

Theoretical Perspectives: Researching the History of Adult Education and Learning in Women's Organisations in Australia

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This paper aims to show the blend of theoretical perspectives employed to trace the way women have educated each other, both formally and informally, in a selection of non-government voluntary women's organisations in Australia. My thesis examines the way women's organisations constitute a site of learning for adult education, while identifying the women who have operated as educators within them, whether officially recognised as such or not. The research will also ascertain the extent of learning, whether intentional or incidental, which has taken place in the history of those organisations studied for the purposes of this work, and that which continues to occur. In addition, the amount of recognition of these organisations as sites of learning in the field of adult education will be explored. The work of Griff Foley (1999) is important in tracing the way learning takes place in the context of social action in such organisations.

Both adult education theory and feminist theory form a fairly equal basis for the research for my thesis, and both consist of wide and varied fields of thought, especially feminist thought, which is constantly changing – and has always done so. A dip into any feminist reader uncovers the diversity of feminist thought (Gunew 1991; Caine et al. 1998), from the maternalist suffragist women (Magarey 2001) to Marxist-feminists (Thompson 2000; Gimenez 2004) through to the 21st century young women demanding sexual freedom as feminine women (Else-Mitchell & Flutter 1998). Indeed, there have been critics who deny that there is any cohesive feminist theory at all, but there have been enough rebuttals to that view to ensure that it does exist as a discipline (for example Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). This paper will discuss the theoretical perspectives of adult education and feminist theory which will inform my research, the major ones being Paulo Freire's liberatory education and Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory, with others playing a minor role (Freire 1993) (Mezirow 1991). I will then show how those theories will be utilised to investigate the way women have learned and educated each other, and continue to do so, within their organisations.

Historical theory also features as history is visited throughout. This is particularly important when placing women into a history that ignored them in the earlier decades which I will be covering, such as the first-wave women's movement in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. Those women disrupted the public/private divide and broke into the masculine arena, thus giving opportunity to employ new ways of studying their activities, as discussed in a paper examining 'New Historicism' in relation to feminism (Newton 1989). Education historian Malcolm Vick writes of the pitfalls of trying to write history as 'what really

happened' – the ideal of E.H. Carr (Vick 1998), but this is even less straightforward in women's history, which often has to be extricated, even assumed, from male gender-biased texts.

Historical analysis is necessary because women's organisations have played a major role in the education and emancipation of women in Australia's history, especially during the suffragist era until the franchise was won for women in 1902. The major focus of this paper, however, is the theoretical approach, but I will also briefly describe the methodologies used which allow the application of the theory. My research includes oral history interviews, primary and secondary historical research and theoretical literature. Interviews provide a perspective of current and recent practice (depending on the age and length of membership of the subjects), while primary archival material permits an insight into the past educational activities of the selected organisations, allowing comparison. As there is a plethora of women's organisations I have restricted my investigations to three or four in each of a few categories, restricting research to New South Wales for the same reason. My original hope was to do a broadbrush overview of the contribution of women to the whole field of adult education in Australia, because of our omission from most of the recorded history (see for example Whitelock 1974), but that was an impossible dream!

Adult education extends across many areas of life and is not limited to that which takes place in formal institutions such as TAFE colleges or non-government training organisations. It can include classes in community situations and even the incidental learning which occurs in day-to-day life, as Foley argues consistently: 'Learning (is) central to all aspects of human life. Formal education is a minor part ... Informal and incidental learning and non-formal education are far more significant' (2004 p.vii).

I intend to explore the many ways in which women are educated within the organisations to which they belong, and to discuss the theories on how this learning occurs. Cyril Houle, a great theorist of adult education in the United States, writes of the dearth of educational analysis of the women's movement, contending that the movement 'particularly insofar as it is concerned with consciousness raising, may be seen as a vast adult education enterprise – both for women themselves and for the people and institutions they seek to influence' (1992 p.241). The writing of feminist educator Mechthild Hart, who was a student of Mezirow, is important in understanding the way women are often seen as unskilled yet are actually 'a highly trained and disciplined labour force' (1992 p.52).

It may be helpful to examine the difference between the terms 'education' and 'learning'. The collaborators of Malcolm Knowles, in the introduction to a revised edition of his key text, *The Adult Learner*, define education as 'an activity undertaken or initiated by one or more agents that is designed to effect changes in the knowledge, skill, and attitudes of individuals, groups, or communities'. They contrast learning as an emphasis on 'the person in whom the change occurs or is expected to occur'. So, they argue, education focuses on the educator as an 'agent of change', but learning is 'the act or process by which behavioural change, knowledge

skills, and attitudes are acquired' *by the learner* (my emphasis) (Knowles et al. 1998 pp.10-11). While these definitions are simplistic and were indeed given only as an introductory remark in the reference quoted, they serve to briefly illustrate the field of my investigation; that of women as educators and learners within their organisations. Many theorists would dispute such simplification, however, and argue that the educator cannot be separated from the learner because of the two-way communication which takes place, not to mention the fact that any worthwhile teacher is on a continual trajectory of reflection and learning (Brookfield 1995 p.187; Fenwick & Tennant 2004).

In a work on lifelong learning and the identity of the learner, Eraut is quoted as seeing learning as 'the transformation of understanding, identity and agency' (in Chappell et al. 2003 p.4). I find his definition particularly appealing as my own contention is that learning promotes agency to a special degree in women who have been lacking in self-esteem, particularly as the result of an abusive or oppressive relationship. I will investigate the veracity of my argument through my research, including in it the testimony I have already received from women who have told me of the difference in their lives that their organisational membership has made. This outcome has resulted from their interaction with other members of their organisations, and not just the confidence they have gained through skills learned in more formal classes, such as embroidery techniques in the Embroiderers' Guild.

In this study of women in their voluntary organisations, both historical and current, I will examine both aspects – education and learning. Education will be looked at as that which is provided in a more or less formal manner by the organisations themselves, and learning as that which takes place in the lives of the members, whether as the result of organised classes, or incidental learning which has occurred through interaction in social situations. Edouard Lindeman wrote in 1926 that 'the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience. If education is life, then life is also education. ...Experience is the adult learner's living textbook' (1961 p.6-7). In the case of learning in social situations, I will investigate the place of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, now given a major position in adult education theory (1991). In my view, the outworking of this particular theory is evidenced to a large degree in women's learning in voluntary organisations.

Mezirow's work in many ways resembles, and may have evolved from, that of Freire, whose writings on education and liberation are well known. In a chapter on radical adult education, a writer argues that although many have articulated the themes of popular education 'none is better known internationally than Paulo Freire', who he sees as a prophetic voice (Deshler 1993). Freire was a Brazilian educator and theologian who is best known for his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, 1993). He introduced the concept of liberatory education, bringing freedom to the individual, and thence through to society, through a process of *conscientization* – consciousness-raising or critical consciousness – and *praxis* – action and reflection on

one's situation which brings about desire and action to change. Freire describes traditional education, which he deplores, as *banking education*, where the individual is required to memorise facts and processes without generating any change in her thoughts and ideas. Conversely, he writes that '(l)iberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' and that education is 'the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination' (1970, 1993 pp.60,62).

Freire's revolutionary ideas have been picked up by academics in many strands of thought over the years, especially feminist writers. One radical feminist thinker, Kathleen Weiler, writes of the relationship of feminist theory to Freire's concern for liberation from oppression through education:

feminist educators often cite Freire as the educational theorist who comes closest to the approach and goals of feminist pedagogy. Both feminist pedagogy as it is usually defined and Freirean pedagogy rest upon visions of social transformation; underlying both are certain common assumptions concerning oppression, consciousness, and historical change (1991).

Thus, the view of feminists agrees with Freire that change is needed in society to improve the position of oppressed groups, whether women in a patriarchal world, victims of racism or exploited workers. In individuals this change often happens as a result of consciousness-raising, a process brought about when the person learns reflection and critical thinking. The work of Stephen Brookfield is important in the areas of reflection and critical thinking, and I am drawing heavily from it in interpreting my research (1986, 1987, 2005).

Women trapped in abusive relationships usually have difficulty with self-esteem and with recognising their abilities and prospects for a free and independent life. The authors of a seminal work on women's knowing state that some women in their study saw themselves in 'painfully negative terms'. Because of difficult past experiences and poor self-image they 'felt trapped by the negative images from the past or splintered into vaguely sensed parts and subject to kaleidoscopic shifts in self-picture that kept them off balance' (Belenky et al. 1997 p.81). Joining a women's organisation, especially if it involves women with similar past experiences, may help such women to learn in ways that will transform them.

'As adult learners we are caught in our own histories' Mezirow writes. 'Approved ways of seeing and understanding, shaped by our language, culture and personal experience, collaborate to set limits to our future learning' (1991 p.1). Habits of thinking which inhibit learning can be transformed through reflective learning which involves 'assessment or reassessment of assumptions. Reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid' (Mezirow 1991 p.6). Mezirow's theories of transformative learning, along with Freire's, also apply to adult education in radical women's organisations such as those within the Communist Party in the early twentieth century (Stevens 1987; Damousi 1994) or housewives' organisations in the same era (Curthoys & McDonald

1996). The Country Women's Association (CWA), which has been closely associated with this university for decades, is transforming itself from its 'tea and scones image' and may also become a radical organisation within a generation or less.

My historical research will mainly utilise records deposited in the New South Wales State Library and in the archives of those organisations which are still in existence. I will also use oral history methods to interview current and past members of those which are still operating. As an example of this I spent a day interviewing members of the Newcastle Branch of the Embroiderers' Guild (NSW) Inc., about which I presented a paper in July at the 2006 International Oral History Association conference at the University of Technology in Sydney.

That conference's theme was 'Dancing with Memory' and I adopted the metaphor of dancing for my paper, 'Dancing out of the Silence', to describe women's emergence from the silence of gender-biased history through oral history and the dance of education that is lifelong learning (2006). I will include a modified version of the paper in the section of my thesis which I devote to the Embroiderers' Guild (NSW) Inc. I have already recorded interviews with women who are or have been members of organisations such as the CWA, Zonta, Christian Women Communicating International (CWCI) and the Embroiderers' Guild NSW Inc. Some women prefer not to have interviews recorded but are happy to allow me to take notes while interviewing them.

Because so many women's organisations are concerned with issues of justice, equality and social welfare, feminism has adopted a theoretical base encompassing these and other issues important to women (and many men) but not necessarily recognised by society in general or its leaders. Sometimes the value of their work in their organisations and in the community is not even recognised by the women themselves. Add to this the fact that volunteers are often undervalued and dismissed and there is a multiplied risk of lack of recognition. One academic writer, whose publication is the first to describe the 'third sector' in Australia, notes that non-government, non profit-making organisations are 'generally overlooked', yet are 'a lot more important than most people realise' (Lyons 2001 pp.xi, xii). Many volunteers in such organisations are women, making any study of their contribution as educators both especially meaningful and long overdue (although not all who teach in third sector organisations are volunteers – some are paid for their work out of class fees).

Audrey Oldfield, an historian of the first-wave women's movement in Australia, writes of her sadness at gaps in the history she uncovered because 'so many prominent women did not think their experiences important enough to commit to paper, and much of what the others left has been destroyed' (1992 p.xiii). Fortunately Rose Scott recognised the importance of keeping records and was present at the time of a 'joy meeting' women held to celebrate the franchise in 1902. Scott's activity in women's organisations is well-documented

and she knew the problem that women faced, and still do, in the writing of history (Allen 1994). Oldfield describes how Scott told men present at the meeting that:

their names would live 'not only in the history of Australia, but in that of the world', while the names of the women would be forgotten. (1992 p.xiii)

Discussion of historical omissions and the necessity of revision cannot disregard the differences that exist within the category of 'woman', a basic consideration in contemporary feminism. This has not always been so, however, as in the past feminists have themselves silenced women of difference, an issue to which Indigenous academic Moreton-Robinson devotes her book *Talkin' up to the White Woman* (2000). Moreton-Robinson is scathing in her criticism of white feminists, a criticism she shares with Jackie Huggins, whose argument she cites along with her own: 'White women have not chosen to examine the oppression of women by focusing on Indigenous women's experiences; instead they have been concerned with white middle-class women's oppression'. Citing Huggins' argument further she writes that 'white feminists have sought to control and silence Indigenous women who speak for an anti-racist feminism' (Moreton-Robinson 2000 p.174). In my research I want to engage with criticism honestly in recognising silenced educators who have been considered as 'Other', although this is difficult in the light of opposition such as Huggins', who rejects the notion of white women academics including Aboriginal women in their studies (1998 pp.25-36). I hope to find a way to respond to that challenge, and to also include other women marginalised through factors such as class, colour, ethnicity or disability.

An important aspect of many women's organisations is creativity, which can be an integral part of personal development, as well as an educative process. That process, is, I contend, further enhanced by communication within groups, whether creating a collaborative project (for example, a patchwork quilt) or individuals working on their own projects within the group. I am drawing from theorists like Perrin, who writes that 'the relationship of art to reality lies in the creative act itself ... the creation of images is part of the learning process (and) the response of others adds to the meaning' (Perrin 1993). Thus, women in creative guilds or in organisations like the CWA are engaging in a unique form of education which is promoting their growth as community members and, more significantly, their growth and their education as individuals.

In conclusion, in collecting and evaluating research by these different methodologies and theories on the practices of women's organisations in history and currently, I will be able to demonstrate my thesis. My contention is that women educate each other incidentally and informally in many and varied ways, through social engagement and activism, as well as in formal and non-formal educational situations.

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