

Changing Women: The Country Women's Association of NSW as a Learning Site

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Abstract

The paper investigates my research into the many and varied ways in which the Country Women's Association of New South Wales educates women in its membership, their families, and the wider public.

My research utilises several areas of adult education theory to investigate the way women learn in, and are educated by, their service and leisure organisations. The CWA is one of the major focuses of the research and Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is emerging as a significant vehicle of change in the lives of its members. In addition to that, the social capital accrued by the CWA is bringing public recognition of the value and relevance of the organisation. This is especially so, at the time of this writing, with the recent broadcast of an ABC series on the CWA.

In the paper I will show the way that the Country Women's Association is educating the public to transform its perception of a 'tea and scones' image to one of a relevant and active organisation. The renewed image is of a community of women which brings enrichment and even change to the lives of both rural and city members alike through the learning which takes place in their lives.

Introduction

This paper reports on research into the many and varied ways in which education and learning take place in the Country Women's Association of New South Wales as a learning community. The association once catered only to rural women but now includes city women in full membership as 'women of the country of Australia'. In my study I am investigating how the association provides education to its members, the ways that those women learn from their organisation and from each other, and how that learning flows on to their families and the wider public.

The research utilises several areas of adult education theory to explore the way women learn in, and are educated by, their service and leisure organisations. The CWA of NSW is one of the organisations on which I am focusing more closely, and Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is emerging as a significant way of identifying change in the lives of its members. In addition to that, the social capital accrued by the CWA, especially at the time of writing, is bringing public recognition of the value and relevance of the organisation in city and rural Australia. Previous studies have shown that the concept of social capital is important in understanding the benefits that flow from community: Leonard and Onyx contend that 'it can be generated anywhere where people connect for the purpose of achieving a common goal... (and) is at its most powerful when developed by and through formally constituted community organisations' (2004:71). Respect of the organisation is shown most notably in the Federal Government's choice of CWA to distribute their drought relief funding to country Australia (Country Women's Association of NSW 2007).

My intention is to include both historical and current practice in my research. I am finding that the stories of the women I meet and the meetings and projects taking place in the present are already reinforcing the ideas with which I began. These ideas, or hypotheses, were that women's organisations are important sites of all kinds of learning which serve to not only educate but also personally empower their members. The history of the organisations traces their development and shows the way that they came to the place of strength and empowerment – or in some cases have lost the influence they once had.

Attendance at both the 2007 85th CWA conference and the CWA Country of Study School held at Earle Page College in this university were not only instructive but uplifting experiences for myself and all the women attending. Each year the association features a country, Malta in 2007, which is studied by the members of every branch in the state. The Association's International Officers are especially encouraged to attend and pass on their learning at the school to the members of their groups and branches, thus extending the learning well beyond those who attend the Study School.

Speakers from many walks of life were guests at the weekend, which is held at Earle Page College each year. Featured speakers in 2007, the 38th year of the Study Weekend, included Ms Joanna Pisani, the Consul-General of Malta, and other professional people of Maltese extraction. Aspects of Maltese life and culture were the topics of all of the speakers, and all included graphics and videos with their lectures. Mrs Brigitte Ward, whose husband Mr David Ward is the Master of Earle Page College and the weekend's host, also spoke. Mrs Ward's enthusiastic participation because of her Maltese ancestry and her birth in that country lent an immediacy to the weekend which enlivened it. The entire weekend, even including the menu, inspired learning and understanding of the country of Malta.

A study guide is compiled for the school each year, and that on Malta features a considerable amount of information for participants to take back to their groups. The chapters include an overview of Malta, as well as its geography, history, culture and society, architecture and costumes. Recipes of the traditional cuisine in the guide include some dishes served at the weekend study school (UNE Conference Company 2007).

After returning to their branches, International Officers report on the weekend. Each branch then prepares an International Day, which focuses on the country of study and engages a representative speaker. The Castle Hill branch engaged Mr Lawrence Dimech, OAM, the editor of the Maltese Herald in Australia, who also spoke at the Study School. These days typically feature displays about the country and a luncheon at which appropriate food is served, depending on the planning of the individual branch.

It can be seen that the Country Women's Association endeavours to change the public's perception of the Association as merely 'tea and scones' to that of a relevant and active organisation. A recent attempt to correct the public misconception through the ABC series Not All Tea And Scones (Travers 2007) was, in my view and that of many women to whom I have spoken, less than successful. Members of the association at meetings and at the conference during informal conversation expressed their disappointment that the series belies its title by focusing mainly on the preparation of cakes and scones for the Land Cookery Contest.

The renewed and more accurate image the organisation is seeking to promote is that of a community of women bringing change to the lives of both rural and city members alike through the learning which takes place in their lives. From the standpoint of adult

education, the organisation can be seen as a learning community as defined by Kilpatrick et al (2003). The image to which the women of the CWA aspire is in reality what the organisation has achieved throughout its history. That is, it has brought many benefits to rural women and the community at large (Townsend 1988 passim).

Each year the organisation holds an annual conference which also includes its Annual General Meeting. The venue changes from year to year, circulating around the state of New South Wales so that women from even the most isolated areas have an opportunity to attend at some time without overly lengthy travel times. The 2007 conference, held at Jindabyne, demonstrated that the 'tea and scones' image is indeed a false representation of the executive and most branches of the organisation. The Governor-General, Major General Michael Jeffery (2007), stated in his opening speech to the conference that 'the CWA is one of the great "enablers" in Australia and a superb role model for others to emulate'. His Excellency went on to enumerate some of the CWA's 'vital work' in providing:

- Educational grants for country students;
- Funding support to medical research and organisations such as the Haemophilia Foundation of Australia, or the Royal Flying Doctor Service;
- Lobbying Federal and State Governments; and
- On-the-ground disaster relief to families around the world, and indeed our own families at home

Jeffery 2007

Unfortunately most of the media reports and photographs of the conference proceedings focused more on the Land Cookery Contest than they did on the debates engaged in and decisions made by the delegates. A mitigating factor may be that the most substantial reports are featured in *The Land* newspaper (2007), which sponsors the competition. This publication caters to rural Australia and is especially aimed at farmers, reporting on areas of interest to them. To be fair, the newspaper does also report on the other business of the CWA conference, but with less emphasis in the paper's main features about the conference than on those categories it sponsors (Land 2007).

The 'tea and scones' image has also probably been strengthened by the well-known kiosk which the Association operates each year at Sydney's Royal Easter Show. In the weeks of the 2007 show a total of 34,000 scones were served, almost double the previous year. Without doubt this is more than enough to reinforce any stereotype! A national newspaper (Dale & Iaccarino 2007), however, featured a column which attempted to overturn the cookery stereotype (while not being able to resist a colour photograph of the cookery contest display). A branch secretary told the journalist that watching the recent ABC series left her with:

A feeling of disappointment and frustration – even embarrassment...the CWA came across as a bunch of cheery, chubby people whose horizons were limited to the size of a cake tin, and to whom there appeared to be no more important issue than the rack marks on a cake

Dale & Iaccarino 2007

The article did go on to inform readers of CWA's work in raising money for medical research and scholarships for young women in the Pacific, as well as distributing millions of dollars of drought funding on behalf of government (Dale & Iaccarino 2007).

Even the guest speaker from Telstra on the first day of the conference in Jindabyne demonstrated a lack of understanding of the association's history and purpose when he quipped that 'CWA is now tackling real issues'. Women to whom I spoke afterwards commented that they thought, as I do, that CWA always has been tackling 'real' issues (Country Women's Association of NSW 2007:29 April). Even a brief search of CWA's history demonstrates conclusively that the organisation has never been just about cooking and serving food. Just an extract from the dustjacket blurb of the official history (Townsend 1988) should dispel the stereotype:

The CWA was formed out of desperate need. Country women were fighting isolation, an appalling lack of health facilities and the constraints of a male dominated society. The Association was built by women who had to watch helplessly as their children died from minor illnesses. These women realised they had nowhere to turn but themselves—and the result was staggering. Within a year, the Association was a unified, resourceful group that...worked tirelessly to set up baby health centres, fund bush nurses, build and staff maternity wards, hospitals, schools, rest homes, seaside and mountain holiday cottages—and much more

Townsend 1988

The author of this history writes in a prefatory note of her sense that the official records of the organisation had not done justice to the scope of its activities, and she describes her consequent call to members for recollections to include in her book. 'The response from the branches,' she writes, 'was extraordinary', indicating the enthusiastic involvement of the grassroots CWA membership (Townsend 1988:iv).

That response from the branches was an echo of the enthusiasm which greeted the inception of the CWA in 1922. A pamphlet held in the CWA archives relates the story of the foundation of the organisation, stating that it was published in order to correct an 'almost fantastically incorrect' article in the August 1954 Country Women's Own Journal (Munro et al. 1954-5). So false perceptions of the Association, then, are nothing new. The pamphlet is published over the signatures of a number of the original executive, including the Foundation President, Mrs Grace Munro (Munro et al. 1954-5). Although Grace Munro (almost always referred to as Mrs Hugh Munro in the masculine-dominated style of the times) is often referred to as the founder of the organisation, there were a number of people, both women and men, and a combination of circumstances involved in the founding of the CWA.

Helen Townsend's (1988) substantial and well-illustrated book is just one of the many ways in which members, their families and the public have learned and continue to learn through the organisation. At the time that the CWA was founded, it is my view that the most important learning to take place was that government and the public were made aware of the realities of the harsh life endured in the bush. Women, especially, suffered from isolation, lack of medical care and little or no access to basic shopping facilities.

Thus city people were forced to put aside the mythical view of the bush as a place of romance and heroism, which had been promoted by journalists such as the misogynist writers of *The Bulletin* (White 1981:101-3). Discussing the paper's anti-suffragist stance in the early twentieth-century, Sylvia Lawson (1987:194-204) quotes an opinion from

that paper that '(w)omen are far from that stage of progressive rationalism when they can take their stand on the same platform with men'.

The iconic Australian author Henry Lawson (1974), who wrote for *The Bulletin* as well as short stories like 'Water Them Geraniums', writes of the suffering of women in the bush. He portrays women in such a way, however, as to make them appear to be saintly and mysterious 'angels in the bush', as Hooton (2000) claims of Lawson's portrayal of women in his autobiographical Joe Wilson stories (Stone 1974). My perception of this image is that it carried an almost religious connotation that rural women would overcome the horrors of the Australian bush and its isolation through their courage and tenacity, thus absolving governments and institutions of responsibility to effect change in conditions in rural life.

The founders' 'authentic story' (Munro et al. 1954-5) of the inauguration of the CWA in 1922 reveals the breadth of the publicity about the needs of rural women, which can be interpreted as educating the public. The pamphlet states that the awareness of the problems facing women in the bush began in 1914 when Dr Richard Arthur stood for election to parliament, promising to be a strong representative for 'Primary Producers'. He also advocated forming a 'Bush woman's conference' (sic) and seaside holiday homes, as did Miss Florence Gordon, a journalist with *The Sydney Stock and Station Journal*. The 'Bush woman's conference' was intended to provide an opportunity for social gathering for country women, as the CWA Annual Conference continues to do today. Seaside holiday homes provided respite from the harsh conditions and loneliness of rural life, and the first to be opened, in 1924, was Keera House in Dee Why, a seaside suburb of Sydney. As well as the holiday homes, rest homes were purchased in larger centres for convalescent care and a place to stay if a family member required medical treatment or hospitalisation (Townsend 1988:60-1,65ff.).

The pamphlet written by the founders (Munro et al. 1954-5) goes on to tell how, in 1921, Dr Arthur wrote articles for *The Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, followed by a request from the publishers for women to come forward with their grievances and ideas for addressing the problems of the country. A huge response followed and 'for the first time, city dwellers were brought to realize the troubles of their country sisters' (Munro et al. 1954-5).

Opportunity for action came through the Royal Easter Show, which has brought country people to the city throughout its history. A conference was proposed and Grace Munro took upon herself the task of publicising it, assisted by the press and motion picture theatre newsreels. The first 'bush' conference opened in Sydney on 18th April 1922 under the patronage of Lady Davidson, the wife of the State Governor, and two days later the association to be known as "The Country Women's Association" was born.

Reiger (1985:40) writes that there was widespread discussion about woman's role during the decades surrounding the year in which CWA was founded. Accompanying this was the rise of science in the public domain and the promotion of the idea of eugenics and its place in the creation of high quality healthy citizens. This aim could only be achieved by manipulating women to become the ideal mothers of the nation's future citizens, a project which began in the late nineteenth century and continued through the 1930s into the 1940s despite the outbreak of World War II (Reiger 1985:208-9).

In this atmosphere of debate about control by authorities, women continued to work towards the assumption of full control of their own lives and a just and equal society, which had not been achieved simply through acquiring the right to vote for

parliamentary representation. A substantial amount of the work of women was not revealed until the 1970s. Indeed some has still not been universally recognised by historians, about which Lake (1999:6) writes of the 'missing' decades between first and second wave feminists. She argues that 'as the public record of men's deeds, history rested on—in fact required—the invisibility of women'. Consequently even many women are unaware of this activity, both behind the scenes and in public life, during what I see as these 'silent years' from 1902 until the second wave women's movement in the 1970s.

Ranald (1980) also demonstrates how active women were in public life during the 1930s and 1940s in her thesis on the United Association of Women and the Council of Action for Equal Pay. In writing of their operations during these focus years, she states:

The period itself, encompassing as it does the Great Depression and the Second World War, was one of great and rapid changes in the economic and political situation of women, and the campaigns of these organisations attempted to influence these changes. Secondly, this period has been seen by some historians as a period of decline or dormancy of the organised women's movement ... however, the activities of these organisations, and the support they received, were significant

Ranald 1980:2

Women's aims were not just to achieve their own equality, but to create a caring society. Bessie Rischbeith (cited in Lake 1999:50) wrote to United States feminist Carrie Chapman Catt in 1924 that Australia's place as 'the youngest of the great continents in development and a comparatively small population makes it possible to sow the seed now of the sort of civilisation women of all countries dream about'. Women set about realising the dream that would become the welfare state although, as Lake writes further, '(t)he history of the welfare state in Australia has usually been represented as a masculine project' (1999:55). Another feminist writer argues that, for her, feminism has four dimensions and two of these can be related to the activity of these women:

- Praxis-oriented – it is a practical project of change involving the development here and now of more ethical forms of social and personal practice.
- Utopian/creative – it involves imagining and envisaging possibilities for a different (not just more equal) society from the present (Barr 1999:19).

In this way CWA was a part of a concerted push by women's organisations through the 1920s and beyond towards the improvement of society by creating a new social order. One of CWA's great achievements in the early twentieth century was the establishment of baby health centres. The women were educating the public and each other in transformative ways, as Mezirow (2000) depicts learning. He sees it as 'the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action'. Freire (1970, 1993:119,160) writes that 'the revolutionary process is eminently educational in character' and that the leaders and the people together in cultural action may 'transform' the social structure. This action relates to the statement about the power of social capital by Leonard and Onyx quoted early in this paper (2004:71). Thus the activity of women in their organisations, including the CWA and especially in the era between the wars, can be seen to be educational and transformative in nature between the members and society at large.

Theories of adult education today cover a broad spectrum which includes informal and non-formal learning. In a table setting out his ideas on such learning, Eraut (2000) links

stimuli with the resultant learning, which he terms 'implicit', 'reactive' and 'deliberative'. Publicity can thus be seen as educative in that the target is given information on the product, event or organisation and hence has freedom to make a decision based on the received knowledge. There is, of course, criticism to be made of the false perceptions induced by the media, but that is not within the context of this paper (for a discussion on this see Brookfield 1990). A campaign to educate the public was especially necessary in the early days of the CWA, when city people and government alike were either unaware or uncaring of the conditions endured by rural women and their families (Townsend 1988).

Under the Association's auspices, and with the support of influential elite community leaders and government ministers, resources spread rapidly throughout rural areas. Baby health centres were opened, rest rooms were located in large country towns where women could relax and care for their children while their husbands were at stock sales, and maternity wards became available in cottage hospitals, hitherto considered unnecessary by government. Most of these facilities were opened and staffed by CWA members from the country branches, which had increased to 68 by the end of 1923 and numbered 120 with 4500 members by 1924 (Townsend 1988:15).

Public speaking is a skill which members learn in most, if not all, women's organisations. Oppenheimer (2002:89) writes that CWA ran classes for women on public speaking and the conduct of meetings during the Second World War which, she states, had opened up 'hitherto unheard of opportunities for women'. Francis Studdy must have developed those skills through her own initiative and may have been one of the catalysts to the later more formal training. She was the second state president, from 1925 until 1928, and Townsend (1988:19) writes that she 'had an absolute dread of public speaking which almost made her decline CWA office'. Mrs Studdy overcame her fear, however, to the extent that she lobbied government 'relentlessly' on behalf of country women and encouraged them to do the same. She also urged branches to undertake health education courses and worked for improvements in train services and country hospitals. Following state presidents worked equally hard in various ways. (Townsend 1988:19;54&97). Thus, during their times in office, Francis Studdy and other CWA presidents throughout its history not only educated themselves but extended education of country women and public awareness statewide.

Education has continued throughout the existence of the CWA in many fields. Handicraft classes and schools are held, and the competitions help members to hone their skills. Scholarships are awarded to young women in Papua New Guinea and to young people in country New South Wales, as well as to rural women to assist in attending the handicraft schools in the city. The many committees educate not only the women serving on them but all members through their activities and reports.

Perhaps the greatest educator in the organisation is its journal, *The Country Woman*, first published in October 1937, and there were also country radio broadcasts around this time. Other publications have included cookery books, calendars, anniversary histories and annual reports (Townsend 1988:111-12).

In the limited space of this paper it is impossible to cover the multitude of activities undertaken by the Country Women's Association of New South Wales, most of which educate its members, their families and the wider public in some way. It is to be hoped that the greater scope of the doctoral thesis will allow me to do some justice to the organisation, its nature as a learning community, and the way it caters to the needs of both rural and city women.

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