

Literacy and Gender

Summary

In this item the writer explores:

- the lack of focus on women in the approaches to adult literacy programmes and in the literature on literacy
- the learner-centred approach, and the idea that what might benefit some learners may not benefit others
- studies that have suggested that women learn in particular ways
- family literacy programmes, to see what messages they give to women about women's roles
- inequalities taken for granted in women's lives and issues of power - literacy as 'women's duty but not women's right'
- violence in women's lives and its relevance to literacy programming for women
- literacy teaching as 'women's work' and the significance of this.

Further Reading

If you are interested in following up on this unit there are various directions you might want to go. Garber *et al.* (1991) and Rockhill (1987a) both provide some further background for thinking about literacy issues with women. Garber *et al.* write from the standpoint of literacy workers, Rockhill draws from research to consider issues of power more theoretically. Horsman (1990) will encourage you to think about women's lives in one context and to question your assumptions about the potential of literacy programmes to create change in your own setting. If you want to explore at more length the ways in which literacy programmes might serve women better, Lloyd (1994b) contains an interesting collection of writings about 'woman-positive' activities carried out in literacy programmes across Canada.

You will also be able to identify other items in the course which are relevant to the issues raised here. Limage's item on adult literacy in the South in Unit 2 also takes up issues of women literacy learners, and the item on family literacy in this unit offers another perspective on these programmes. There is also material on women's education and on gendered expectations of women as 'caring' workers in the Adult and Community Education and Professional Studies modules.

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Introduction

Literacy learners are frequently spoken of, and planned for, in the literature and in the programmes themselves, as if they were genderless. Where gender differences are recognised, women are often viewed only in traditional roles and the constraints on their lives are often ignored. This item will explore the implications of this omission, and focus on women as learners and their particular needs in literacy programmes.

Where are the women?

In 1987 I wrote:

In most of literacy discourse 'illiterates' are not differentiated by gender, but the reader can usually infer that 'people' are actually men. In this way women become 'other' in relation to men as the norm. (Horsman 1988: 123)

This criticism is still true in 1996. In the literature on literacy, even in the 1990s, there is still a marked absence of research that addresses women's needs. In literacy programming, too, there is generally little emphasis on whether men and women experience illiteracy, literacy programmes, or literacy learning differently. Over the years however, there have been a series of feminist critiques describing the invisibility of women in writing about literacy, and in the planning of programmes. These writers have all argued for the creation of literacy programmes which are relevant for women. Researchers such as Carmack (1992) and Kazemak (1988) in the United States, Thompson (1983), McCaffery (1985) and Cornes (1992) in England, Bhasin (1984) and Ramdas (1990) in India, MacKeracher (1987) Lloyd et al. (1994) and myself in Canada (Horsman 1990, 1995) have all addressed the question of relevant programming for women.

In many countries the majority of those with limited literacy skills are women. Girls are often given low priority for schooling. Even in Canada where statistics of 'illiterates' suggest that women are not over-represented, girls have often been pulled out of school to look after younger children and do household work when their mothers were busy with paid work. In spite of higher numbers of women with limited literacy skills in many countries, women frequently have less access to literacy programmes as adults. McCaffery noted in 1985 that the majority of adults who came forward to literacy programmes in England were men. Whatever the statistics about who is 'illiterate' in a

particular country, generally little attention is paid to the different experiences of boys and girls or men and women: experiences of the school system, of parental attitudes, of being illiterate or of participating in groups or individual tutoring. I know of no literature, for example, which explores what it means for men with limited literacy skills to be unable to fulfil patriarchal roles of being the 'knower' in the family, or to have to seek help from women volunteer tutors or literacy workers. A literacy worker I once interviewed said that men tended to think their literacy skills were better than they were, while women thought their skills were worse. Her comment begs the question of whose judgement is more accurate, but makes vividly clear a difference she observed between men's and women's responses to low literacy skills. Such differences have not been explored in any depth.

Many of these writers are also critical of the ways in which illiterate people are presented in media accounts of illiteracy and in the publicity which seeks to encourage people to attend programmes. Here, too, women are often invisible, but when they are portrayed it is often as helpless and incompetent. Bhasin draws attention to the blame-the-victim approach, which focuses on the illiterate person rather than on the need for structural change. She argues that illiteracy is not a disease that needs to be eradicated but a symptom of the disease of poverty and inequality (1984:42)

When women are acknowledged as recipients of adult education programmes, Thompson argues that their 'needs' are defined by men: Women's real needs (i.e. the definition women would make about themselves and their lives if men were not around or if men were not structurally in charge) are not being recognized or met.

The suggestion that women might see the world differently or might deny the values and standards determined by men, appears incomprehensible to those well used to 'meeting individual needs' and supplying 'confidence' in remarkably predictable and sexist ways (1983:86, 85).

Women are often seen only as wives and mothers, and even roles they traditionally carry out are frequently ignored by those who design literacy programmes. In India, for instance, rural women have always been producers of food and labourers, but literacy programmes have ignored this, and rather than telling women of their rights as workers, have sought to make them 'better' wives and mothers.

Numerous writers address the issue that literacy for women should not merely fit women into their current roles, but should enable them to look critically at their lives. Ironically, although literacy for women has addressed these traditional roles, the constraints these roles create have frequently been ignored. When women's days are scheduled around family needs, when they have little access to transportation and their education is not a financial priority, women need classes at appropriate times, safe transportation, free childcare and programmes.

For you to do:

Think about any experience you have of adult literacy provision. Who seems to be intended as the learners? Where women are included as learners, what are seen as their needs. Which women are included? Are they women of colour, women with disabilities.... Are a variety of 'needs' identified?

You could also look at any publicity for literacy you can find in your area. Think about the same questions. Who is represented as the learner? How are they represented and what are shown as their needs?

If you have been to an adult literacy programme or are able to visit one, go in and look around, or try to remember what it looked like and felt like. What is on the walls? Who are the students? What is the atmosphere? Who talks and what do they say? Does it feel like a woman's space or a man's?

If you have access to published literacy materials, such as the easy readers which are used in some schemes, look at a selection. Look for books where women are represented. Which women are shown? Are they shown in a variety of roles?

Comments

There would be an enormous contrast in what I would find if I carried out these reflection tasks in Toronto. The publicity for some programmes would see men as the potential learners, others would refer to women's roles of looking after children and dealing with the school. One programme, for street people, has a card for women to keep in their pocket, advertising the programme and its women's night as 'a safe - friendly - supportive - learning place.'

Many centres would have a wide assortment of posters on the wall and would look like a comfortable place to be, with a coffee pot and soft chairs. Often though there will be more men than woman 'hanging around'; some women learners might not feel at ease or safe from teasing or from harassment. Although there would be a wide variety of books in many programmes, others would have mostly commercial books which do not often show the realities of working-class women's lives. Many publications would show women in traditional roles. Materials written by women learners from Canada, the USA, England and Australia are better at showing the differences and similarities in their diverse experiences, but these are still few in number.

Does learner-centred mean women's needs will be met?

One way which adult education programmes have sought to recognise the inadequacy of a predefined curriculum, which may not be appropriate for all, or even any, learners, has been to structure individual or group sessions around the interests and 'needs' the learners identify. Many literacy programmes similarly seek to be 'learner-centred' by acknowledging that learners are adults, and placing their lives and their interests at the heart of the learning process. This approach focuses on learners as individuals. It might be assumed that this would avoid many of the problems identified by writers who are critical of the aims of literacy programmes for women. However, in the attempt to meet individual needs, little space is left for thinking of particular groups of learners such as women (or any other grouping such as people of colour, or people with disabilities) as having needs *as a group*. Little attention has also been paid to the idea that what might benefit some learners may not benefit others. For example, if women want a women's group but men do not want to be in a group alone, which group should a learner-centred worker listen to?

During the first stage of a research project on women and literacy one literacy worker said:

...women need a women-only support group because they need a safe space. Men don't support each other. So a men-only support group is a contradiction. Women support men. So a mixed group is a men's support group. (Lloyd 1991: 41)

In one attempt to create a 'woman-positive' project in the next stage of the research, a mixed group of literacy learners were asked whether they wanted to divide into separate men's and women's groups. A few vocal men spoke out against dividing up, and some women supported them. Women who might have felt safer in a women-only group were probably the least likely to speak out. So the assumption that a programme is learner-centred can lead programme workers away from noticing and exploring the ways in which different needs may conflict.

In the same study, another literacy worker reported that the establishment of a women's group as her agency's 'woman-positive activity' helped her to see the ways in which an otherwise excellent learner-centred programme might not be meeting women's needs as well as she had assumed. She was surprised to find just how important this gathering was in helping members to feel less isolated and valued: not only the women learners, but herself and other staff. She said:

Understanding the women's group as 'sacred' space points to the ways in which the rest of the programme was somehow less satisfying for women. (Wells 1994: 137)

She argues that, in learner-centred literacy programmes:

...women are going to get a better deal if women's groups are offered and are women-driven, that is, women-learner-centred. (*Ibid.*:139)

The demand to be learner-centred can also limit the introduction of materials which are not mainstream, and also limit the possibility of dialogue between tutor and learner. Being learner-centred has come to imply a neutrality of learning, or that 'the learner should be able to learn whatever she or he wants'. In its crudest form, it suggests that learners should learn what they want to learn, however they want to learn it. In theory this may sound a good thing, but learners' 'wants' may be formed from what they expect to happen in education. They may expect to endlessly learn the alphabet, or redo grade school spelling books, because that is what students are 'supposed' to do in school. Giving students what they want may therefore be preserving the status quo.

It is therefore important to present options for choices, but students cannot make choices if they do not know what the options are. This means that it can be particularly important to offer 'alternative' choices, such as feminism, which are outside the mainstream and are rarely available to people with limited literacy skills. Garber *et al.* elaborate on the arguments for introducing a feminist curriculum:

The question we ask ourselves is: is a learner-centred curriculum at odds with a woman-positive or feminist curriculum? We suggest that when learner-centred is interpreted to mean the learner simply selecting the curriculum, with little or no input from the tutor or facilitator to broaden options and possibilities, then woman-positive and learner-centred are at odds. A woman-positive education has content, has a point of view. But, learner-centred education has, as we have seen, content or point of view, too. Unfortunately that content is usually the content of the mainstream thought because it is most pervasive and is not labelled (eg. 'the white, middle-class, male perspective') and is therefore seen as neutral, unbiased and true. But mainstream thought does have a bias and that bias is neither woman-positive nor feminist. When we seek to do simply what the learner 'wants' we are ignoring the powerful influences of mainstream thought and our own role, which inevitably shape the 'choices' a learner makes.

These ideas are not new. They are embedded in another important guiding principle in literacy: 'no education is neutral'. Hiding behind an unbiased conception of learner-centred can be a way to forget this other principle. We hear people saying 'you cannot impose a feminist agenda, you cannot impose a feminist curriculum on learners because this is not learner-centred.' And indeed we cannot impose it. But, as feminists, it is more in keeping with a rich interpretation of learner-centred (which keeps in mind that no education is neutral) to recognize our interests, to call them out and make them explicit. A woman-positive approach and content should be put out there, for learners to challenge. If we pretend to give learners what they want without recognizing what we want, what our goals are, we are not being true to the heart of learner-centred programming. If we recognize learners as adults we will be prepared to dialogue with them and acknowledge our own viewpoints. We will recognize that we cannot teach the skills of literacy devoid of content. All choice of content is political.

To exclude a feminist agenda is just as political as to include it. (1991: p.11).

For you to do:

Reflect on your experiences as an educator. Have any of these dilemmas come up in your own work? For example, have you experienced conflicts caused by plans to introduce single-sex work in your centre? Have you struggled with questions of how far you can put forward your own views?

Reflect on your experiences as a learner. What would learner-centred have meant in the context of your own learning? Would you want a course where you were simply asked what you wanted to study? How do you feel about courses which are clear about the curriculum and aim to teach you the field? When would you look for a more or less learner-centred curriculum?

Comments

My experience as a learner is that learner-centred has meant that I want some courses where I am told clearly what will be in the course and so can decide whether it has relevance to me or not. I will be especially keen to take part in a course with a clear curriculum when I want a chance to explore a broad topic, or when I am new to a field. In other courses I am happy to have the content drawn out more from the group and evolve as we go along. In either case, I want processes to help me integrate the new knowledge with my own previous knowledge. I want to be respected as a knower, but I also expect the facilitator to have knowledge to share. In literacy education I think we often disregard the value of developing new knowledge in a dialogue with others.

Do women learn differently from men?

When theorists have begun to pay attention to the particular needs of women, there has been some interesting consideration of whether women learn in particular ways which are different from men. If so this might influence programming for women. One example is the work by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) which studies women's ways of knowing. From their research with North American women, Belenky *et al.* identify five 'epistemological perspectives from which women seem to know and view the world'. Their categories, formatted as a list to make them clearer, are:

- *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; and
- *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. (1986:15)

Their first category, the women they describe as 'silent' are of special interest.

They do not identify these women as illiterate, but they do say that: they 'had little formal schooling or had found school to be a place of chronic failure.' And they argue that they are silent because of limited experiences of exchanging ideas with others:

In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write - sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self (*Ibid.*:26).

Their conclusion that these women lack a voice because they are 'isolated from the self' fails to consider the possible impact of other factors. Although they identify that these women had 'demeaning,' violent and isolated childhoods, they do not appear to recognise that these women could have been silenced by the power of others. Belenky *et al* describe them as 'worried that they would be punished just for using words, any words' (p.24) but they do not conclude that their silence may have been learnt because they *have* been punished for using any words. The potential of the study is that we may at last begin to ask what conditions will help women, especially those who have been denied a voice, to learn and recognise their own value. The danger is that we may be inclined to see illiterate women as simply 'silent', and not consider that they are possibly 'silenced'. We may blame the women and see them as inferior, with an inadequate 'way of knowing'.

There are similar potential dangers in the use of the five 'epistemological perspectives'. While the authors do not claim that these categories are stages, they do present them as a

hierarchy, and speak of women developing from one perspective to the next. If we see the categories as a hierarchy and think that those at the 'bottom' need to learn to be more like those at the 'top' we are in danger of diminishing those at the 'bottom.' In particular their first category seems to be less than human.

The authors are cautious about these categories, especially their category of silence, since few women fit in that category. However, they draw conclusions from the model about teaching approaches, for instance a 'connected' approach to learning in which the teacher is a 'midwife', which they consider would help women to learn:

We believe that connected knowing comes more easily to many women than

does separate knowing. We have argued in this book that educators can help women develop their own authentic voices if they emphasize connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate; if they accord respect to and allow time for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience; if instead of imposing their own expectations and arbitrary requirements, they encourage students to evolve their own patterns of work based on the problems they are pursuing. These are lessons we have learned in listening to women's voices. (p.229)

A strength of this study is this detailed exploration of different ways of understanding oneself as knower. Many of us will recognise ourselves at different times, and in different contexts, moving backwards and forwards between all of these perspectives. But their study appears to be influenced by a traditional hierarchical model, suggesting a linear development from one stage to the next, rather than more circular understandings of change and growth. Kazemak (1988), however, suggests that this work should lead us to design literacy programmes for women that are less individually oriented and more in keeping with women's understanding of themselves as contextually-bound in caring relationships with others.

The Belenky *et al* study also does not differentiate women by class and race. We need to recognise the differences among women learners, and also to consider the context of power (or lack of power) within which women form their knowledge. Luttrell (1989) carried out a study which did explore these differences among women, and examined black and white working-class women's ways of knowing. She interviewed and carried out participant observation of women attending adult basic education programmes, and draws attention to differences in how women the two groups of women thought about learning and knowing. She observed that the white women found it much easier to claim that their husbands, brothers or fathers had common sense and were really smart than that they themselves were. The black women, in contrast, did claim 'real intelligence' for their own experiences and skill.

She concludes:

The differences between white and black working-class women's claims to knowledge reveal that women do not have a common understanding of their gender identities and knowledge. But what they *do* have in common is the organization of knowledge as a social relation that ultimately is successful in diminishing their power as they experience the world. To understand women's exclusion requires an examination of the similarities and differences in the objective conditions of women's lives, as well as an analysis of how ideologies of knowledge shape women's perceptions and claims to knowledge.(1989:44)

Luttrell's study shows a respect for the women's own knowledge and a recognition of differences between women, but in the process seems to claim real 'truth' for the women's knowledge; ignoring the ways in which it too, like the 'ideological' knowledge the women seek, is socially constructed.

If we ask whether women learn differently from men, and what conditions will help women in particular to learn, we are faced with a variety of answers. But there is a dimension missing from much of this work on women's ways of knowing. The study by Belenky et al. has been used not to help us to recognise the violence of many women's situations, but to support claims that women learn in different ways than men, and so require a different type of education. Safe spaces are certainly one thing needed for women's learning, but the suggestion of a simple division between men's and women's ways of learning may simplify a far more complex picture of both women's and men's learning needs. It is crucial for us to examine the power dimensions of men's and women's experience in a raced, classed, society in general and in classrooms in particular. The need for women's safety and for women to learn in settings which increase rather than diminish their power needs to be recognised as a political problem, not just an educational problem.

Are women only wives and mothers?

The simple divide between men and women as learners can also lead us to see women as 'naturally' carers and nurturers, and lead to a focus on women's roles as mothers and care givers. We saw an echo of this in Kazemak's suggestion that literacy programmes for women should reflect these contextual relationships. Several writers, however, have objected that when women are considered as the recipients of literacy, it is only their roles of wife and mother that are focused on. No-one speaks of men needing literacy because they are fathers, and so need to be literate for the sake of the next generation, but many writers observe that this argument is frequently used for women. Thompson (1983), for example, says:

When the attention of providers is directed at working-class women 'in the community', in 'outreach work' or in 'adult basic education' schemes, a further element becomes seemingly obligatory: child development and parent craft. For those who are 'isolated', 'unable to cope', 'bad managers' and pejoratively described as 'single parents', relevance and the

development of skills is regularly defined in terms of being 'better mothers'. So that despite claims about 'individuality', 'personal development' and 'educational self-fulfilment' so beloved by adult educators, where women are concerned, it is as appendages of homes, husbands and children that they are usually assessed and catered for (pp.84-85).

The trend towards family literacy builds on this focus on women as mothers. Such programmes need to be examined carefully to see what messages they give to women. Isserlis *et al* (1994) have drawn attention to the contested possibilities for family literacy programmes. They identify programmes as using 'delivery' models or 'participatory' models. 'Delivery' models aim at 'remediation of perceived deficits that learners have. The delivery model wants to fix, or improve participants' abilities and skills. It assumes that others know things that parents do not and that parents need to learn these things.' They contrast this approach with a 'participatory' model which acknowledges and begins with 'strengths learners already possess.' 'These programmes involve participants in planning curriculum, identifying their own goals, and developing programming to reflect learners' real needs while increasing their existing abilities.' (1994:10)

I would argue that the delivery model assumes that middle-class parents know things working-class parents do not and aims to make working-class mothers more like middle-class mothers. White middle-class women are often the driving forces behind such programmes, which operate from unspoken assumptions about the inadequacy of working-class patterns of parenting. Participatory models may not be entirely unproblematic either, as the attempt to provide simply what learners ask for may lead to limitations in what can be offered, as we have already explored.

In Canada, however, funding for women's literacy is increasingly framed around 'family literacy', as if literacy for women can only be justified for the sake of the children. This funding framework can, as Isserlis *et al.* observe, reinforce traditional notions of family and of mothers' roles in the transmission of literacy practices. Certainly many women with children do want to improve their literacy skills for the sake of their children, they want to do a good job and know that the ability to help children with their homework is judged as part of their work. In my 1990 study of women in rural Nova Scotia I observed:

It is not only the women themselves who think that 'good' mothers should be literate. Teachers, 'experts' and the media regularly attribute working-class children's poor achievements in school to their parents' failure to read to their children, their lack of interest in education, the poor example they set, and even their failure to raise their children correctly. A counsellor in one upgrading and work-preparation programme attributed Maxine's children's school problems to Maxine's inadequate reading skills. She said that Maxine obviously did have a reading problem, even though Maxine herself didn't think she had any need for better skills. The counsellor felt that the fact that Maxine's children were in special schools 'showed' that Maxine's reading skills were inadequate. She felt that if Maxine's reading

level had been better she might have been able to do more for her children. She had no doubt that if the children were doing poorly in school, the mother was responsible. It was Maxine's duty to improve her skills, in order to be an adequate mother. (1990:52-53)

Clearly there is a danger that programming which builds on women's desire to improve their literacy skills for the sake of their children can reinforce the feeling many women already have that their own needs are not a priority, that their focus should be their children. The programmes can also contribute to a frame of mind which blames women rather than making visible the practical constraints which shape many poor women's mothering.

For you to do:

Look at the Coors advertisement below, which appeared in *Vogue* in 1990. Jot down all the assumptions about illiteracy you can see in this ad, look at both the wording and the image. What is your reaction to this?

***1990 COORS AD AS SEPARATE PAGE**

Comments

You might, like me, be irritated with the commonly used metaphor of illiteracy as a disease. Certainly as the metaphor is developed, suggesting that illiteracy is a contagious disease spreading from women to children, it demonises the illiterate and illiteracy. Should we be afraid of people who don't read and write well? Can anyone catch it? The ad also blames the victims. It suggests that women are to blame for their illiteracy and then for 'spreading' it to their children. If illiteracy is 'spreading', shouldn't we ask why? Shouldn't we wonder about the class, race and gender biases of the school system if more people are becoming illiterate? Alternatively, if so many people are illiterate, why isn't society organised in such a way that it isn't a problem?

Why are mothers being blamed for their children's illiteracy and not fathers, or even the school system? The women and children are all shown with no faces. What is the message?, that you are less than a person without literacy?, that you are stupid if you are illiterate?

Why is literacy a threat to men's power?

Many women writers have observed that when women seek to improve their literacy skills, men in their lives may not be supportive. This can range from unwillingness to 'babysit' to outright violence. This means that the barriers to taking on a course may include not only the time and energy which care of children takes, especially when they are assumed to be women's total or at least primary responsibility, but also men's resistance to women studying. When I interviewed women in Nova Scotia, Jill spoke of these barriers:

I never got through with it, just the studying, nobody would leave me alone long enough to study, between [my daughter] and [my husband]. He didn't think that was such a hot idea either. I think he was afraid I would get a higher income than him. (Horsman 1990:37)

The resistance men show can be quite subtle, but its effect can be powerful. Darlene described her experience:

Well, he doesn't want me to go to work. He'd rather me be at home, but he said 'That's up to you.' He said, 'I really didn't want you to go on this course... but I didn't want to say no because then that would be pushing my ideas on you, so I thought I'd let you try it and find out how hard it is. (Horsman 1990: p.42)

That subtlety may make it less likely for the woman to be angry at the man and more likely that she will be angry at herself. If Darlene goes ahead will he support her? What sort of help will he offer in the home to make it possible? Or will he passively prove he is right? If she fails what will she conclude? Will she think 'You can't do a course when you have young kids.' Or will she think she must be stupid because she couldn't complete the course?

Literacy can lead to change by altering the power balance for women. Rockhill's work (which you met in Unit 1) acknowledges the context of power, or lack of it, for women and explores how literacy is experienced as both a threat and a desire. She explains that literacy for women leads to the potential for violence: 'that is, the desire of women for literacy and the threat of violence, subtle or overt, posed to them by the men in their lives if they actually act on it by attending programmes' (1988:8). Literacy is seen by Rockhill as women's duty but not women's right:

Women engage in literacy practices as part of the work of the family. When it becomes associated with education, literacy poses the potential of change and is experienced as both a threat and a desire. Thus the anomaly that literacy is women's work but not women's right. (Rockhill 1987b: 330)

McMahon *et al.* (1992) also explore the divide between public and private literacies and the fears women have of moving into the public realm, which literacy workers may see as simply lacking confidence. They say:

So when women are afraid to move out into 'public', when they say they haven't got the skills and we as literacy workers say they lack confidence, they are wrong and right at the same time, and we are wrong and right at the same time.

Fear of change is a sensible fear. Literacies position people in the world, and repositioning is painful, as is acknowledging powerlessness, choice and no choice at all. Choices between literacies can be choices among identities and creating a new identity, like learning, hurts. (p.221)

Rockhill argues that the assumption that literacy is 'neutral' causes us to miss the charged dynamic around it for women, and urges the need to look at the 'personal' to understand the gendered practices which reinforce the domination of women. In this way she suggests: ...perhaps we can begin to find ways to address the contradictory construction of women's subjectivities with respect to literacy/learning/education' (1987a: 166). In her more recent writing she has continued to explore questions of power and the personal experiences of women, considering the separation between sexuality and literacy. She pushes literacy workers to question issues of power:

Who speaks of literacy and sexuality in the same space? While this disconnection reflects the erasure of women's experience from the social production of knowledge, it is sedimented by practices of institutionalized heterosexism which regulate sexuality as private, unspeakable, and, for women, in opposition to intellectual performance. It is indicative of these separations that educators who advocate literacy for 'empowerment' do not ask, 'What does it mean to speak of power for a woman whose subordination is accomplished through sexual objectification?' This question is especially pertinent for critical literacy, for 'woman's' sexual subordination hinges upon her not threatening male authority, an authority which is threatened by her attaining higher levels of literacy. (1993:335)

For you to do:

Think of your own experiences and those of women you know. What literacy tasks are assumed to be women's work? Who pays the bills, writes the thank you letters and birthday cards, keeps in contact with friends and family? What are some of the responses you have seen and heard men make to women who speak out, are competent, are more highly educated than they are?

Comments

When I asked others to think about this question I was surprised by how many women did do all the family work of literacy and had not really noticed. They took it for granted that they did these literacy tasks, 'women always do, don't they?' Hardly any women said they got letters or cards from their fathers or brothers! Listening carefully in meetings where men and women were present also revealed some interesting patterns of men's and women's talk: ways in which men picked up the ideas of other men, for example, and ignored women's comments. I shall be listening carefully to the men and women around me in future!

Will literacy change women's lives?

The literacy programmes which are offered to women therefore need to recognise the inequalities taken for granted in women's lives. If they do not help women to look critically at their own lives, literacy programmes will only fit women more firmly into their traditional roles. During research I carried out with women in rural, Maritime Canada I explored this promise of literacy programmes. In an article which summarised my findings from the study I wrote:

Women's dependence on men, on inadequately paid work and on social service assistance is threaded through the lives of many of the women I interviewed. This dependence leads to violence: the violence of women's isolation in the household and sometimes actual physical violence; the violence of the drudgery of inadequately paid, hard, monotonous jobs; the violence of living on an inadequate welfare income and enduring the humiliation of receiving assistance. Some of the violence is spoken of and shared, but much is endured in the silence and isolation of the home.

The illusion that illiteracy creates women's problems obscures the violence of many women's lives. Our attention is focused, not on the way women's lives are organized, or dis-organized, but on women's failure to become literate. These women's lives are the context in which they experience the 'promise' of literacy, and dream of how different their lives will be when they improve their education level. Yet for these women there is little chance that this promise will be fulfilled, particularly through many of the training programmes women are offered, which serve instead to embed them more firmly in their current lives. (1992:169)

Women with limited literacy skills are often described as isolated. The isolation created by the social organisation of women's lives is not often made visible, however. The isolation of women in the household, frequently solely responsible for children, often with no access to transportation, or with their movements controlled by men, all disappears from view and is seen as 'natural.'

Women talked of being shut in the house with little or no social contact outside the extended family and little social life. Many of the women had little experience making friends in childhood. The social organization of the women's lives as girls, kept at home to help with the work of the household, may have contributed to the later isolation of these women. The abuse many of the women had experienced in childhood, both in the home and at school, had silenced them and led to them being labelled 'shy', so that they became isolated from other children. (1990: 67-68)

The promise of literacy is the promise of access to a different life. In the programmes I studied women did not escape the control of the social service system, and they were not helped to free themselves from traditional expectations of femininity. They were offered 'functional' skills for the lives they were leading, to write their shopping lists, cheques or letters to family, rather than ways to change their lives. Many with limited literacy skills could not even get access to the training programmes they hoped would enable them to get work, and the training programmes rarely prepared women for the lack of local employment or the gendered labour market. Even the minimum demand that many women had, simply to get out of the house and reduce their isolation, was not achieved in many programmes where they were given individual tutoring at home. Although tutoring at home may seem a practical solution to women's difficulties in attending classes this 'solution' leaves the social organization of women's lives not only unchanged but also unchallenged. I argued that many literacy and training programmes cannot fulfil the promise of literacy suggested by the media. But instead programmes can fulfil an extremely valuable role:

...programmes can support women in their analysis and critique of the promise of literacy at the same time as helping them to improve their reading and writing skills. Programmes can help women in exploring and understanding the disorganisation of their lives. Programmes can help to reveal the myths embedded in the characterisation of the problem of illiteracy and the promise of literacy, as well as helping them to pursue their goals of literacy.

Programmes which listen to women's own accounts of their needs and support them in thinking critically about their own lives can help to free them from dependence and violence. When programmes are set up to encourage women to take greater control over their own learning and over the programme as a whole, the learning of literacy becomes, in itself, a tool for reflection and change. (1992:180)

Literacy workers are, I think, frequently caught in the bind of wanting to justify the importance of funding for literacy programming and so inflating the promise of literacy, although workers know that for real change to happen literacy is not enough; much more needs to change in many women's lives. Literacy workers do not want to destroy learners' dreams and hopes, but if women are to gain real power through literacy we must offer

programmes which assist learners in understanding society rather than offering false promises that if they improve their literacy skills their lives will be transformed.

For you to do:

Here are two more examples of the 'promise of literacy' for you to consider.

Look at the Coors advertisement below, which was issued in 1995. What strikes you about this presentation of the value of literacy?

*1995 COORS AD

Secondly, if you saw the movie 'Stanley and Iris', starring Robert de Niro and Jane Fonda, think about its theme. (If you have not seen it, when you have time rent the video, which should be easily available, and watch it, looking especially at its message about literacy.) In the movie Iris is literate and works in a factory. When she teaches Stanley to read (which she is able to do remarkably quickly using the Laubach approach), he can succeed as an inventor. Literate, he can now take her away from the factory to a new life. Think about what the film tells you about the different possibilities for men and women when they are literate.

Comments

The latest Coors ad is a perfect example of the promise of literacy and the insignificance of all the other taken-for-granted factors in a woman's life which limit what she can be and do. 'Nothing imprisons a woman more than a lack of basic literacy and skills.' What about men's violence, or the lack of childcare, or the lack of access to transportation, or poverty? Will illiteracy allow women to 'ultimately, set themselves free?' or will women simply feel more to blame because, if they worked harder, they would have better reading skills and get a job? Low wages, high unemployment and the gendered labour market don't enter into the picture. Then of course questions of race and class are left out of the picture too. Which women, after all, fought for and won for themselves the vote 75 years ago in the United States?

'Stanley and Iris' seems to me to be a rather vivid account of the way in which women's lives are seen as dependent on men. Iris is the helper who enables Stanley to reach his 'true' potential. When Stanley succeeds then Iris doesn't need to work _ what more need she seek? So many stereotypical assumptions are here about men's and women's roles! Literacy changes your life, but only if you are a man!

Can literacy be an empowering process?

Literacy programming, then, is not usually designed with women's needs in mind or with an acknowledgement of the tension of promise, of threat and desire, which may be many women's experience of the attempt to develop literacy skills. As part of a major research study carried out by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, CCLOW (1991, 1994a, 1994b) exploring women's experience in literacy programmes, Lloyd describes how women experimented with a variety of projects in order to try to make their programmes more 'woman-positive':

This research did not set out to prove any hypothesis. The women involved did not initiate their activities to prove a particular point. They simply wanted to do something that they thought would be positive for some of the women in their programs. They wanted to use this research opportunity to improve the programs in which they worked. They also wanted to share their experience with others by analyzing what happened on several levels. They explored the personal, professional, political, and structural consequences of their activities. (Lloyd 1994a: 2)

The projects included: women's groups for learners; a women's group for all the women involved in one programme; tutors, staff and learners; research in the community to find out why women were not coming to the programme; the creation of a sexual harassment policy; a group working to re-write a pamphlet from a local agency providing counselling on abuse issues; and a writing workshop which led to the creation of a newspaper.

When women-only literacy groups are set up, these frequently allow the space for women to begin speaking about their experiences. Cornes (1992) described their value:

Women often voice their thoughts in ways which they think will be, or will be seen to be, most supportive of their menfolk. Leaving aside such sexually-orientated matters as flirting, or dressing and making up for mixed company, my experience (both as a woman and as a tutor) has been that in an all-female gathering, women are more forthcoming about individual aspirations. In the absence of men, they are also more frank about the hurdles standing between themselves and the fulfilment of such ambitions. (1992:109)

A women-only group does not lead to all common ground and shared understandings. Differences of race, ability, age and experience can all lead to tensions among women. Working through those differences can be a challenging, but important, aspect of a women's group.

Unfortunately, the provision of a women's group is often a rarity because most literacy programmes struggle with acute lack of funds. Moore (1994) wrote about her experience

leading a women's group as part of the CLOW research project. She identified the financial and other pressures which made it difficult to set up such a group and provide such things as suitable space, childcare and adequate staffing including staff time to create relevant lesson plans and reflect on the work. When programmes do run women-only groups these are usually run on a shoe string and often contested by men in the women's lives or in the programmes.

In another programme which participated in the CLOW study, women began a women's group, but men continually interrupted their sessions. Staff decided that rather than give up on the group sessions they would close the programme to men on that evening so that women could have uninterrupted time to meet together. Men still disturbed the sessions, so supportive men were enlisted as 'bouncers'. The programme staff took extremely seriously the need for women to have a safe place to meet. Some programmes might have stopped the women's group when men first began to make it almost impossible to run and to complain that it was unfair that they were excluded. (Women's Committee, 'Beat the Street' 1994:151)

All of the women who participated in the research study wrote journals reflecting on what was happening in their programmes, and in themselves, as they tried to explore new territory in their programmes. Extracts from these journals (Lloyd 1994b) show over and over again the value of time set aside to reflect and to discuss with someone who supports the process of questioning, in this case the researcher and others involved in the research project:

What is so magical about talking with someone who understands, with whom there's no need to explain so much?... This research asks me to document what happens because of the project. It's like the research is a stone thrown into a pond and I'm supposed to describe the ripples caused by the throwing in of the stone. But I'm partly thrower, partly stone, partly pond, partly ripple, as well as observer! Sometimes I question if the ripples I see are ones created by me looking around for the ripples which matter. These ripples are inside me. (Bergman-Illnik 1994:112-113)

For you to do:

Think about what activity you would carry out in a literacy programme (or other adult education programme you are familiar with) if you had the opportunity to initiate a 'woman-positive' activity. Reflect on why you think that your activity would be valuable and what effects you think it might have.

Comments

I think given the opportunity I might do as Marion Wells did (1994) and begin a group open to any women in the programme. With no set agenda for the

meetings, I would want to explore what women might find valuable in the programme, not only what workers could do 'for' learners, but what would be valuable for any women involved. I would want to find ways of working together so that those of us who are literate, or paid staff, could challenge and engage with the views of learners and volunteers without obliterating their views or being silenced ourselves in the attempt not to overpower others.

How should experiences of violence affect literacy work?

The CLOW study also identified violence as one barrier to women's literacy learning. Women involved in the research talked 'about the pervasiveness and magnitude of violence against women' (1994a: p.107). Three women involved in the research taught literacy classes where every woman present had been sexually abused. One 'woman-positive' activity, carried out as part of the study, involved a house-to-house survey in Rabbittown, Newfoundland. The violence in the women's lives as adults was often made apparent as the men refused to let the women even answer the survey questions. In a reflection at the end of the study one interviewer summed up what they had learned:

On every page of every questionnaire we see violence, poverty, and loneliness. The despair in the young women especially is loud and clear. They are in situations that make life seem hopeless. They either don't know they have choices or they don't want to leave the situation _ we don't really know. Or do they really have choices? (Ennis *et al.* 1994:81)

In spite of this important study, for the most part there is silence about the links between violence and literacy. Media reports do not link issues of abuse with a focus on adult illiteracy, but most literacy workers know a myriad of stories of the horrors of learners' childhoods and adult lives.

Many adults may be inclined to blame their own stupidity, or their own failure to try hard enough, for their failure to learn to read. For those who were abused as children, and learned through that experience that everything was their fault, this is especially common. Pat Capponi, a Toronto activist on the rights of psychiatric survivors, eloquently shows how her belief in her own stupidity was developed:

I believed what my father had always told me: I was stupid and lazy. I'd heard it so often I couldn't choose to disbelieve it. It seemed I'd always been slow and stubborn. I still couldn't tell time in the fourth grade, couldn't add or subtract, despite my father's nightly tutorials. I couldn't understand why I persisted in my laziness when it always brought me so much grief. I have very few memories of the time I spent in early grade school, and those I have are riddled with beatings and shame.

I remember the small apartment in downtown Montreal, the one with the alley in the back where all the other kids played through long summer evenings. I remember the dining-room table where he'd make me sit beside him, grade four math book open in front of me. I remember how quiet the house was with everyone else in bed.

He'd make me leave one hand flat, palm down on the table.

'Ten times ten.'

I'd scratch the page nervously with my pencil, unable to remember the right response.

'I said ten times ten.'

My head would go blank. His heavy fist would come crashing down on my hand till it seemed I had no bones left unbroken. Every wrong answer brought pain, causing me to panic so much that the few correct answers I could remember scooted right out of my brain, abandoning me to his cruelty. (Capponi 1992: p.35-36)

Literacy programmes need to be places where women can begin to turn these negative beliefs around. A curriculum which helps women to look at what led them to believe they were stupid might help learners to shift the self blame and judgement of themselves (Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women: forthcoming).

I have argued elsewhere (1995) about the necessity for literacy workers to recognise the important consequences of abuse for literacy work:

The mainstay of much literacy work is learners telling their stories through the language experience approach, where the learners speak and the tutor writes down what they say, and in the publishing of learner writing. But what stories remain untold? If literacy learning includes ideas of empowerment and finding a voice, then learners speaking about their lives must be part of literacy work. Literacy workers must be prepared to respond to the truths which learners want or need to write and speak about, and to offer relevant reading material. How can workers in literacy programs exclude certain realities of a learner's life as inappropriate to the literacy program, without silencing learners and confirming for survivors of abuse that their experiences are unspeakable?....

Many women may not ask to work on memories of abuse. Yet literacy programs still have an obligation to 'make the space'. Workers need to allow the possibility of focussing on such experiences, to show that it is OK to talk about them and to remove the taboos...

Furthermore, literacy workers must not presume that a woman's childhood was abusive or that self-disclosure is an obligation. The survivor must retain control over her own stories and when and how much she tells of them.

When women do speak out, literacy workers must be extremely sensitive to the consequences; they must ensure safety and supports for women who may have little experience of safety. (1995:211-212)

Generally, programmes are not designed with attention to what experiences of abuse may mean for literacy learning. An exciting publication just released by CLOW (1995) which offers suggestions for how to 'make learning safer' may begin the process of rethinking these issues. The book draws material from a series of workshops on the connections between violence and education and looks at practical suggestions for removing the educational barriers created by violence.

This collection is an important step in breaking the silence by practitioners about the links between violence and education, which is crucial if literacy programmes are to adequately support and teach adults who are survivors of abuse. Literacy workers are not therapists and are not often trained in counselling. But we must learn to work in a way which recognises the violence in some women's lives.

For you to do:

Become a participant observer of yourself and all those around you. Listen for the ways in which you and others put yourselves down and are put down by others. Notice the situation which leads to the put down. Notice who puts whom down. Look for patterns of gender, race, class and age. Notice what is said or done and what impact it has. Try to notice all those little comments and looks which you normally take for granted. Reflect on what interventions would be needed to shift the patterns.

Think about what would be needed in a literacy or other adult education programme to create a safe and supportive learning environment for all.

Comments

When I raised this issue in a presentation at the start of a conference, over the weekend I started to notice how much I apologised for things which were out of my control and how often I called myself stupid for forgetting things, or running out of time or.... Throughout the conference, women kept coming up to me saying that they too were noticing how frequently they blamed themselves and how critical they were of themselves. They had not noticed what they were saying before. They said they thought it would be useful to take that awareness

back to their literacy programmes and help students to begin to hear themselves. When we begin to hear ourselves, we can begin to turn our beliefs around and also begin to hear the ways others participate in or disrupt our self-criticism.

Some practical suggestions for 'creating safe learning environments' included in a new Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women pamphlet (1995b) are:

- Examine your own attitudes which may prevent you from being an approachable and helpful support person for learners.*
- Support the hiring of counsellors who are specifically trained to deal with abuse.*
- Have a 'safe worker' available when dealing with issues of violence in the class, if at all possible. (A safe worker is someone trained to help women deal with the strong feelings that these discussions may bring up.)*
- Make a clear statement that there will be no tolerance of violence in your learning place and be consistent. You are not responsible for the behaviour of others, but you can decide what is acceptable in your environment and enforce this both through written policies and orally in classes.*
- Provide examples of strong women in your texts, through guest speakers, or through simple efforts like posters on your wall.*
- Conduct a safety audit with others in your place of learning by asking women how the environment can be made safer. This way you can see what changes need to be made, and begin to make them.*
- Oppose racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism and other forms of discrimination and make them all part of anti-violence programs. (1995b:7-9)*

These are just a few of the suggestions made. Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (1995a) also has a teacher's checklist for safety including some of these points and many others. Perhaps your agency has similar guidelines, or you can create your own checklist to share with fellow students and other educators.

Why is literacy work, women's work?

Finally, we consider issues of literacy and gender, which concern workers rather than learners. Literacy remains a largely women's area of work, both for paid workers and for volunteers. We need to ask why this is the case and what impact this has on literacy work and on women's experiences as learners, paid literacy workers and volunteers. The skills needed for literacy work are many of the skills traditionally regarded as 'natural' for women, and so not generally even recognised as skills. Garber *et al.* state:

The majority of literacy workers, by far, are women. Perhaps this is not surprising, as literacy work is part of the field of education and a 'caring' profession, areas of work which have traditionally been seen as women's work. Literacy work has traditionally been volunteer or part-time and is frequently poorly paid and low status. The multiple and complex skills needed to work with literacy learners _ who are often poor and face many issues in their lives [_]are not made visible when literacy work is described. These skills include not only those to help them to improve their reading and writing, but also skills which engage with them in a dialogue about their lives, and support them in a process of becoming active members of the literacy community. As in so many areas, these 'women's skills' are not acknowledged as skills and are consequently awarded little pay or status. (1991: 6-7)

Literacy work is often seen as being able to be done easily by volunteers, needing no more than a 'degree of caring', as one advertisement for volunteers stated it. There are many arguments which detail why literacy work should be carried out by volunteers. Where a community development model is followed, it can be a way of situating literacy work in the community and encouraging communication and learning not only for the learner but also for the tutor. Both tutor and learner can be involved in a process that helps them to understand illiteracy as a political issue. However, where volunteers are used simply as a way to run programmes with inadequate resources, this can be caused by, and contribute to, the low value placed on: adult learners' learning to read, on women's work of caring and support, and on the teaching of elementary skills. Literacy workers may have no option but to use volunteers to run programmes with limited funding, but they can still highlight, and challenge, the assumptions that no pay and minimal training are 'good enough' for women literacy workers and literacy learners.

Not only volunteers, but also paid literacy workers, frequently donate extensive time to the literacy programme. Literacy workers have often ignored the problem of working conditions and coped in outrageous situations. Moore (1994) describes well the struggle to create adequate conditions to run a women's group and the tension between seeking to meet the needs of the women learners she was working with and her own needs:

I saw myself being pulled between my job and my personal needs and often feeling snagged in between the two. I was trying to meet everyone's needs at once and not meeting anyone's, especially my own. I began to ask questions. Why do I devalue my work? Why aren't there enough resources to do my work? Why don't I demand more? What was it I was trying to do

and for whom? Why do I always underestimate the needs of women: my own, the group's and the staff's? (1994: 5)

Literacy workers have struggled within the limitations of inadequate funding, poor working conditions, long hours, etc. because we are committed to the field and are always aware of how well off we are in comparison with learners. Women, who have learned well to always seek to meet other people's needs, are often less clear about our own needs and about the limits of responsibility to the learner. Moore describes her experience:

Sometimes I got emotionally hooked by the women in the group. I heard myself getting too involved in solving a problem, and then realized later that I had gone too far. At times we acted too much like friends and I wished I had some professional facade to hide behind. But I was not just a facilitator - I was a *woman* facilitator. (*Ibid.*:102)

If women literacy workers and volunteers are to learn to respect our own needs and create models for how to be a woman facilitator, tutor or teacher in ways which recognise everyone's needs and limits, more possibilities for reflection and discussion will be important. Moore ends by asking the question: 'If we can't value our own needs as women workers, how can we authentically value the needs of the women in our program?' (p.103).

Garber *et al.* report a demand that feminist literacy workers have a duty to challenge these conditions:

They have argued that as feminists we have a responsibility to seek better pay, working conditions and benefits, to assert the value of our skills, the importance of literacy work and to make the field a viable work area for working class women, women of colour, single mothers, older women or any women who don't have the luxury of putting in extra time and working for inadequate pay. (1991: 17-18)

But the attempt to meet our own needs and to challenge and change the literacy field can become yet another burden for literacy workers to take on. Norton ends her article:

Many, like me, have chosen this work for its personal rewards. We have focussed more on the needs of our programs and participants than on our needs. Because we are overworked, because we may have to work two jobs to make ends meet (or to plan for our future), we do not have time to organize. We need to make time. We need to work for justice for ourselves as well as for program participants. (1994)

She leaves literacy workers with this final challenge: to work for justice.

For you to do:

Reflect on your reasons for entering, or wishing to enter the adult, youth or community education field. Think about your past experiences which have contributed to that 'choice' and how your gendered experience led you towards, or away from this work. List the skills and strengths you bring to your work and think about the strengths and skills you think literacy work and similar educational work demands.

Think about your response to Mary Norton's challenge to seek justice for workers as well as learners. How do you react to that challenge? Do you think literacy workers and other educators should do that? Why or why not? If you chose to take up her challenge, what could you do?

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