

Qniversity Lawrence: Sparking a New Network of Diverse Friends and Mutual Support

In 2014, Bill Traynor and Frankie Blackburn of Trusted Space Partners conceived and implemented an experiment to encourage and support everyday people in sharing their wisdom with each other. With a small group of volunteer “stewards” and over an 18 month period of time, over 400 people participated in a wide array of workshops and events as part of “Qniversity.” The following is an effort to share that experience. What we think we accomplished? What we think we learned? And what we think is the promise of these kinds of efforts in community life.

Perhaps you are sitting with one of these questions as you go about your daily life:

- Who can I call to talk over a specific life challenge without feeling uncomfortable?
- How can I hang out with people who will broaden my horizons, while also supporting my dreams?
- Why doesn't anyone ask me for help or for my ideas and wisdom?
- Why do I feel so empty after attending a neighborhood meeting?
- How can I help build bridges across my community's deep divides?

We frequently ponder these questions, both as individuals seeking diverse networks of friends which provide moments of fun, meaning and mutual support and as social designers, seeking to support others in developing similar networks where they live and work. We also ruminate on the following truths:

- The scientific evidence is clear: we are much healthier and achieve more with our lives when we have a robust network of positive and diverse relationships that support our continued growth and development as individual human beings. Yet, the trend lines point to increasingly large numbers of disconnected, isolated and lonely people. The numbers are even larger in poor neighborhoods, and among men and communities of color. Last year, a study demonstrated that more people die as a result of loneliness than due to heart disease and obesity.
- And when we connect this data to the data on income inequality, chronic unemployment and the extreme use of electronic devices, it is easy to paint a picture of many people, particularly young people, living in an alternative reality that does not include the positive exchanges that come when you are surrounded by others who both need your wisdom and love and have wisdom and love to share with you.
- Most importantly, here in America, we are faced with the continued deep wounds of our democratic capitalist system built on top of the evils of slavery and Jim Crow, and the continued systemic racism in all of our private and public systems of support: finance, housing, public safety, education and health care. We know that new laws and public policy reforms only get us part of the way towards a thriving

pluralistic society. New networks of daily exchange, mutual support and innovation across lines of difference are essential ingredients to eradicating the deeply ingrained attitudes, norms and habits grounded in our fear of “the other”.

Because of these truths, we have devoted our careers to sparking new diverse networks inside the framework of local institutions and social change platforms. For example, we are currently very involved in bringing our philosophy of community network building to mixed income housing complexes, local school reform campaigns and to urban renewal initiatives. We will continue to do so when presented with ripe moments of opportunity that can demonstrate the value of these networks to institutions and the people who run them.

But we know that working inside the confines of local institutions will not effectively proliferate the art and practice of building mutually supportive relationships across lines of difference. We yearn to help spark a more universal and ritualized approach to this challenge, much in the way the Alcoholics Anonymous approach supports those overcoming addictions or Weight Watchers’ supports those seeking to lose weight. And, of course, we hold great respect for the many faith communities which spark and sustain active networks of mutual support and trust, but we rarely come across a faith community which succeeds in building a new and lasting network across divides of race, class and culture.

Two years ago, fueled by this yearning, we decided to embark on a small experiment in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a low to moderate income, smaller city made up largely of Hispanics (80%) and Whites (20%), to test out the following hypothesis:

If we create a loosely organized and fun physical space and set of practices devoted to the principle that “wisdom is everywhere”, we can support people of different backgrounds in mutual learning and relationship building.

We picked Lawrence because TSP had – based on a long history – access to a network of trusting relationships which would serve as a starting place for pitching this hypothesis. This experimental moment - which included 6 months of planning and 18 months of operation – became known as Qniversity¹ Lawrence and produced some very important lessons that we hope to capture and share with others via this short document and the attached photo essay.

A Month in the Life of Qniversity Lawrence

Our virtual tour of Qniversity Lawrence begins in a colorful room with a high ceiling and lots of windows (approximately 900 square feet in size) located within an old mill building

¹ Qniversity is a made up word, combining the letter Q which stands for the fact that we can have a higher quality of life - right now - by sharing good life together, with the word University, which signifies that wisdom is everywhere and that we all have something to teach each other.

that was recently converted into three floors of mixed income housing and one floor of commercial space. The center of the room is wide open, but in each corner there is a different type of area in which to gather:

- a cozy living room with old overstuffed chairs, a couch and lamps;
- an inviting country kitchen with a well stocked mini-fridge, coffee maker and baskets of snacks;
- a cool bar area under a colorful awning, complete with a pinball machine, popcorn machine and a large corner wall of white boards (and plenty of markers to use);
- a garden bench with a low roof of lighted branches under which to sit and think/talk quietly.

Here is a typical flow for one month of the Qniversity Lawrence experiment:

🚩 Week One, Saturday Afternoon at 2 p.m. – Signature Qniversity Session

Thirty diverse people are gathered to enjoy a 2 hour Qniversity session involving three mini classes on:

- *Using your iphone on how to make movies;*
- *Strengthening your core with daily exercises at home;*
- *Cleaning your kitchen efficiently and thoroughly.*

One of the teachers is a young latino man who is re-building his life after some rough years. Another is an older white lawyer who is a third generation resident of the city. The third is an middle aged Latino women who does not speak English, having just moved from the Dominican Republic two years ago.

Participants begin by standing in a circle to introduce themselves and to share one thing new or good in their lives.... and then divide up into smaller groups to rotate among the learning stations. The rounds are quick and high energy and the afternoon concludes with a quick check out during which teachers and topics for the next month are recruited. And of course, everyone lingers to enjoy music, snacks and beverages.

🚩 Week One, Sunday afternoon at 1 p.m. – Yoga and Meditation Session and Affinity Group

Kate, an active participant in the monthly Qniversity Sessions, decided to offer a weekly yoga and meditation session, after her mini-class was so well received. She's always dreamed of opening up a Holistic Health center in Lawrence, but she has a full time day job and no means to rent out a decent space. She's discovering that there is quite a bit of pent up demand for yoga/meditation (Lawrence has no yoga studios) and decides to offer her weekly class for free to build her reputation and experience, while working on a business plan to open up a studio some day. Kate quickly becomes a key doorway for introducing new people to Qniversity Lawrence and the Saturday afternoon sessions.

🚩 Week Two, Friday night at 6 p.m. – Community Network Night

Qniversity Lawrence partners with a local, established nonprofit, devoted to organizing residents in Lawrence to improve the community, to host a monthly network night in the space. The purpose of network night is threefold: relationship building, small group conversations around common topics of interest and a marketplace exchange of small favors among neighbors and friends. This ritualized gathering device is often referred to as “a party with a purpose”. Qniversity Lawrence taught the nonprofit how to use this ritual and offered the fun gathering room for free. In turn, the nonprofit introduced a new group of diverse people to Qniversity Lawrence, providing a chance to recruit new teachers and participants, a win-win for everyone involved.

✚ Week Three, Wednesday night at 6 p.m. - Back to Basics Sewing Night and Affinity Group

At the last Qniversity Session, Arleen, a young Latino mother who is raising two boys in Lawrence and Frankie, an older, white resident new to Lawrence, discover that they both want to learn the basics of sewing and to have access to a sewing machine. Arleen volunteers her mother to be the teacher and another active Qniversity participant donates her sewing machine for permanent use in the space. Arleen and Frankie agree to co-host a periodic gathering of others who want to learn things like sewing on a button, hemming pants, making a pillow case etc. With very limited marketing, they discover a whole new range of diverse people who share their interest and introduce Qniversity to these newcomers through this “shared affinity doorway”. Frankie volunteers to make a pitcher of Sangria for each of their gatherings, bringing a more festive flare and helping participants connect while they sew.

✚ Week Three, Friday night at 7 p.m. – Qniversity Stewards Pot Luck Dinner and Game Night

In the beginning, Qniversity Lawrence was organized a small group of stewards who were willing to try this form of mutual support. Overtime a wider group of people emerged as active participants and supporters of the experiment. In order to best harness the energy and wisdom of these stewards, a decision was made to create an intentional space to build relationships of trust, fun and mutual support among this evolving team. On this particular night, one of the most creative stewards – who happens to love games – brought a bunch of fun icebreakers for the rest of us to try out, over a pot luck dinner. We lowered the lights, enjoyed some wine, turned the music on and laughed harder than we typically do on a regular boring Friday night! After this evening and several other gatherings, we all noticed that the process of divvying up the Qniversity duties got easier and easier to accomplish, and we found ourselves with a more diverse support group than ever before. Our positive energy began to spill out and others actively volunteered to become stewards as the months went by.

✚ Week Four, Saturday night at 7 p.m. - Dance and Speed Teaching Party

A common topic of conversation at Qniversity Sessions and gatherings is that Lawrence does not have many safe, desirable places to hang out on a Saturday night. As a result, an organizing team volunteered to combine the idea of a dance party with a speed teaching session of different mini-classes held on previous Saturday sessions. The team recruited 8 teachers to host a mini-booth around the edge of the room and in the hallway, and made an awesome tape of dance music, combined with a “donation only” bar of limited wine and beer. The “teaching” at the mini-booths included Healthy Juicing, Home Brewing, Angel Card Reading, Zentangle Cards, I phone Photos, Stretching Exercises. Over 80 people came to this party, including children, youth and older adults – all mixing it up together within safe and positive limits.

Seven Key Ingredients in Our Experiment

1. A Compelling Invitation and Concept:

From the very beginning, we consistently stuck to a very simple, compelling message, even though we hold many aspirations for pursuing deeper and specific social change and reform. *We struggle with the continued failure of public and private institutions in sparking real change in communities like Lawrence. We believe that regular people like you and me can come together now, to exchange our wisdom and have fun, and through these new, diverse relationships build a higher quality life for ourselves and others in our community. We also put forth a simple and compelling invitation: We all know that Wisdom is everywhere. What is your wisdom? What would you like to share with others?* “Wisdom in Everywhere” was our tag line and this was the message from the first informal gatherings to pitch the hypothesis, through the early outreach and all the way to the final session.

2. An Intriguing Name and Fun Communication Strategies:

We have learned through the years the importance of developing an interesting and intriguing brand (one that has a ring and captures the core concept but also invites further explanation). The Original “Q” which for us signifies the Quality of Life one gets from sharing life with others, came from a campaign that TSP organized in the Grove Hall Community of Boston in 2102. Since that time, TSP has used “Q” as a brand a signifier for a range of devices and campaigns. Hence, we went with Qniversity Lawrence and the use of a bright and cool Q, for t-shirts and posts on line, designed by a graphic artist friend. We also benefitted from the help of other stewards who knew how to use facebook and instagram, and from a graphic design app called “Over” and cheap Vista print post cards, ordered on line.

3. An Inviting and Flexible Physical Space:

Our most important decision was to invest some of our own personal funds into leasing a nice, wide open physical space that supported us in involving others in designing a cool and fun home base, one that accommodated lots of different kinds of gatherings and activities. We invested considerable time in searching for and buying funky and cheaper furniture in consignment shops and on line. We wanted to send a clear message to each newcomer –

this is a different kind of community moment (than the typical boring community room) and you are warmly invited to join in.

4. Consistent and Simple Operating Premise and Practices

After inviting people to join in, we were consistent in re-stating the underlying premise at the beginning of every session: *Quality people, things, ideas, experiences and knowledge exists all around us and inside us, but we have a hard time getting at it. At Qniversity, we create and share simple practices that help us connect in the midst of a busy life and across differences, so that we can all get the most out of community life and share more good life where we live.* We were constantly experimenting with a range of creative practices, but the two most consistently used practices were:

- **New and Good:** At the beginning of each session, we stand in a circle and go around and introduce ourselves, share where we live and share one thing new or good that has happened in our lives in the past few days
- **Learn and Teach:** At the end of each session, we came back into a quick circle and asked for volunteers to share something new they learned and something they might like to teach at a future session.

5. Resisting Over-Organizing and Providing Easy Ramps for Participating

Prior to inviting the first early stewards, we agreed we were NOT starting a new nonprofit or a new business. We were clear about that point with the early stewards team and all the other volunteers and supporters who came after. Our goal was to spark a loosely affiliated network that could survive outside traditional organizational forms. At a few key moments, we actively resisted the push from newer network stewards to insist on more infrastructure, particularly to address concerns regarding communication with “members” and tracking finances. We often referenced the methods of AA groups to help explain and to build shared understanding and support. We also worked hard to develop a few, easy guidelines for newcomers to serve as pioneer teachers. And, we relied on and modeled old fashioned relationship building and follow up to ensure effective transitions and participation.

6. Core, Spirited Group of Inviters and Modelers

As Margaret Mead and real life experience has taught us, most successful social interventions bubble up naturally from an organic moment of opportunity shared by a small group of people. From the two of us, we connected with a few people who we had relationships with and we invited them to be co-experimenters with us, saying essentially we have this idea, can we try it out a few times together to see if it has some merit. We tried a few informal Qniversity ‘sessions’, where we all committed to hosting a short workshop on something we were passionate about. These were fun, helped us build relationships and helped us test the idea. In addition, several of those early ‘adopters’ became some of the strongest stewards over the long haul.

With the confidence from these early sessions,’ we sought out and cultivated a team of interested people to first help us design the space. We also launched a mini-campaign around our “Wisdom is Everywhere” tag line, doing one-on-ones in person and by phone

we asked dozens of people “What do you want to Teach? What do you Want to Learn?” Through that process we recruited a dozen “pioneer hosts” – a diverse group of local residents who would be the first ‘teachers.and then to serve as “pioneer teachers”. After the first six months, some of this group transitioned into a slightly more formal/organized team of network stewards. As illustrated in the Month in the Life of Qniversity, above, we emphasized the importance of creating a sense of friendship and shared fun in building out the Qniversity Lawrence experiment. This meant that we spent more time organizing social gatherings among ourselves, than conducting planning meetings and in fact, did most of our planning via a group email process. In the beginning, all of the stewards volunteered their time, but in the last year, they received a small monthly stipend.

7. Leverage of Pre-Existing Networks

The ability to recruit early volunteers and pioneer teachers and participants clearly rested on our access to a diverse of residents and professionals in Lawrence and the surrounding area, who were connected to the work of Lawrence Communityworks. This provided at least the ability to have one on ones and some small meetings to pitch the idea to a diverse set of people from the start.

Experiment Results and Current Status of Qniversity Lawrence

As is true for many community experiments, the limited supply of on-going funding to pay for the physical space and the supplies, forced a decision to move Qniversity Lawrence ,after one year, from it’s own gathering space to a shared “open lobby” space in a mill building next door. This move, along with life changes among the core organizing team, prompted the effectual end of the Qniversity Lawrence experiment. We now use this paper as a moment to reflect and capture lessons learned. We never expected the experimental period to go on indefinitely and we entered the experiment open to what ever evolved out of our investment abilities, from both a timing and financial perspective.

Here is the original hypothesis:

If we create a loosely organized and fun physical space and set of practices devoted to the principle that “wisdom is everywhere”, we can support people of different backgrounds in mutual learning and relationship building.

We see the following assessments (below) as key evidence that we succeeded in proving this hypothesis to be correct.

- Over 400 very diverse residents of Lawrence participated in more than one session or gathering during the 18 month period.
- Over 50 very diverse residents of Lawrence served as either a network steward or a teacher or a volunteer during the 18 month period of operation.
- At least half of these 50 people would not have previously identified themselves as capable of teaching or organizing a community-wide class.
- The message of “wisdom is everywhere” is widely used among four or five smaller circles of new, entrepreneurial efforts in the city.

- El Taller, a favorite coffee shop and restaurant for young people to congregate, has opened up a space similar to Qniversity Lawrence and another group – which includes stewards from Qniversity – is organizing a new “maker space” in Lawrence.
- A team of three diverse people are building a new holistic health center concept and calling upon principles and people from Qniversity Lawrence in their design process.
- A core group of stewards continues to meet on a monthly basis and are helping sponsor Qniversity-like sessions in El Taller and other community spaces.

We now share an initial list of lessons learned, for those interested in trying out a similar experiment in their community. As the months and years go by, we feel sure that more lessons and reflections will emerge.

Consider weaving together the notion that “wisdom is everywhere” with a more compelling and shared imperative.

We found that the concept of “wisdom is everywhere” was very resonate and created a positive, open starting place from which to build new relationships across lines of difference. However, it was not sufficiently linked to a shared imperative that could produce the incentive or push for repeated, consistent participation. For example, it might work better to spark a network of diverse people seeking greater economic opportunity through the sharing of relationships and wisdom, across lines of difference. Or, another idea might be to link the notion that wisdom is everywhere to an expanded network of people working towards quality education for both children and adults in a particular community.

Adaptation and Resource Constraints: Over the course of 18 months, we shifted the format of Qniversity 4 times. In 18 months we morphed from the “Signature” Qniversity sessions in the Winter/Spring of 2014, to a “Summer Schedule” in 2014 of single purpose sessions, to a Fall/Winter 2014-2015 Schedule of “categorically” defined sessions and single purpose events, to the Spring Summer 2015 “Weekly Exchange” format. During this process we felt that we needed to be adaptive and be listening to our own learning as well as specific voices of stewards and others. This commitment to adaptation also allowed us to learn a lot more as we experimented with a range of formats and vantage points. The downside is that we did not allow for any one of these adaptations to really go through a full developmental cycle. We did not have the resource base – in either funds or personal capacity - to grow with demand, or to fully commit to problem solving the format as it existed. We had a ½ time stipended volunteer for only 3 months at the beginning of 2014. After that – for the balance of 2014 - we provided a small group of Stewards with a very modest stipend to collaborate as a core Stewardship Team. However, as demand grew, and the complexity of managing the space and the format increased, the stewards felt some pressure on their time. With each iteration and adaptation we got more informal and intimate, but we also got more exclusive and spent less time engaging new people. In retrospect, Qniversity probably represented 3-4 related but slightly different concepts, driven by slightly different imperatives. This is natural and in the course of shaping most enduring ideas, there are moments of reconciliation and pivot moments toward the central

idea that has resonance. In our case, a little more time, and a measure more of resources may have helped us identify and move through pivot moments less reactively and with a bit more analysis and intentionality.

Pursue a slower, more organic build up, with more “co-owners” from the very beginning.

In the early days of Qniversity Lawrence, we faced the choice of starting the practice of sharing wisdom with a smaller group of people and no external resources versus using some external resources (our personal funding) to secure a nicely furnished space to help attract a larger group of people from the outset. Even though we found an amazing group of “teachers and stewards” to help shape and guide Qniversity, the unspoken understanding was that this experiment belonged to those of us who had invested more personal funds and more time in the very beginning. Despite genuine efforts to share both decision-making and responsibility, we were not able to achieve a true sense of shared ownership in the short period of time we gave ourselves.

Start with a more strategic location and more available “open hours”.

One vision we had in the beginning was to create an informal, non-commercial coffee shop where you could stop in on your way to other happenings, and “bump into” other members in the network or use some of the space for a quiet 30 minute respite or to meet with some one who shared a similar interest or idea. While we all love great coffee shops, they can get expensive in terms of feeling obligated to buy coffee and food and they are often noisy or do not offer flexible spaces for demonstrating a craft/skill/drawing on a larger piece of paper. We were not able to experiment with this kind of space because our location was not central enough to make it easy for people to stop in and we did not have the person power to have a host to open up the space for large chunks of time. (Note: We’ve often thought that using vacant spaces in those ubiquitous strip malls – even on a rotating basis – or one of the front bays in a Wal Mart – could work really well for this purpose!)

Provide more small group spaces for intentional relationship building.

One clear learning from successful networks (like AA or faith based congregations) is the importance of small group spaces in which people can both share their ideas and reveal their personal challenges, and receive real time support. The combined benefit of feeling needed and supported – all in one regular and ritualized setting – has proven critical in producing the kind of bonds needed to sustain the network over time. We did not build in this kind of small group space in Qniversity, even when we started to hold regular steward gatherings. We did experiment with a weekly circle of stewards (we called it the Weekly Exchange Circle) during the last three months of the active Qniversity period, but the time was too limited and too late to develop a clear assessment of it’s worth to the overall effort.

Available Resources

Sample Rack Cards for Qniversity Sessions
Guide for Pioneer Session Leaders
Guide for Steward Circle Members
Sample Constant Contact Email to Members

Weekly Exchange Circle Format