'It’s just such a treat!': pleasure and desire in women’s vocational learning

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Introduction

What do women say about their learning experiences? Women in Australia have always had a strong presence in adult education (Gribble, 1993; Butler and Ferrier, 2000). While adult education is (as with most industrialised countries) increasingly drawn under the umbrella of vocational or employment-related education, the participation rates for women – particularly mature women – remain high. In the public Vocational Education & Training (VET) sector for example, women make up almost 50% of participants (NCVER, 2005). We know this, because we have the research that tells us these facts. What is less known, or researched, is what women think, feel and say about the vocational learning experience itself. This paper presents findings from my recently completed PhD study in which I investigate the learning experiences of mature women returning to study in the Women’s Education Course, an adult vocational preparation course in South Australia.

Ian Martin (2001) asks, from an educators’ perspective, what has happened to the vocation of adult education: ‘one thing seems sure: no-one else is likely to take much interest – they are all too busy asking the wrong questions’ (pp.1). The same can be said of vocational learning. The notion that we – researchers and educators – are asking the wrong questions is one that I used to inform the design of my doctoral research. An exploration of contemporary Australian VET literature convinced me that, not only were the wrong questions being asked, but alternative (right?) questions were not being asked – at least, not in relation to women learners.

This paper begins with a brief outline of the context and design of the research. After visiting notions of vocation discussed in the adult education literature, I focus on aspects of a useful learning framework that developed from the interview data. Features of learning are identified that are not commonly attributed to vocational education within the present industry-driven climate of adult education and learning. I explain the relevance of the research framework for investigating women’s experiences, and discuss the possibilities for framing, differently, approaches to vocational education research and provision to address current and ongoing concerns about the place of vocation in adult education.

The context and the research

This research study developed from my own experience as a mature-age learner in the Women’s Education Course in South Australia. This woman-only course is designed to meet the needs of ‘mature age women who wish to return to study/employment and who need to refresh or develop new skills, gain confidence and pursue new directions’ (DFEEST, 2003 pp.6). While adhering to the requirements of current qualifications frameworks the course recognises the invisibility of women in conventional knowledge, and addresses the implications of this for women’s confidence, sense of self, and agency. The curriculum is designed to acknowledge women’s everyday learning and skills, and the
role of women in society. Provision is based on models of feminist pedagogies, incorporating feminist principles of knowledge, experience and learning.

Participants were twelve mature women who were or had been enrolled in the Women’s Education Course. The starting point for the study developed from an understanding that the everyday world is indeed problematic for women (Smith, 1987), and my aim was to explore this problematic as it applied to women returning to vocational learning. The focus on women is an important one, because ‘[w]omen’s lives do not mirror men’s’ (Gouthro, 2007, pp.151). I neither assumed that their reasons for participation would be the same as – or even similar to – men’s, nor that their experiences would match commonly accepted ideas about learning. I also recognised that traditional notions of vocational learning are constructed within gendered frameworks of knowledge, from some men’s experiences. Women not only have different experiences, but because they are ‘outside the frame’ (Smith, 1987, pp.61) of how society is organised, they also experience similar events and activities differently.

Whilst it is acknowledged that learning occurs in diverse contexts, these ‘learning contexts [are] distributed across the social order and embedded in social practices’ (Edwards, 2005). How researchers understand those social practices and interrogate the gendered constructions of that social order, determines what knowledge is revealed. I used Dorothy Smith’s (1987; 1999) notions of organised systems of power that operate to construct women’s experience for, not by, them. These ‘relations of ruling’ (Smith 1999) informed a methodological design that enabled an understanding of how everyday life had been organised for women and the issues they consequently faced within a masculinist educational system. Acknowledging that not only were the ‘wrong’ research questions being asked but that the right ones could not be shaped out of the current Australian VET research literature, I began by asking women to tell me what they thought was important to them about their vocational learning.

Vocation - what does it mean?

The meaning of vocation in education has for some time been a topic of debate. From the perspective of some adult educators (for example Collins, 1991; Dawson, 2005; Martin, 2001) education is for work and for life, and the ideal of vocation in education is of an enriching and fulfilling experience, preparing the learner for participation in all areas of life – employment, social and personal. As early as 1897 the educator John Dewey (1964/1897) defined education in such terms, claiming that each student ‘(b)ecomes an inheritor of the funded capital of civilization. The most formal and technical education in the world cannot safely depart from this general process’ (pp.427).

Dewey’s concept of education for the purpose of inquiry, to produce knowledge and critical thinking, has been adopted by adult educators concerned with broadening life opportunities for adults, particularly those who may have fared poorly in earlier educational situations. One example is Collins’ (1991) ideal of adult education as vocation, offering a holistic and balanced approach to the purpose of learning and teaching:

Vocation refers to a calling and entails firm commitment to the performance of worthwhile activities that are not merely calculated to advance personal career aspirations or fulfil minimum job expectations … Efficiency and expertise are secondary to the larger issues of human fulfilment and equality. (pp.42 emphasis in original)

However, as adult education has been largely drawn into the sphere of work-related, or
vocational education, the *vocation*-al orientation of education has, as Collins (1991) predicted, been ‘pushed to the margins by obsession with pedagogical technique and management by objectives’ (pp.41). The growing area of industry-led, work-related learning – *vocationalism* – has retained adult education’s use of the terminology but has very selectively altered the philosophy. Dawson (2005) explains ‘[a]s technical economics increasingly came to dominate and drive the social agenda, vocation came increasingly to be equated with careers and occupations within the established sphere of paid employment’ (pp.224).

Paid employment is of course a worthy goal, but the critical aspects of vocation – fulfillment, self-awareness, a sense of self and place – have been dismissed in preparing individuals to be willing workers. *Vocation* has become a ‘tool’ of labour-market interests in which there is little space for enjoyment or pleasure in learning. Despite this, many educators believe that all education has (or should have) a broader purpose than simply to train individuals for a particular function. Adult vocational education is no exception.

**Aspects of learning**

A focus of the research was *how* women felt about and talked about their experiences. I noted their emotions, the words they used and the ways in which they expressed their thoughts, ideas and memories of their learning experiences. From these expressions aspects of learning were identified that were clearly important to them. While women talked about learning skills for work, they also spoke of the pleasure in discovering learning, and how learning became something they wanted – and needed – to do.

*Discovery and pleasure*

Women spoke of being ‘given permission’ to enjoy their learning, and of their profound sense of themselves as capable women (note that in the following quotes the first numeral indicates the first or second interview, followed by the page number(s) of the interview transcript):

> Yeah, I, I’ve said to my friends that now that I’ve rediscovered … discovered learning. (Della. 1, pp.11).

> I became happier because it was what I wanted to be doing. I was in the right place at the right time, and learning what I needed to learn, to help me become a stronger person for me, for the future, and, and, for my son as well … It was so what I needed at the time, and it’s been wonderful for me. It really has … And I’m challenging my brain as well … I just found it all so, I just wanted to embrace it all. I, I thought it was fantastic. I loved it. It was like wow, this whole new world opening up for me that I sort of knew about, but not really. (Marianne.1, pp.4,5,6)

> [A] world, the world, an aspect of the world, was opened up to me. The world of theory. I had had no idea. I had had no opportunity to have an idea … Just this constant surprise … how could I have not known? (Greta. 2, pp.3-4)

To talk about a world opening up through learning suggests an immense shift in women’s thinking. The significance of such a metaphor is in its scope: the world representing everything that is known, tangible and intangible, social and personal. What these women had in fact discovered is that there are different ways of understanding the world. They realised that the ‘particularized knowledge of the world’ (Smith, 1987, pp.109) that had until now organised their location and their actions in the everyday world, was not the only
way there is to know. Women discovered other ways of knowing, and, significantly, their own agency in producing and reproducing knowledge:

It was like I was standing on the outside watching somebody else doing, going through all of that. And eh, but now I'm, it's, it's more me. Yeah, it's me doing it. And, and eh, I'm a little bit more comfortable with that ... But yeah, I'm, yeah, bubbling, bristling with confidence at the moment, and [I'd like to do more study] but you know, purely and simply for the pleasure of learning. (Sylvia. 2, pp.7-8,17)

Rosalie (1, pp.3) said simply, 'It's just such a treat!'

In the women’s stories there is more than the ‘connection and relationship’ (Tisdell, 1995, pp.56) valued in the feminist curriculum of Women’s Education: there are expressions of delight as they talk about their new found ways of understanding what had previously been difficult to reconcile with their lived experiences.

Need and desire

Having found the tools to understand how their women’s lives have been organised and shaped there can be a sense of urgency as women feel they need to catch up and to learn as much as possible. In fact their emotive language suggested a deeply felt need to reclaim something that had been missing in their lives, or had been denied to them:

I'm not sure what, but I, I knew that I needed to have some form of learning. (Gillian. 1, pp.5)

… I couldn’t get enough of it. I could not get enough of the learning. I loved it. Absolutely loved the learning, you know? Even though it was hard, because, like I say, I mean I work full time, usually six days a week, and then, sometimes I’d be working back, and I’d … get to my class you know, say, eh, an hour or so late or whatever, but I’d still go … I didn’t want to miss out on any of the learning. (Sylvia. 2, pp.11)

[W]hen you’re doing something you love, or you’re really enjoying, the energy levels are just so high, and then, and when you’re passionate about something, you really want to find out about something, you really want to do something, your, your energy levels are extremely high and you won’t give up on it. (Julia. 2, pp.13)

We need to, we, we need to go on forever, I mean, I, I just don’t think anybody should need to stop studying, ah, in, in whatever capacity. (Lydia. 2, pp.2)

These four women talked about learning in terms of love, and passion, and desire: they described a relationship with learning that is not well documented in contemporary vocational research. Clearly, there is joy in learning, and at times there is more than pleasure – there is an earnest, almost desperate, desire to learn, to understand and to gain more knowledge about a newly discovered way of thinking and seeing their world.

Discussion

‘Learning can be transformative, empowering, liberating. It can also be frustrating, confusing and soul-destroying’ (Morris and Flynn, 2007, pp.1). Yes, it can be all of these, and more: this research shows that learning can also be pleasurable and desirable, joyful and even addictive. The pleasure of learning for learning’s sake, and the desire for
knowledge have particular significance for women. While many individuals and categories of people are denied full participation in knowledge production, women can be particularly isolated from knowledge production. Social ‘norms’ demand their complicity in maintaining patriarchal knowledge systems (Smith, 1987). They have, as Smith explains, learned to exist inside the framework of their own social invisibility:

To be recognized as a proper participant [in society], the member must produce work that conforms to appropriate styles and terminologies, makes the appropriate deferences, and is locatable by these and other devices in the traditions, factions, and schools whose themes it elaborates, whose interpretive procedures it intends, and by whose criteria it is to be evaluated. (1987, pp.61)

When that framework of invisibility is deconstructed through critical feminist pedagogical processes, as in the Women’s Education Course, women can begin to understand why the world seems so puzzling. Once they begin to see and reflect on to how things are, and how women have been absent or made invisible in traditional knowledge, there is a desire to learn and understand more. Along with this goes a realisation that they can be active participants in change; and having been excluded from the process of knowledge building, there is much to catch up on. Women’s passion and desire for learning suggest that learning for its own sake is clearly not a purposeless action. Given the opportunity, women can – and do – develop a personal and pleasurable relationship with learning.

Love, desire and passion are aspects of learning that are unlikely to be recorded in Australian contemporary VET research, and yet the Course in which these women participated is situated firmly within that educational sector. It seems that the Women’s Education Course has introduced women to vocational learning as a pleasurable and fulfilling activity, rather than simply a means to an end. These stories of learning transcend the notion of education for employment, echoing not only Collins’ (1991) call for an educational focus on fulfilment over expertise, but describing a way of doing learning that encompasses women’s experiences, as advocated by feminist educators such as Gouthro (2002; 2005) and Hart (2002).

The women in my study have described vocational learning experiences in the manner of Collins’ and Dewey’s ideals: that is, education that produces knowledge and critical thinking, and that is fulfilling and enriching. They have also learned skills for employment or further study, and all would be considered successful finishers in contemporary vocational training language, each one having since moved on to higher education or secure employment.

There are lessons for research here: by exploring from women’s standpoint I was able to ask different questions and so frame the data differently. In doing so I found that the relationship learners have with learning (that is, how they experience their learning) is significant in determining learners attitudes towards subsequent participation in study and/ or employment, as well as their sense of their own capabilities as active members of society. While my study has focussed on the experiences of women, notions of pleasure and desire as aspects of learning are surely applicable to all groups of learners: it is only in the relevance and usefulness of the learning itself that they differ.

Although I did not interview educators for my study, it is clear that the educator’s role is integral to the provision of a relevant, useful curriculum: this has been shown to be achievable within the constraints of an industry-driven educational environment and curriculum. We as educators can facilitate fulfilling and enriching vocational education
Conclusion

This paper has described some aspects of women’s vocational learning, identified in my doctoral research. These aspects of learning – discovery and pleasure; need and desire – suggest experiences of learning that align with critical adult educators’ notions of learning as vocation. These women found vocation in their learning experiences because their learning was relevant and useful to them and encouraged them to challenge and critique the world around them. They learned that they had a right to knowledge, and a right to participate in making and reshaping knowledge. Learning such as that experienced in the Women’s Education Course encourages a desire for more learning – a love of learning itself – and demonstrates qualities that can be confidently described as vocational learning. Vocational learning, when it is delivered via a curriculum that encourages self-discovery and critical reflection, offers opportunities to develop new perspectives, not only for learners, but also for educators and researchers. It’s a matter of asking different questions.

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