscious of the personal and institutional costs of “psychic life” of neoliberalism (Berlant, 2007; Scharff, 2016), the ubiquitous economic calculus that shapes our subjectivities around largely exclusive entrepreneurial values (e.g., managing one’s self as a sole enterprise, and constantly competing against oneself).

Like other forms of arts-based research, photo-elicitation serves as a reflexive method for generating meaning, critiquing, and creatively intervening in the neoliberal presuppositions of academic work, and “avoids the distortion of fitting data into a pre-existing paradigm” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 382). The polysemic qualities of images (Margolis, 2008) also make them a powerful catalyst for focus group conversations among leaders coming from diverse personal and professional perspectives and social subject locations, thus building inclusion into the change-focused inquiry itself. For Fotaki and Harding (2013), finding ways to disrupt the (sexist) managerial assumptions structuring the neoliberal university’s organizational discourse is critical for “developing ways of thinking that disrupt the symbolic from within” (p. 8). Although these authors are not specifically concerned with specific methods of inquiry, it can be argued that using an ABR-like photo-elicitation within organizations can allow for institutionally unspeakable thoughts to be expressed through the emancipatory potential of

art. As a community of education leaders, our use of a photo-elicitation method nurtured a collaborative, disruptive space wherein engaged, inclusive leadership became more connected to our already engaged scholarship and teaching.

Although each session involved a different format or focus, the project as a whole has produced an emergent “conscientization” process of identifying our research problem and forging our own solutions. To answer the research question—*What do inclusive values look like at our university?*—we embarked on fulfilling the following research objectives: a) articulating our values to ourselves; b) understanding more systematically the barriers to inclusive leading; and c) advancing inclusive leadership to transform the organization in connected and sustainable ways. For the photo-elicitation phase of our research, we began by dedicating time for this project during three of our recurring meetings, using our group’s Wordpress site to store data and to track and communicate progress.

Data for this study was collected in two ways: firstly through a process of photo-elicitation, and then through a set of two subsequent focus groups allowing for sharing of meaning and collaborative problem-solving based on discussion. Photo-elicitation was conducted both virtually and in person. The call for participation in this ABR-based study occurred at one of the earliest meetings of this emergent collective, where I asked participants to select or create either digital or print images that resonated in some way with the leadership model we were keen to advance among ourselves and within the university. This in-person call was complemented by an email to all women on the ever-growing distribution list; in total, the call for participation netted our group eleven images with accompanying annotations explaining the metaphor(s) elicited by the image. One participant took her own photo, another selected an image from Visual Explorer™ (a discussion tool we use frequently in our classrooms), and the remainder of participants found images on the internet that evoked one or more inclusive qualities. These images and annotations were saved to a digital Padlet™ tool embedded in our project website so that participants could reflect on and learn from each other’s choices and interpretations. Following the photo-elicitation phase, I collated the images and texts, bringing the data to two focus groups convened to discuss and collectively thematize our findings.

The first focus group (four participants) occurred about a month after the initial session launching this study, and the second meeting (six participants) was held about a month after that. For everyone who had volunteered to participate, the two-hour focus group format allowed for everyone to share some time with the others to talk about their own and other’s images and about how each image sparked metaphors of inclusive leadership in ways most important to each participant. Sitting together, with the tape recorder running while I took notes (also participating in discussion), we were able to expand the meanings latent in our images based on insights from our colleagues, adding additional layers of interpretation and deepening our own understanding of what it means materially to lead inclusively in our various units and roles. In addition to the images and the personal reflections I gathered at the outset, these discussions became further sources of data for this study. In addition to creating data, conducting analysis in a focus group setting constructed for us a rich fugal space (Eaves, 2014) that allowed us to temporarily evade the exclusive, managerialist subjectivities

(Peters, 2009) innate to working in the modern university. This in turn allowed for alternative mental structures for imagining ways of aligning our work (and thus the university culture we are tasked with leading) with inclusive values. It is the process of personal cognitive (and emotional) restructuring, values alignment, and the development of a vision of inclusive organizational change that is presented next.

Images and Applications of Inclusive Values

The images selected by participants fell into four general categories. Three participants chose illustrations or photos of singular human figures, with annotations focused on the leader and leaderlike traits and responsibilities. Another grouping consisted of photos or illustrations depicting colourful objects or stylized people—a circle of different kinds and colours of chairs, chained circles arranged in a mosaic, a pair of human hands “holding” liquid particles of energy, and a platform on which stands people who are seen to be moving in and out of a loosely tied circle—each speaking to diversity and inclusion in some way. Photos and drawings of natural settings formed the third cluster of images, including an old tree with gnarled roots, an image of woven hair/fibers in multiple hues, an unfurling fern leaf, and a photo of yellow poppies breaking through an asphalt surface. These images elicited metaphors related to the autopoietic nature of complex human systems and the movements among people bolstering inclusivity in an organization. A final set included images of objects large and small, with annotations focused on the qualities of those objects and how they connected to inclusion and leadership.

A further thematic analysis of the focus group data (in reference to the analysis of the data elicited from the images and annotations) yielded three general categories of findings: a) the purpose of inclusivity in our leadership; b) the performativity (in the discursive sense) of inclusion (i.e., inclusive intellectual, physical, and emotion actions that transform the leader as they are enacted), and c) sites for advancing values of inclusion. Each of these themes is discussed next, illustrated through selected participant annotations and insights from the focus groups.

Articulating Why Inclusive Leading Matters

As a participatory, professional action research group, we regularly use our PAR meetings to reflect on why it matters to us to understand, support, and seek to advance inclusive values in our roles as leaders in post-secondary institutions—particularly in our own special purpose university with its focus on applied, world-changing learning and research. To ground our exploration of how photo-elicitation could enhance our ability to clarify the mechanisms of inclusive leaders in the discussions that had preceded this research phase, we circled back to that question of purpose. We used elements from the gathered images to illustrate six distinct and overarching reasons for more intentionally adopting inclusive values that we grouped into two wider themes: a) how leading from a principle of inclusion involves the organization itself, and b) how inclusive values benefit the people whose words and actions constitute the organizational culture.

Inclusion's benefit to the organization

A discussion on the question of how inclusive values have an impact on the organization surfaced three related themes: by enabling an organization's potential, or its ability to make the most of its resources; by ensuring access to the knowledge contained in the people constitute an organization; and, how attending to unleashing human potential and acting on grounded knowledge allows us to live into our mission of providing world- and life-changing research and education.

At the level of the organization itself, we first identified how inclusive values can surface organizational potential. For this insight, we took from the image of the unfurling fiddlehead fern a metaphor for looking at our university as a complex adaptive system in which inclusion of diverse voices and skills contributes to the autopoietic emergence of a system's latent potential:

Inclusive leadership supports the unfurling of each individual element or piece and the larger system or whole. Inclusive leadership recognizes the interconnectedness of each element and that growth and development and flourishing occurs through relationship with each component of ourselves, with each other, and the land. Inclusive leadership does not exist in isolation, rather it recognizes that complex dynamic relationships, facets, and unfurlings are integral to inclusive leadership in practice. Inclusive leadership is a process: a way of being and becoming.



Figure 1. Wingchi Poon [CC BY-SA 3.0], Wikimedia Commons.

This annotation sparked a great deal of affect, engaging the members of the focus group in a vivid discussion of the how welcome it would be to devise systems that not only anticipate complexity, movement, and change, but also offer ways to capture the value of that movement

and interaction. We noted too how, that intentionally inclusive process promotes unfurling of potential because it grounds an organization in knowledge and skills that already exist in the organization's history and its people. It was photo of the tree with the deep and spreading roots that evoked this metaphor of "grounding" leadership in a living system that is always in flux and redolent with the nutrients and information needed for the tree to grow, just as the tree serves to nourish the soil:

The messy, complexity of a rooted community that lives both above and below the surface of things with its dark workmanship of insect and worm and deep communication conduits of mycelia and microbe that make all of this grandeur [of the leaderly tree] possible.

That glorious image of unruly but enlivened complexity led to some group reflection on the ultimate purpose of our work, which is to provide education experiences and conduct research designed to make positive change to human and non-human lives, economies, and the lifeworld that sustains us all. Just as a tree is rooted in a soil that it simultaneously shelters and depends on, for its existence, on, if an organization exemplifies inclusive values, "it creates positive connections, it involves layers of creativity, it is a never-ending process (always in motion, always developing), it is respectful, contemplative, critical and self-aware"—and is thus more likely to sustain itself through times of stress and economic, technological, or other forms of disruption.

To this point, our photo-elicitation and discussion led us to confirm for ourselves that inclusive values are core to our university's ability to fulfill its mission in a way that is sustainable for the people who work here. We needed next to complete the circle, to explore the purpose of inclusive values in the context of supporting effective leadership.

Inclusion's benefit to the leader's capacity to lead

While the metaphor just noted shows how difficult it is to separate out the organization from its people, there were key insights taken from the photos and illustrations that spoke directly to the benefit of an inclusive style to people with leadership responsibilities, including these three related themes: how inclusive values' benefit to human sustainability in a neoliberal education context; the improvement in human affect and creativity unleashed by from inclusive leadership practice; and, therefore, how an inclusive leader is more likely to engage people in addressing seemingly impossible problems.

The theme of sustainability threaded through the ensuing discussions about inclusivity's value, not solely to the organization and its outputs, but to the leaders and the people who make those outputs possible. The image depicting a circular mandala of differently coloured polka-dots elicited metaphors connected the idea of sustainability to the needs of people have to be heard, understood, and otherwise cared for, and the role of the leader in providing that care and attention: "It's not enough to be ok with people being different, or having different views. We need to create space for diversity, and we need to actively and constantly work

towards inclusion.” When everyone is recognized and addressed as a valuable, unique source of knowledge and skills, their overall affect improves, and in seeing their efforts as essential to the sustainability of the university, there is a sense of purpose, which breeds a lively joyfulness, even greater sense of purpose: engagement. Some among those gathered for our focus group saw that joy as represented in the image of the two hands meeting to hold—but not smother—the sparkling, ethereal lightforms could be likened to a living, palpable fluorescence of human creativity. It is from this basis of a loosely connected grouping of people who feel empowered in expressing relationship and shared purpose (physically, emotionally, and organizationally) that fresh thinking and renewed energy emerges. In her intuitive response to an illustration of differently shaped and coloured chairs arranged in a circle, one participant noted how that when inclusive leadership is enacted, “the vision then becomes the leader, guiding decision making, acting as a touchstone to bring the group back to center.”

This phase of metaphor analysis arising from photo-elicitation and annotation confirmed for us the benefit of inclusive values to our own institution and practice. We then returned to the images for visual metaphors that could help us articulate *how* the inclusive leadership happens, and what an intentionally inclusive leader looks like in action.

Inclusive Actions and Attitudes

In addition to each participant’s annotation of their own selected image, our focus group sessions generated several more metaphors descriptive of what inclusive leadership looks like in action, and some of those connected action to a leader’s attitude and awareness of their surroundings. We gleaned three distinct but related actions/attitudes from the data, including: communicating values, convening difference, and cultivating the mundane—those aspects of organizational life that typically evade notice in neoliberal university environments and exclusive managerialist leadership styles, but are essential to thriving complex human systems.

Communicating values

Two of the photos elicited metaphors directly related to the theme of communication, characterizing the inclusive leader as someone skilled in using, distilling and communicating the values and vision of the organization they lead. One figurative illustration of a mythic female “waterbearer” elicited a complex metaphor about the leader as a communicator, and communication as the “water” that joins people, and leadership as the work of listening for and diffusing the shared values and vision that allows the people in an organization to co-create and share culture. To enable the free flow of the “water” (the medium for sharing information, meaning, and knowledge), the inclusive leader cultivates awareness of the whole system for which they are responsible, maintaining external relationships on behalf of those she leads: “The wings on her back allow the inclusive leader to rise above the topography to see the whole landscape, and what lies beyond, so she can bring context to her work within her community.” Another image spoke to the quality of intrapersonal communication necessary to inclusive leadership; the participant who selected the photo of the young male child peering out shyly behind the crooked arm shading his face interpreted his shielding of his eyes as

a metaphor for how equally important a leader's inner vision is to her ability to synthesize what she is seeing and learning. That inner "shell" "enables us privacy and a calm and safe space to dig deep and reflect. We need to remember, however, to look through/up/out and see what else is happening... to see the whole picture." We were struck by this final insight that a key aspect of inclusive communication is the act of retreat and reflection, of oversight and "innersight," both of which are not visible to the management and therefore difficult to track and measure—but vital to living inclusive values, nonetheless. As we discuss below, this particular metaphor provided us with ideas for how we can radically advance inclusive leadership in the most mundane ways.

Convening difference

Several of the photos and illustrations women found or sought out suggested the themes of complexity, difference, diversity and the role of the inclusive leader in actively seeking out and convening people with different personal and professional backgrounds, skills, and responsibilities. For example, a stylized illustration of a rainbow-hued dancing female form spoke to what inclusive leadership looks like in motion, engaging her in a multidimensional dance with difference, and change. For another woman, the photo of a cluster of pencil crayons elicited this insight on the purpose of including different kinds of people and perspective, "...and not just to check off some boxes, but to truly engage with diverse views, ideas, and bringing it all together." Our focus group spent a good deal of the session using this and related images to explore why diversity matters, drawing on metaphors elicited from a participant's selection of an otherwise nondescript image of a bowl of colourful cereal bits in a bowl of milk. The imagined movement of the cereal pieces in the milk provoked her to recall "Boid's rules" (Reynolds, 1987), principles derived from observing "the flocking and swarming behaviour of birds" that are exemplary of complex human systems, a view of organizations inherent to inclusive leadership. From there, a wide-ranging discussion ensued about the value of "loose ties" and of making time to visit and get to know people just for the sake of relationships, with the knowledge that keeping in touch advances the university's ability as a whole to mobilize and change direction quickly.

Cultivating positive affect

In the process of communicating inclusive values and convening diverse people, the inclusive leader also enacts taking care of human feelings, aspirations, and attitudes, the elements of organizational life that do not make it onto spreadsheets and annual reports. By that, we mean the ordinary but typically undervalued, affective, relational activities of workplaces that lay outside the parameters of what is typically the focus of managerial thinking. For example, a photo of a woven fibres of different hues not only sparked more discussion of diversity, but the importance of coaching, caring, looking for what is already working, and building up the emotional intelligence and resilience of its people; metaphorically, "inclusive leaders weave strengths together to create strong durable solutions. They focus on the overarching purpose rather than the individual contributions. They also integrate a sense of belonging."

One innocuous image of a glass-faced building generated a metaphor of transparency, which we connected to actions at the level of affect and how it moves organizations forward or slows them down.



Figure 2. Reichstag © Márcio de Moura [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0]
 from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mcdemoura/5301418586/>

We discussed how inclusive values require the leader to feel feelings, be vulnerable in showing these feelings and allowing them as valid and needed elements of a sustainable organizational culture, knowing that she is creating the conditions for excellence and creativity to emerge without her coercion. The colleague who chose the image commented, “Inclusive leadership is transparent. It provides a framework within which thoughts and ideas can thrive, develop, and evolve. It generates connection between those within the system and those outside. Inclusive leadership provides guidance rather than direction.”

We learned from this discussion that, while the fungible aspects of our work (e.g., targets, revenues, costs, retention rates) are important to the financial sustainability of the university and can be enhanced by living our inclusive values, they are not the actions and artefacts constituting our ability to live our learning and teaching model.

Finally, I present the various sites open to advancement of inclusive leadership across and throughout the university in the final phase of data analysis.

Sites of Inclusive Leadership Practice and Transformative Dialogue

A third way in which the arts-based metaphor elicitation process contributed to creative problem solving was in provoking a discussion of *where* in our daily work and the cycles of the academic year that we could use our leadership roles to advance inclusive values. Having confirmed a strong alignment between inclusive leadership values with our espoused institutional values, we further mined the images for insight into how to connect the idea of inclusivity to the operations of the university. It was a poetic annotation of an image of

yellow flowers breaking through an asphalt surface that focused discussion on where inclusive leadership could exploit or create “cracks” in the exclusive organizational spaces, places, and processes of our workplace:

finding fissures that
 disrupt
illusions of impenetrability
 and give space
for colour and joy and
 wild expression
bravely exposed

This image and the participants’ metaphoric interpretation served as the most energizing outcome of our arts-based research intervention, and for good reason. Constituted by language and a graphical structure gently defiant of any attempt at capture or fungibility (a quality of financialization that refers to the homogenization of difference in aid of commodification), it generated discussion of four general domains in which we could enact inclusive leadership and find “fissures” through which to nourish our organization with its “wild expression”: in our communication (interpersonal and intrapersonal), our teaching and learning, our research, and sites of service and administration.

Inclusive communication

Inclusive leadership is by definition relational and uses dialogue as a mechanism of change. It is no surprise, then, that we identified the disposition of the inclusive leader as that of a communicator, a *discursive* leader attentive to the link between culture and communication. Our discussions revealed concrete ways to advance inclusivity at the level of communication (organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal). For example, we noted how the use of corporatized organizational language like “the executive” and “targets” works subtly to turn us away from a collegial focus to one more akin to a business environment; instead, we could use terms like “university leaders” and “sustainable cohort size”, and still attend to protecting the financial viability of our programs but in a way that implies a more collaborative relationship between academic and financial administrators. We also realized how we could use our speech to maintain focused awareness of the temporal “edges” of the university as an organization; as one participant noted, “so much project work goes on outside of the porous walls of the institution”. By speaking of the university as a community of people collaborating in teaching, learning and research across space and time, we can better capture and showcase the cultural impact of the work we and our graduates do by virtue of what and how they have learned, considerations typically absent from discussions of the university’s worth in the world.

As leaders in our organization, we knew that the process for diffusing inclusive values would entail grounding our interpersonal interactions in inclusive language. In a similar vein, and in that psychic, subjective dimension of our professional lives, we realized we could be more

intentional in advancing inclusive leadership by attending to the qualities of our intrapersonal communication, our self-talk. One line of discussion in this vein saw four participants dwelling on the need to lead by voicing and normalizing the limitations of our energy and time, and to do so first with ourselves. As an example, the issue of “imposter syndrome” (Pedler, 2011) came up and one of us noted how, for someone in a leadership position, “It’s very scary for me to be a not-knower but...AND, we are in an uncertain world.” In that and similar statements, there is a recognition and then acceptance of vulnerability as a reality lending itself to inclusive leading. It is not the role of the leader to create the vision or to exert discipline over (human) resources, but rather to learn by convening with and caring for others in creative problem-solving grounded in shared values, communicating back those values in a dynamic, dialogic feedback loop.

More than that, eliciting metaphors of vulnerability disrupted the presupposition of an exclusive, “heroic” managerial leadership style that vulnerability is a risk. There was a subtle movement in our discussion here, away from the entrepreneurial psychic life of neoliberalism toward a reframing and validating of the felt experience of inclusive leading—the recognition that we are all important, that all of our knowledge is partial, and that caring about and leading others in learning together is the pathway to effective problem-solving. As a small moment of group “conscientization”, it woke us up to how changing our organizational culture also means transmuting neoliberalism’s inner voice. This meant leading ourselves towards more realistic, life-affirming self-talk in spaces like our daily commute, or rejecting an attitude of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2007; Moore & Clarke, 2016)—the false hope that the pace of work will level out, and that one’s incessant striving and personal sacrifice will be rewarded—which is so often emblematic of the entrepreneurial subject. As we transformed feelings of lack into acknowledgement of real barriers inviting creative-problem-solving, we were able to look beyond our personal endeavours and outward to our communities for support and a multiplicity of perspectives.

Inclusive teaching and learning

Our institution is built on a unique and well-articulated model of collaborative, engaged teaching and learning and is already notable for how it expresses inclusive values in the contexts of teaching, learning, and research. However, as we asked ourselves what inclusion looks like in the realm of teaching and learning, we were able to identify additional ways to plant seeds of inclusion in the context of institutional culture. At Royal Roads University, inclusive values are everywhere in the classroom. Nonetheless, behind the scenes, program administrators and instructors face barriers dampening our ability to nimbly respond to crises and innovate when opportunities present themselves.

At the level of course delivery and teaching, we brainstormed how we might bring the principles of relationality, diversity, and affective engagement to course and program design. We recognized that we could enliven the process and produce high quality educational programming and course content by intentionally convening diverse perspectives, including those of alumni, students, instructional designers, and subject-matter experts. As we have

learned to work collaboratively across units and the operational parts of the university have learned more about the academic missions, we have been better able to develop a habit of flying by “Boid’s rules” (Reynolds, 1987). This has promoted simpler systems, and has allowed for greater trust in these simpler systems to reduce the rigid layers of approvals and the incessant accounting that have sometimes served as blocks to creativity. When we have involved students and alumni in the collaborative process, we have amplified our learning and teaching model, and engaged graduates in a life-long partnership with their alma mater. The resulting feedback loops, along with the likelihood that alumni will continue to nourish our programs with community-based research and teaching opportunities, have been thus far positive and remain central to our mission.

Inclusive research

From our focus on the classroom, we turned our sights to considering what inclusive leadership could look like in the area of research and how it could allow us to deepen our ability to engage students, partners, sponsors, and communities in our research. We could immediately see how the inclusive values of engagement, relationality, and collaborative problem solving were already present in the research that many do or support through administrative roles. Most of the members of our research group have led or have supervised action research and community-based research projects, while others have worked in theory-building to further advance engaged scholarship and organizational learning. Adding elicited visual metaphors to our awareness allowed us to consider how we could be intentional in crafting research that promotes collaboration, is encouraging of human and cultural diversity, and engages communities in addressing thorny problems through the sharing of knowledge, perspectives, and skills.

Inclusive service and administration

Unsurprisingly, we found the vast majority of the inclusive-leading sites of opportunity to lie outside of the classroom or research site and within the operational and administrative levels of the university. Meeting design and process was flagged as one of the first sites we saw that could benefit from a cultural “makeover”, with the goal of making meetings a natural place for engaged learning (with collaboration to arise as a matter of course). From the program level to the overarching committees overseeing the business and academic missions of the university, we committed to using our voices to support one another and encourage collaboration by changing placement of seating to be more circular (less hierarchical) so as to suggest a council of equal voices. To promote greater inclusion of more women’s perspectives, members of the research group also committed to amplifying one another’s voices in meetings. For the meetings within our own control, we noted how we could use our agendas to create more spaces in the day for staff and faculty to get to know one another, to ground our “business” in a knowledge of one another as people with families and roles in the wider community, and to connect to key people in other parts of the campus (once again using the “Boids’ rules” metaphor, and its wisdom of relying on “loose ties”) who have a stake in what we are doing. With meetings

occurring at every level of the organization and with external partners and clients, we have identified opportunities to enact our inclusive values (through communication, convening, and cultivation of people) in marketing and recruitment meetings, hiring committees, faculty association affairs, and promotion and tenure committees.

Summary

Using eleven simple images to elicit metaphors of inclusive values catalyzed our momentum and purpose as a research group, transformed our own subjectivities, and advanced our own thinking and ability to imagine the actions, attitudes, sites and other organizational cultural artefacts open to better alignment with the espoused inclusive values of our learning and teaching model (Schein, 1990).

Final Reflections on Using Arts-Based Research for Engaged Academic Leadership

The ABR process has better equipped us as academic and administrative leaders to transcend deficit-based problem solving and the reductionism associated with neoliberal university management and to approach organizational development with creative energy that arts-based research inspires. Using the ABR method opened a fugal space (Eaves, 2014) and allowed us to “dig a hole” (Berlant, 2007) that enabled our discourse to move beyond critique of our neoliberal work environment toward a multi-dimensional set of tactics for advancement of inclusive leadership principles—leadership as engagement, engaged scholarship, orientation to possibility, and learning as transformation (Agger-Gupta & Harris, 2017)—in all of the formal and informal ways we exercise influence as leaders and colleagues.

Advancing inclusive values through a reflexive form of ABR has proven to be immediately energizing for our research community. We find that the aesthetic elements of the process provide a respite from the incessant pressures of financialization and ceaseless competition (intra- and interpersonally) endemic to the pressures of neoliberal university environments that are not likely to change in the near term (Ball, 2012; Cushen, 2013; Eaves, 2014; Mumby, 2015). Ultimately, we find that ABR-driven action research offers a tool for organizational learning that offers a means of psychic revitalization, equipping us in our roles as educational leaders with site-specific knowledge and relationships needed to serve as *engaging* orchestrators of human potential and activity in our organization, our classrooms, and our research.

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