Identity, Change and Well-being in Women's Community Education

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This paper describes the nature of practice in a women’s community education organisation in the Republic of Ireland, and the findings that emerged from an ethnographic study in the organisation. The findings are analysed using insights from three sources that consider informal pathways and invisible colleges used by women: *Women’s Ways of Knowing* from the USA (Belenky et al 1997), English’s (2011) study of feminist non-profit organisations in Canada, and Etienne and Jackson’s (2011) study of women’s organisations in the UK. The purpose of the research was to identify habitus changes that could be attributed to the learning culture in the organisation. The feelings of well-being that were reported by participants are considered in light of these studies and in light of the criticisms of ‘therapeutic’ education.

The organisation provides personal and community development education for the purpose of working towards collective action for social change. The social change ideal is being able to create and participate in a more equal society. The women prioritised are working-class women, immigrant women, lone parents, and members of the Travelling Community. The organisation has a participatory management structure and is run by women, for women since starting as a NOW programme in 1995. The organisation established a Women’s Centre in 2000, and includes a crèche to support women engaged in daytime adult education. Sixty women a year participate in its programmes. The Centre claims that its programmes and supports are ‘needs-based’, overcoming barriers that might normally prevent participation.

Women come to the Centre and meet with a facilitator, who then introduces them to an informal group. When ready, the group identifies its learning aims and objectives, and funding is applied for. Our state funders are increasingly demanding accredited modules to be undertaken as employment is seen as the solution to poverty and disadvantage. Often, however, that is not what the women want to do. It takes more than a year’s participation in personal development programmes before women become more motivated to consider accreditation options. Funding for the early engagement work is accordingly difficult to find.
This research was an opportunity to identify the changes that can be attributed to participation. Reflective practice throughout the Centre means that programmes are evaluated, and many anecdotes exist about the positive outcomes that result from participation. However, we needed to pinpoint the elements that underpin these processes and outcomes and assess this against the Centre’s mission. I was able to suspend my voluntary management activities for a six-week period and be the fly-on-the-wall ethnographer, gathering data and then identifying what was indexical to women’s experiences in the Centre. When the fieldwork period was over, themes were identified, summarised, and brought back to all of the participants for further discussion. Hypotheses relating to each theme were then formed for testing with a focus group of facilitators. By this means the learning culture of the Centre came into focus, and avoided the ‘methodological individualism’ warned against by Lynch (2000).

I was able to sit in with groups when invited or meet groups at their breaks and ask individuals questions that would not be too intrusive but that were intended to get a sense of the primary habitus of participants, and any provisional habitus that they could identify. Naples recommends Institutional Ethnography for the purpose of examining an “institution or system and how it is set up” to handle its mission. This involves “mapping the system” by collecting data through interviews, and the texts generated by this system (Naples 2003 p.30). The focus is not about the experiences that the informants are speaking about; rather it is about what these utterances show in relation to the institution or system.

Bourdieu (2001) provides a frame within which women’s community education can be described as a field of practice. Fields are made up of forces that provide individuals with a primary habitus, a set of dispositions that affect how they think, act, and perceive reality. Habitus is at the core of a person’s identity. Bourdieu maintains it is neither created nor changed by cognitive processes (Bourdieu 2001). A primary habitus provides a frame of reference (Mezirow 2009) through which all new experiences are filtered. Exploring what goes on in a learning culture as a field of practice, according to James and Biesta (2007), enables the identification of habitus shifts, if any, that are a result of participation.

The first finding is that many of the participants appear not to have had prior positive experiences of recognition, or having a voice in their own family and community. The experience of participating in feminist groupwork gives them a sense of joy in being
heard, being seen, and speaking in turn. Not everyone might experience such methodology as productive: such a process could be perceived as coercive for some (English 2011). However, the women who spoke in the study value it. The feminist poststructuralist agenda of the organisation and its facilitators ensures that such groupwork and facilitation skills are used for critical rather than confessional purposes (Usher, Bryant & Johnston 1997).

A second element is pace, relating to the length of time that participants can stay with a group before feeling they have to move on or out. This element allows a participant to control the pace and not feel rushed into an accredited programme. This, according to facilitators, is significant if a woman does not have the opportunity to control much in her own life.

The Centre is perceived to be "like a home from home": men are not excluded from entering, but when there, are there to work for women. Again, this can be a new experience for participants. The safety of the space for women is paramount. Participants speak of the combination of support and challenge that they experience, with everyone facing different challenges they feel they can undertake with support. That support can come from fellow group members, or a facilitator, one of whom stated: "Sometimes the challenge is to get a woman to think well of herself". This is a major change from their normal role of supporting others. Some women will be encouraged to represent their group in the participatory management structure of the organisation. Participants at the outset often do not understand why their voice and opinion might be important, but it is this very voice that ensures that the Centre’s programmes and supports stay ‘needs-based’ rather than being decided on by older members and staff.

A major surprise for me was hearing many remarks along the lines of “I feel so much better now”, which gave rise to the question: is this therapy or is it education? I set out to explore and explain this. I was familiar with Barr’s (1999) criticism of the growth of counselling approaches in community education in Scotland. Barr traces a therapeutic trend in the dominance of personal development goals over community development goals. Personal or individual development goals are becoming decoupled from the social change agenda (ibid p.43). Barr prescribes distinguishing clearly between education and therapy.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) claim that any building of emotional literacy in learners is dangerous because it allows problems to be individualised rather than attending to
the structural causes of social problems that require political, not psychological, interventions. Attempts to foster a ‘therapeutic attitude’ are misguided and could be seen as ‘an attack on reason’ (2009 p.21-22). The work of “repairing learners’ fragile identities” is “profoundly anti-educational” (ibid p.83). Any emphasis on collaboration, equality between learners and between learners and teachers constitutes a ‘relocation of power’ that serves to obscure how power operates to service the interests of some groups over others (ibid p.102). Emotions, and attending to them, distracts from the project of ‘real’ education. Sitting in circles and equalising power relations in the classroom are only disguising where real power lies.

On the other hand, Barr calls for feminist pedagogy to criticise narrow notions of rationality that exclude emotions (Barr 1999 p.133). Feminist pedagogy is a still-emerging field of practice that “accords a central place to feeling as a source of knowledge” (ibid p.113). It is connected to radical feminism’s use of collective processes to “revalue feminine work and values” (Barr 1999 p.166).

Burke and Jackson state that ‘emotional literacy’, an awareness of the emotions of the self and others, is lacking in various fields of lifelong learning. Informal learning in communities does not have the same value as qualifications acquired in the formal education and training system. This issue is framed as a problem of the hegemony of the discourse of lifelong learning, with the view of the learner as individualised, and ‘de-classed’ (Burke and Jackson 2007 p.137).

How then should we reconceptualise this supportive, care-full and needs-based approach to women’s education when the dominant discourse of lifelong learning frames any relational and emotionally literate approach as ‘not education’? Being needs-based means that this is the way women like to learn.

**Invisible Colleges and Informal Pathways**

To be a lifelong learner requires the ability to see oneself as a learner, and as deserving of support for formal learning activities, in addition to all other factors. One influential study of women’s views of themselves as knowers was carried out by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule in the 1980s. This team are psychologists interested in women’s intellectual development and questions about how women can feel less than confident about these abilities (Belenky et al 1997 p.4). This team observed in their various fields of practice how women often spoke of the importance of relationships in their learning and in their ability to learn. Interviews were held with
women in informal as well as formal educational settings. The informal settings they describe as ‘invisible colleges’, where women are supported as mothers in their parenting role (ibid p.12). The particular attraction of these invisible colleges is that they are spaces devised and run by women, for women. They therefore had the potential to show what kind of pedagogy women can devise for themselves, if free to do so. The diversity in settings provided a better chance of identifying common themes irrespective of background (ibid p.13).

English (2011) researched Canadian feminist nonprofit organisations to identify what kinds of learning pathways they provided their staff and voluntary board members. The reason she is interested in these organisations is that they are “alternatives to male and gendered institutes of higher education” and provide an environment for “working-class, low literate and vulnerable populations of women” (English 2011 p.209). The organisations concerned manage the tension between funders’ expectations and their own values, and strategies of resistance are learned by observation. Their environments are ‘non-hierarchical’, with decisions reached by consensus and discussions with people sitting in a circle (ibid p.214). English states that these processes are ‘technologies of power that produce effects’, producing a creative type of power rather than a regulatory or repressive form of power (ibid p.214). Women ‘reconstitute themselves as knowing subjects’ (ibid p.221). Such women-only spaces are safe spaces to practice ‘strategies of resistance and try out new ideas’ (ibid p.222). Risks can be managed in these environments. The organisations have a discourse that constitutes members as ‘knowing subjects capable of being and acting (ibid). The members are women who have “chosen the in-between informal venue or women’s organisations as their learning space” (ibid). Etienne and Jackson examined a different cohort of women that participate in the Women’s Institutes in the UK. They explored ‘issues of identity, learning and community for older women’, most of whom could be described as middle-class and white, but ‘with few lifelong learning choices’ (Etienne and Jackson 2011 p. 228). They conclude that “re/developing identities through a shared sense of community best happens in women-only spaces” because such spaces give “women the ability to resist power relations elsewhere” (ibid p.235). The woman-only space is an opportunity to affirm women’s identities (ibid p.237). Etienne and Jackson link a sense of identity and of being affirmed with the ability to go into new spaces as a result.
All three studies value women-only spaces for learning. Learning, as reflected in dominant discourse, can be individualised and domesticating. But if learning is done in a community of practice that has a social change agenda, then agency can be applied in what English calls a “subversive and quiet form” of activism which “may not take down a government but it will produce effects”. The women become “21st century agents of change, from within the grassroots” (English 2011 p.217).

Women’s Ways of Knowing identified five perspectives on knowing, as follows:

- **Silence**, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority.

- **Received knowledge**, a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own.

- **Subjective knowledge**, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited.

- **Procedural knowledge**, a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge.

- **Constructed knowledge**, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing.” (Belenky et al 1997 p.15)

Practitioners in the area of personal and professional development can readily recognise these different stages, or recognise that different women are at different stages in relation to their mode of knowledge creation. Silent knowers are passive recipients of the agendas of others and have no sense of entitlement about using their voice. They may have grown up in an environment where their voice was never sought, or if it was used, they were disparaged for it.

A sense of capability exists in the next stage or mode of knowing. The woman sees herself as able to receive knowledge, but does not yet see herself as a knowledge-creator. Many women in community education are at this stage of dependency,
relying totally on a tutor or facilitator to direct the learning, and giving the power of expertise to the tutor. They do not expect to have their own experience acknowledged, never mind have it seen as learning that is as valid as the learning of any other person.

Subjective knowing means a move to a new stage, in which a woman trusts her intuition or emotional reaction more than knowledge from an external source. Knowledge must be made personal and concrete before the woman views it as knowledge. It must have meaning. Abstract knowledge is seen as pointless. The woman’s own experience and emotion is seen as her best or most reliable guide to future action.

The remaining stages underpin successful formal undergraduate study. Objective criteria can be applied to concepts; there is a different, more evaluative, relationship to knowledge. There is more than one truth. The woman’s relationship to knowledge has undergone a fundamental shift: knowledge is seen as created through dialogue, with objective and subjective criteria being applied to evaluate it. Throughout, building or constructing knowledge is fundamentally a relational or social activity (Belenky et al 1997 pp144-150).

This study provides a good insight into women who are silent knowers: while women at this stage have language, they do not have skills for representational thought. If they cannot represent their own experience in dialogue, not only do they remain isolated from others from whom they can learn and develop their own intellectual capabilities, but “without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self” (ibid p.26). Adult educators can see the importance of early engagement work that allows such dialogue to transform a woman’s relationship to knowing.

The affective dimension in learning is often understood to mean making learners comfortable, setting groundrules so that a learning group can work together effectively, or recognising when a learner’s ability to understand is blocked or paralysed by a situation that they experience as fearful. *Women’s Ways of Knowing* shifts the understanding of the affective dimension into Gilligan’s (1993) account of a feminine model of development, and connects it with the development of voice, and thus of intellectual development. Instead of seeing women at the earlier modes of knowing as intellectually deficient, we can see how their personal relationship to knowledge is shaped by the role given to women by society. If women are
constructed by society and conditioned as the emotional sex (in a binary opposition to men as the rational sex), then of course intellectual or cognitive development should incorporate feelings as well as thoughts.

These stages of knowing may not apply only to women: they may have a more universal applicability to other social groups who have not had the opportunity to develop along the path identified by Perry (1970) in his study of male undergraduates. Lovett, for example, writing about adult learners in Liverpool in the 1970s, identified the need for these men and women to make concepts personal and concrete (Lovett 1975). The earlier stages of knowing may have a strong relationship to class and not just gender.

“Speaking of women’s learning as caring and connected” raises dangers of “a stereotypical and essentialist reading of women” (English 2011 p.211). But if we look at this as a study of learners in settings other than higher education, the epistemological stages have wider social applications. Lifelong learning, in the dominant discourse, depends on the supported and able learner, identified by Warren & Webb (2007) as the ‘responsible learner’. *Women’s Ways of Knowing* shows that several stages of cognitive development are involved in being an adult (man or woman) able to avail of formal learning opportunities. Women who do not have a sense of themselves as knowers are unlikely to put themselves forward as potential students; women who have sense of themselves as able to receive the knowledge of others will be able to access opportunities, but may not be the self-directed mature learner of the dominant discourse. However, given access to informal networks, their sense of themselves as knowers and learners can change and develop.

Collective learning experiences can bring wider benefits to individuals: “a sense of belonging and identity, social cohesion and inclusion, personal growth and development, and improved health and a sense of well-being” (Burke and Jackson 2007 p.10). The emphasis on process is being lost as content-led conceptualisations are valued in the dominant lifelong learning discourse (ibid).

‘Other’ ways of knowing and learning (or the ways of learning and knowing of ‘Others’ as less valued and recognised members of society) are marginalised by dominant discourses. Burke & Jackson argue for critical knowledges to be recognised and valued rather than being constituted as “subjective and situated, linked to the body and to emotion” (Burke and Jackson 2007 p.34). The “experiential,
the personal and the emotional” is excluded by academia (ibid p.46) and many explanations of what constitutes education, despite the long-standing existence of sociocultural learning theories.

The Centre can be described as a ‘third space’ where people with an identity that is not valued in the public sphere can create alternative discourses that reflect their values and needs (Mirza 2006 p.149). So of course participants will feel better.

References

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