It’s hard not to get addicted to HIFY. It’s hard to resist the pull of ‘fighting the good fight’ for youth empowerment. It’s hard not to want to give them all your time, emotion, effort, creativity. Quite frankly, it’s hard not to get a complex when you are in possession of a model of teaching, thinking, and acting that has such a drastic, marked impact on the way youth are empowered to move and act within society. Luckily, no one at HIFY has such a complex. I get the feeling that if the folks at HIFY could give out workshops like candy, and without going under financially, they would do it in a heartbeat. I think it is that selfless, earnest energy that is most infectious.

At the time of my internship, HIFY was in rough waters. They were small and struggled for funding in a city awash with nonprofits (lovely San Francisco), and while I benefitted from the crisis by taking away a good understanding of funding, grants, and the weaknesses of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (a term coined in “The Revolution Will Not Be Funded,” recommended reading from my supervisor, Tina) the uncertainty around HIFY’s eventual survival pervaded many meetings and conversations as we put our heads together to assess the market, potential partnerships, funding options, accessibility to youth, etc. No matter how positive and reassuring the executive director and manager were, it was difficult for me not to worry for them. I hope that they are well on their way uphill at this time!

I arrived at HIFY not entirely sure what my role there would be, nor entirely sure of my ability to work with adolescents. About those two feelings I can say that while my anxiety
around working with youth eventually melted away in the face of actual experience, I cannot say I ever had a ‘eureka’ moment of clarity regarding my purpose at HIFY. I felt a bit scattered, sometimes uncertain how best to prove myself, but I think the breadth of my experiences with HIFY makes up for the lack of one solid achievement that I can hold up for examination.

My duties, as I mentioned, were varied. In addition to many smaller activities and tasks, and the continual shadowing of workshops, I was given four larger projects: To create a digital story (which can now be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqUNv6hIGy8 or under the account name ‘hifymedia’ on youtube), to co-facilitate a weekly open-hours digital storytelling workshop for LGBTQI youth, to help design/pilot a weekly support group for LGBTQI youth at a partnered clinic, and perhaps most importantly, to design a workshop on the topic of my choosing utilizing their teaching model. The tasks I had in-between or during these larger ones included some research into existing literature for LGBTQI youth, creating activities for digital storytelling workshops, categorizing the archived digital stories, data entry, and various bits of support work.

Both the open-hours media project (christened ‘Q Lab’) and the support group at the clinic (‘The OUTlet’) were proposed at a staff retreat early in my internship, and I eagerly volunteered for them, being in the LGBT crowd, myself. Because both programs were new, I had the pleasure of seeing them through their planning stages and being involved in their execution over the remaining weeks of my internship.

Both of these projects suffered from a lack of consistent participation while I was there, which was disappointing, but not a waste of time at all. Q Lab did have some success after an initial slow period, and the week I left there was one (admittedly strange!) audio/visual media project in its editing stages. Even in the down time, though, I was glad to be a part of the
collaboration between HIFY and the San Francisco LGBTQ Community Center and learn about the latter through talking with their representative, and to be privy to and active in planning and problem-solving. The youth I met in Q Lab were an interesting, varied bunch, and I had a moment where I had to check myself on my perspective of them. I thought, for the longest time, that the participants were high-schoolers on break, but there came an awkward moment where I learned that all of them were older than myself, and they in turn learned I was younger. It reinforced for me the feeling of disconnect between provider and participant that crept up now and again. I (and my fellow coworkers of the same age, the wonderful Cassie and Sheena) was sometimes not far removed in years from the youth I served—or not at all! For me it was slightly alienating, for the youth programs that I might have taken advantage of in a new city (being from Massachusetts), I was involved in the running and administration of. Once on the inside, it was hard to see myself on the outside.

The support group at the clinic (Dimensions Clinic) had even fewer participants, even though it had been created to address an explicit need. We eventually re-evaluated the population we were trying to serve, but throughout most of the time I was there, myself and two fellow coworkers arrived faithfully every week to make ourselves available to LGBTQIQ youth who may be in the process of coming out. At the outset, the facilitator of a long-standing support group checked in with us and began telling us all sorts of horror stories about his group, and how he had had to report (because of mandated reporting law, which I became familiar with) statutory rape, had problems with violence in the space, with youth showing up drunk and high, etc. After hearing all that, I thought I was really in for a rough ride. The very few youth we did meet, however, with one exception, were talkative, mild-mannered, and genuinely pleasant for the hour or so we knew them. I enjoyed getting out of the office to go to the Castro (where the clinic was
located) and spending time with my coworkers, and I enjoyed being in a very ‘queer space,’ which I hope is not a unique trait to San Francisco wherein some non-profits I came in contact with were run all or in part by members of the queer community—something I do not think I will ever forget the feeling of, as a young queer person.

I was aware that I would be expected to create a full workshop from the beginning of my internship, and this was my most time-consuming task. After shadowing a few workshops, absorbing the tricks of the trade and sticking my nose into a few preparation meetings, I became comfortable with the ‘how’ of workshop creation and execution but I struggled mightily with the ‘what.’ As a Religion major, I was at first unsure how my interests and HIFY’s would intersect beneficially (indeed, a woman in one of our workshops asked me to repeat my major because she was certain she had not heard me right!). Now, of course, it seems silly to question how religion and health intersect, but I spent many hours banging my head against my computer desk and hemming and hawing with the ever-patient Tina and Carnelius over my ideas and quandries. It was difficult work, but the sense of accomplishment I had when at last everything began to come together was powerful. I cannot wait to discuss my work with professors back at school, and already I have had conversations about faith with strangers where I have been able to watch them reconsider the ways in which they interact with the faith of others. I was never able to facilitate it for a group of youth, which was quite disappointing, but the fact remains that I created it and ran it fairly smoothly for my coworkers from start to finish, and it will be available to them in whole or in part to use for future workshops.

I likely learned the most through shadowing workshops and watching my coworkers in action. I would like to give props right now to the staff at HIFY, who are all AMAZING people and wonderful facilitators. Watching them field difficult questions tactfully and be cool with
excitable adolescents, and listening to their candid observations between, inspired me to think
that I might be as capable, and instilled a strong sense of respect for their skills and expertise.

Having said that, I am going to admit to a bit of prejudice on my part. When I signed
myself up for the job, and learned that I would be working with youth in San Francisco, images
of rowdy classrooms, disinterested faces, and dangerous neighborhoods came to mind. This is, as
HIFY would say, ‘deficit-based thinking’—focusing on youth as full of problems to be fixed,
rather than the energetic, capable, knowledgeable people that they are. I would give my thoughts
labels that are less kind, but it’s a moot point now—the difference in my outlook on adolescents
and my ability to interact with them is as night and day. I wish I could have been to more youth,
rather than provider, workshops, but I am extremely thankful for what I was able to be a part of,
and for both the amazing youth and providers who each touched me in some way that would
have me wedded to non-profit work forever just to feel it.

I have taken away from HIFY knowledge of their philosophies and methods of teaching,
which will doubtless be valuable in countless situations ahead. I have begun to develop the skills
and confidence to be a facilitator, and more importantly, faith in my ability to use those skills. I
feel very positive about the future of anti-oppression work, and well equipped to recognize and
begin to deconstruct the institutions and attitudes that delay and deter people from leading
healthy, productive lives under their own power. I know what this looks like, and I know how we
can get there. Much more of my life and the community in which I was raised makes sense to me
now, and time and again I found myself wishing to race back to Medfield, MA (my white,
upscale hometown) to spread the gospel, as it were, of youth development, harm reduction, and
positive sexuality.
To future interns for HIFY I say take care of yourself; take breaks from trying to save the world! Burnout is unfortunately all too easy. And be prepared for a healthy amount of chaos in your schedule; if you can’t keep yourself busy and need a lot of structure, you might consider a more formal working setting. To borrow a word from a previous intern, I felt that amidst the constant activity, my skills were ‘underutilized’ for stretches of time, so good communication skills are a must to ensure that you are suitably challenged. And if you’re looking to work intimately with a tight group of kind, chill, dedicated, talented people—consider HIFY.

There is much more to say than I could ever fit into a report, and the ineffable components that give any internship its true color—a conversation here, a bad day there, a kind word, a workshop, an email. Much of my experience was characterized by what I observed rather than did, but I observed a great deal and internalized many lessons. I am truly sorry that I had to leave off just as the school year began, and leave off my adventures through the San Francisco youth services network. It was a great summer in a great city with some great people; I will miss HIFY!