Changing Hearts and Minds:
The transformation of education-based activism on campus
By Annika Olsen

I was running to class when I encountered Benjamin with another pro-life activist for the first time; they were handing out graphic flyers at the corner of St. George two years ago. “What are your thoughts on abortion?” was all he needed to ask before I was engaged in a 20 minutes conversation about embryology, rights, female autonomy and the complex circumstances that may require an abortion. In the end, we shook hands agreeing to disagree, yet I was baffled by the civility and the intellectual discourse I just encountered. This was a far cry from the screaming emotional Christian evangelists who have been associated with the pro-life movement since the end of the last century.

The memory of this encounter surfaced again when I was searching for a potential site where I could conduct research on the politics of the university. Not only is the group still conducting activism but has proven to be extremely well-organized, visible and persistent to an extent that I have not experienced among other campus groups. Currently, the pro-life group on campus has been denied club status by the University of Toronto Student Union for two years in a row. However, despite the aggressive reactions, non-recognition as a club by UTSU and even doubt among members of the pro-life club themselves, the students continue to participate in street demonstrations (*Choice Chain*) and tabling events using graphic imagery and videos. As a result, I wanted to conduct fieldwork among the pro-life group on campus to determine why they mobilized in this manner, how a widely shared base of knowledge allowed them to conduct their practices and why, despite the aggressive reactions, they still return on a weekly basis.

Through attending their sessions, dialogue training programs, demonstrations, volunteering at a Crisis-pregnancy center and having access to the activism schedule, I discovered that the expulsion of the GTA campus groups from campus property to the public space by student unions due to the controversial employment of *victim photography* has made efficiency into a key concept for the transforming practices of UofT pro-life activism. To argue this view, I decided to employ Barth’s definition of knowledge as an experienced social affair that includes “*feelings (attitudes) as well as information, embodied skills as well as verbal taxonomies and concepts*” (Barth, 2000, p.1). This observation implies that, due to its manifestation in practices and the resulting experiences, knowledge constantly adapts to newly encountered information. This knowledge development process not only implies a dynamic interaction between experience and environmental influences but also allows for a balance between agency and conformity when it comes to the rejection or acceptance of certain experience-based inferences. By viewing efficiency as the measure of validity that influences the practices of the group, it becomes possible to see how their fundamental bodies of knowledge are distributed and how social divisions and forms of communication are encouraged during public activism and private training.

It is first necessary to acknowledge that the abortion debate moved outside the legislative arena and became integrated into public discourse after the defeat of Bill C- 43 in 1991. This bill aimed to recriminalize abortion after the Supreme Court declared in the 1989 Morgentaler case that Section 251 of the Canadian Criminal Code violated Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights (Gordon & Saurette,
2016, 133-134). Although there were grassroots pro-life activism and political lobbying in the seventies and eighties, the declaration that Section 251, which would have legalised abortion only when a Therapeutic Abortion Committee deemed that a pregnancy post a woman’s physiological and mental health at risk, was unconstitutional moved the abortion debate from the medical realm to the legislature (Gordon & Saurette 2016, 126). This shift was crucial since Prime minister Mulroney had to face a polarized Parliament that called either for stricter regulation or more liberal access to abortion practices, a split that seemed to be disconnected from the absence of public concern for unregulated abortion during the 1988 elections. Bill C-43 was defeated in the Senate in 1991 due to opposition from both Pro-life and Pro-choice supporting senators and ended up being the last bill on abortion tabled by the government, as Mulroney decided not to reintroduce new legislation (Saurette & Gordon 2016, 134-135). This switched the debate to the public domain because only a demanding public could reopen any debate in parliament and prevent the Supreme Court from further diminishing the rights of the fetus. Consequently, the pro-life activism, which had moved away from the educative civil-rights activism of the sixties towards a more aggressive religious discourse to counter the alleged declining morality of secularization in the seventies and eighties, started to re-invest in efforts to de-normalize abortion and to reconvert it into an “unthinkable” procedure.

“To change hearts and minds”

The return to education-based activism was influenced by a notion of efficiency, a term that is widely used among the pro-life group at the University of Toronto. Instead of political activists who try to advance legislation, the students have taken on the role of public educators. While the club still divides its pro-life activities into political, pastoral and educational branches, it is the educational branch that is emphasised as being the most efficient, for the group holds that change can only be instigated by mobilizing the public. Instead of asking the question “How can we make abortion illegal?” the question becomes “How can we make abortion unthinkable in a society where the lack of the fetuses’ Personhood (legal personality) is taken for granted?

When I was attending a dialogue workshop, the mandatory training for Choice Chain participants that instructs students in the ways of framing the pro-life argument on the street, the first thing that Mary told the new student recruits was that a successful exchange of information requires you to first find common ground:

After a few moments of silence Mary continued “so we have people that are for it, against it and then people that are neutral. It is the neutral that are the worse, because you have nothing to talk about and they have not thought about it” She said this with a small smile that was reflected on the other participants faces. I look around to see if I missed out on some joke. “You ask them ‘what do you think about abortion’ and they go like ‘no opinion’. While saying this statement she lowered her voice and shrugged to portray an uninformed person. Laughter at the imitation rang through the room, and I could not help but join in - (Annika’s fieldnotes).

In this passage, Mary clearly displays the difficulty of communication when there is a lack of common ground, which in this case gives rise to ridicule of neutral persons in the abortion debate. Their lack of opinion must be due to indifference or apathy with regards to abortion, as Mary is not able to understand any possibility of neutrality resulting from informed opinion. Therefore, the confrontation with the neutral bystander creates a situation where the person needs to be educated while there is an awkwardness arising from an inability to find common ground. I encountered pro-life students
responding to neutral bystanders during Choice Chain demonstrations by finding a common theme regarding the subject of human rights ("Do you believe in human rights?") or the scientific definition of humanity (if two organisms from the same species reproduce, what is its offspring biologically speaking? Is something that grows alive?).

For pro-life students, establishing commonality makes interaction and knowledge exchange possible, as it creates a social connection that allows communication to take place. In other words, only through the ability to understand each other can learning take place. One pro-life student suggested to me that, even if she cannot find anything to agree on, she tells the person that she likes the hat they are wearing, for instance. However, complimenting someone’s clothing does not hold any informative content that can be used as a basis for common ground. Therefore, how can this create any efficient common ground outside of having the same taste in clothing?

As the student activists indirectly suggest, dialogue is based on commonality, but knowledge acquisition can only occur if a social relationship is formed creating trust in the validity of the other’s experience (Barth 2002, 2). The application of the word character within the dialogue training and weekly sessions embodies this social aspect of knowledge production. In an early session that I attended, one of my key informants, Daniel, pulled out his phone in front of the group to read a text from a Ryerson student, who had been pro-choice. The student had frequently engaged in discussions about abortions with Daniel and other pro-life students over the course of two years, because of how approachable they were. In the text the student stated that his conversion to the pro-life movement was accelerated by the contrast between their friendliness and the hostility of Ryerson’s pro-choice movement: “I had to ask myself if I really wanted to be associated with them” was the way he ended the text. This was later echoed by Mary stating that people do not always remember our arguments, but they remember how they have been treated, they remember our character.

What the former pro-choice student describes is his loss of solidarity with the pro-choice movement due to his observations of questionable behavior. As Barth explains, we extend our knowledge through our own judgments based on experiences that we have validated, but mostly on “what others whom we trust tell us they believe” (Barth 2002, 2). It is this trust that is needed within a social relationship to accept any new information that differs so drastically from the experiences from which we otherwise infer knowledge. The pro-life students are aware of this need to experience this emotional connection in order to bring about a drastic change of mind. Failure of individuals to convert and even their angered reactions to exhibited intellectual and visual evidence can only be understood by the pro-life group as a form of social disconnection; something is “blocking their heart”. The transmission of new knowledge about a fetus being human and deserving of rights based on information extracted from scientific and human rights discourse can still be rejected if there is a painful sentiment blocking the heart. Consequently, pro-life students have concluded that to efficiently convey the knowledge that a fertilized egg and unborn fetus are deserving of personhood and legal personality, they need to change or socially reconnect the heart first, so they can then change people’s minds.

**Efficiency as a filter of social organization and practices**

When Daniel explained that he liked how another pro-life student Natasha came to him wanting to engage in the pro-life movement, he emphasized that she did not ask him the frustrating question
“What should I do to make abortion unthinkable?” Instead she worked backwards from a goal by asking “What do I need?” Since to efficiently educate individuals requires an approach that does not just provide new information but also makes the new information emotionally available, the dualism of the heart and mind needs to be reflected in the main methods of communication or representation.

The controversial usage of signs containing victim photography (ultrasound images and pictures of dissected fetuses) thus involves more than the exhibition of visual evidence. The current pro-life movement builds on the civil-rights pro-life activists of the sixties, who employed the then-contemporary civil rights discourse of equality and humanity to argue for the rights and protection of the fetus. This language based on exposing inequality still resonates within the student body, with increasing advocacy for mental health equity, diversity, and sexual and gender equality, in times when the corresponding rights seem constantly threatened. Additionally, the dismissal of Section 251 by the Supreme Court was not only supported by arguments relating to risk, but also arguments for female autonomy and women rights, noting that the criminal law did not contain “criteria unrelated to her [a woman’s] own priorities and aspirations” and therefore limiting the freedom that women were granted under Section 7 of the Charter of Rights. Only if the fetus can be granted personhood and therefore rights can it be covered by Section 1 of the Charter, which limits the Charter’s application if there is reason of sufficient importance (Gordon & Saurette, 2016, 133-134). Despite the court curtailing the rights of the fetus in Tremblay v Daisy in 1989, the student group has noted that past social movements were often able to change normalized denial of personhood by exposing the injustice taking place.

Graphic images therefore become a means of making an emotional appeal and raising questions about the societal “violence” inflicted on the unborn. The group finds the abhorrence in perceiving these images as evidence that abortion is controversial. The imagery serves to emotionally provoke bystanders to engage in the abortion debate and make it unavoidable to ignore:

“Choice?” it said in dark black letters on a giant foldout board with a picture of a headless and disembowelled 11-week fetus on it. Mary was leaning over the sign handing out flyers explaining the violence that choice forces on women by compelling them to abort a child. Two other students, both from different universities in the GTA, were standing on the corner of Ryerson campus and holding up signs showing decapitated fetuses and fetuses with limbs ripped off, one of them facing the bicycle path exposing passing bicycles to the pictures. About 5 feet removed from me, Kayaan was engaging in a discussion that had been going on for the last 25 minutes. The woman was increasingly raising her voice stating that the pictures were too emotional and triggering. “It is unethical!” she exclaimed. Kayaan reacted by calmly asking “Is it the pictures that are unethical or what is depicted on them?” (Annika’s fieldnotes).

For Kayaan, a social injustice is being perpetrated against a growing and therefore living being. Instead of regarding the confrontational tactic of eliciting emotional response to the victim photography as unethical, he interpreted the woman’s accusation as an emotional response to the implications of the unethical violence of the pro-choice movement that the image displays: “If it ends in death, it is not a choice.” By emotionally reaching out to this woman, he believed he was starting the process of unblocking the heart of a woman who he considered to be in denial of the exposed truth.

For this reason, using victim photography is not only an educational strategy for pro-life activists, but it also puts them in the role of therapists listening to the personal narratives invoked by the triggering imagery. This is emphasized by the fact that they also distribute cards for the local “Silence no more”
group, a healing group for women and men hurt by abortion, and the Aid to Women pregnancy crisis centre, a centre created to help women with difficult pregnancies.

Graphic imagery and video are therefore actively selected because they are deemed to be efficient, proven in action since the pro-life club started employing them in 2014. Other practices, such as fundraising and clip-boarding (Q&A), have been deemed less effective in comparison and therefore a waste of time. This was made apparent by the frustration often experienced when clip-boarding, which also has the distribution of information as its key aim. The annual number of people who joined the group as a result of clip-boarding was felt to equal the number resulting from a month of choice-chain activity. Currently the students continue to employ Q&A in the activism against assisted suicide, while still feeling that it yields little result. As the group has recognized, the low visibility of the activity inhibits any interaction and therefore any formation of social bonds. However, Daniel explains to a new club member that at least it provides practice in rhetorically framing the pro-life argument through questions and narratives that can be employed during abortion activism.

Additionally, the claimed efficiency of victim photography and the inefficiency of other activities are not based on statistical but anecdotal evidence. The interpretation of this evidence presumes a need for trust in a valid information exchange, itself established by sharing and accepting anecdotal evidence. For instance, in the first session of the semester, Daniel said that he normally selects short narratives about encounters to share with new recruits as examples of the ways in which graphic imagery makes it possible to change people’s mind in the abortion debate. According to him, episodes in which the injustice of abortion is visibly encountered restore the fetus’s humanity and personhood in the minds of individuals (including the recruits), compelling them to sign up for the pro-life club. It is a view that the recruits emotionally embody in themselves as many of them are reminded by the imagery of the horror they feel about the death of 100,000 fetuses a year in Canada.

However, this does not mean that there is no expression of discomfort or doubt within the group concerning the use of such imagery. Daniel, for example, was confronted by a new member who wanted to continue her activist role at the university but did not want to be associated with the images of disembowelled children. Her request was denied.

Victim photography has become the main medium that is solely employed by the pro-life group on campus as an efficient means of recruiting new demonstrators. The woman expressing her discomfort was prevented from participating in activism and told that she should join one of the other branches (political or pastoral) if she wanted to be pro-active in the club and movement. Efficiency, therefore, is not only employed actively as a selective criterium for a proper form of communication, but also to consolidate social organization for student pro-life activism.

The loss of demonstration space on campus

While graphic imagery addresses the need to emotionally engage individuals in the abortion debate in order to bring about the changes of heart that lead to changes of mind, the active maintenance required to sustain the sole employment of this medium must be sturdy, as it is constantly confronted by the potential risk of triggering aggression instead of the compassion required to efficiently transfer information as described above. If exhibiting character is more important than argument, how does finding common ground correlate with what is a clear need to stand-up to the aggression that results from making controversy graphically visible?
This tension between invoking emotion by signage to establish common ground and the resulting experience of antagonistic responses to the Choice Chain campaign reached a peak in 2016, when the pro-life groups at the UofT downtown and Mississauga campuses were denied club status by the student union. The groups were outraged that the UTSU would not give them club funding, complaining that “even though we are students and pay them, they won’t give us support”. This was intensified when the Ryerson Union, which is the only body that can accept club application, denied the Ryerson Students for Life club status, causing it to disband all together.

Social space, such as the university space, cannot be assumed to be naturally formed but its borders are enforced, and it is susceptible to reforming (Gupta & Ferguson 1992, 6). The exile of the pro-life students at Ryerson from campus space fuelled the need for a collaboration with pro-life student group at the University of Toronto, which had a large body of activists and was being supplied with signage by the Canadian Centre of Bioethical Reform:

‘I have only two people, no money and no club. How many people do I need?’ Daniel fell quiet and looks at the six of us with a smile. “More than two, 5 to 10 people if you want to sustain weekly activism and a public sidewalk to do it on’ he answered. (Annika’s fieldnotes)

The inability to be present at events organized by the extracurricular student body represented by the union, such as club fairs, dissolved solidarity based on university identity within the movement and led to the mobilization of pro-life students within the boundaries of public space, creating the umbrella organization Toronto Against Abortion. This organization grew later to include York University, the Scarborough, and Mississauga campuses, and George Brown, as well.

As a result, university groups no longer operate within the boundaries of their campuses. Monthly training programs and demonstrations draw participants from across the GTA, including students from all campuses. This shift to public mobilization and strictly structured access to GTA pro-life student sessions and workshops has given rise to strong coherency between the Ryerson TAA movement and the UofT pro-life activists. The president of TAA is both a Ryerson student and a UofT graduate student, and therefore the Ryerson TAA assistant team leader and the education coordinator for the University of Toronto group. TAA’s focus on efficiency confines the activism of both organizations to events displaying imagery. However, the Mississauga pro-life movement had a table session earlier in the semester with a thought board and continues to display more flexibility due to its relative distance from the TAA leadership and both downtown campuses.

Consequently, solidarity between the intercampus groups is maintained by an emotional connection and strives to be boundaryless. The pro-life students participating in demonstrations have become a student faction that engages in border-crossing. The moment they pick up the graphic material and take on their role as educators, they must shed their identity as University of Toronto students, as they are not welcome on the university’s private property. They must leave the university space for a space where cultural discourse is free to occur. Conversely, their participation in the expansion of knowledge at the university prohibits them from participating in the “dominant culture within the same geographical and territorial space” (Gupta & Ferguson 1992, 7).

This immediately puts them in evident opposition with the university as a knowledge-producing centre, many encountered members of the student body tending to label their discourse as misinformed, based on false scientific data and tampered images, attitudes that I also frequently observed.
consequentially furthers the alienation between the pro-life students and the university by deporting their knowledge exchange to their own insulated social networks confined to public space.

**Conclusion**

The concern with maintaining mobilization and solidarity in the public sphere is brought to light by the adoption of the term “efficiency” to defend the use of a controversial medium: *victim photography*. This emphasis on efficiency is a consequence of the destabilized social structures resulting from the introduction of this controversial new means to communicate knowledge. Coherency among the student pro-life bodies of the GTA needed to be strengthened in order to consolidate the new tactic and to retain a new balance between the core, representation and social distribution required for efficiency (Barth 2002, 3). The term therefore reflects a change in the attitude toward knowledge:

“*knowledge cannot be seen as a production mechanism that is passively accepted by the citizen, but to be redefined as a subject of consumption and validation. There needs to be an understanding of the citizen as a person of knowledge* (Visvanathan 2005, 91)

In the case of the pro-life student club, it attempts to be actively engaged within different institutions, consuming and integrating various forms of knowledge generated in an interaction of scientific data, social movements and experienced educational strategies and incorporated in a framework to convey the notion that the fetus should be protected by human rights. It is a mixture of knowledge, one that is constantly challenged as improper and defended as efficient.

However, the constellation is even more elaborate. As I discovered through my research, the UofT group has become tightly interwoven into a network of intercampus student activism (Toronto Against Abortion), local student-run non-profits and charities (Toronto Right to Life, Campus Life Network, and Aid to Women) supported by out-of-province and international pro-life organizations (Canadian Centre of Bioethical Reform, Centre of Bioethical Reform, Priest and Anglicans for Life) and finally their own research-producing institutions (DeVeber Institute). All of them have partially contributed to the way that the pro-life movement efficiently educates. The group has taken it upon themselves to mobilize as the educators of the truth, while incorporating knowledge supplied to them by the university as well as other opposing knowledge producers. The campus pro-life group cannot be adequately described by polarizing terms of critics, such as pro-life and anti-choice, but should be seen as a confrontational engagement with several bodies of knowledge to form their own terminology and criteria, such as efficiency, and that loop back to influence the group’s own formation.

**References**

