

Knowledge Is Power – Leadership Training for Marginalized Learners

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Knowledge Is Power (KIP) is a program developed to empower marginalized populations to take action through discussions of social justice and social change; which provides participants with opportunities to practice communication, problem solving, goal setting, self-reflection and conflict resolution strategies, and other transferable capabilities that form the basis of essential employability skills.

KIP is a program developed by Anna Willats for the Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (a west end Toronto drop-in and housing agency) in 2007, based on leading work in community leadership and critical pedagogy. Developed in close consultation with the entire PARC community, KIP was designed to emphasize the development of pre-employment education and skills development for community members, primarily those living below the low income cut off, who have experienced homelessness / precarious housing, and who have psychiatric and other disabilities. KIP was awarded the Access Award for Disability Issues in December 2007, a City of Toronto Human Rights Award. It has been adapted and changed for use with staff at PARC and other Toronto area drop-ins since that time.

The goal of the first KIP course was to train PARC members in anti-oppression and conflict resolution skills, thus improving communication between members in the drop-in environment. It was expected that this program would help PARC be a more welcoming and safer space for people to come to and participate in programs and activities. In evaluation focus groups, members and staff discussed what they have noticed about how they and other graduates interact with staff, other members, and each other.

The course was developed with significant input of PARC members, volunteers, employees and other Parkdale community members. Many of the materials and resources are from, or adapted from, a community leadership course written and taught by Anne Bishop and Jeanne Fay, called *Grassroots Leaders Building Skills: A Course In Community Leadership (2004)*. The work of Jenny Horsman and others on the impacts of violence on people's experience of and ability to learn (www.learningandviolence.net), informs the set up of the class and facilitator approach. The course utilizes a popular education methodology that is founded in the practices of Indigenous communities and educators and the liberation work of Paulo Freire among others. The course seeks to engage learners intellectually, spiritually, physically and emotionally. The facilitator uses and is informed by a feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression framework, and is self-reflective and open to feedback throughout the course.

KIP has 4 overall objectives:

1. Learners will become more self-aware about the barriers they and others face, and will acquire skills to help them value themselves and others as individuals and as members of the PARC community
2. Learners will understand how oppression and privilege play out in their own and other people's lives, and how they can work with others to make sure that power is shared and human rights are respected
3. Learners will have learned and practiced communication, conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills and will understand when and how to use them within the PARC community (and elsewhere in their lives)
4. Learners will have the understanding and skills that they need to become a positive role model within the PARC community and in other areas of their lives

An evaluation of the 4 KIP courses offered at PARC was conducted in fall 2011. This is what we learned:

- When PARC members are given proper supports, they can successfully complete a challenging course of study
- Examples/role plays from students' lives deepen learning and comprehension
- Theory has to have a practical application and lead to meaningful work (paid/unpaid)
- Students will apply the learning right away and need role plays, real life examples
- Flexibility and the ability to adapt to events/issues as they come up is essential
- Guest speakers, field trips enhance learning

- Learning activities must accommodate differing literacy levels
- Students want to continue their learning - at post-secondary, in community groups, within PARC