

‘Other’-wise: researching the habitus changes in women who participate in women’s community education in Ireland.

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## ABSTRACT

A women's community education provider in the Republic of Ireland instigated research on the impacts of its programmes on the identity of the women who participate. The organisation is funded under Ireland's Community Development Programme to target women who experience significant social exclusion: their under-participation in formal adult education and training is deemed to be a factor in maintaining their risk of poverty. The organisation's principle of equality is applied by being 'needs-based': the individuals who come to the Centre are helped address barriers that prevent participation, and the groups of learners are facilitated to identify the content of the learning programmes. The women who participate in the programmes speak of the elements that contribute to their personal development and growth, the social gains they make, and their increased sense of agency. They define what empowerment means to them. The organisation's autonomy means it is able to provide a flexible and reflexive environment that results in 'healing' in bell hook's terms (1994), enabling women transform their ideas about their own capabilities and potential. The identity changes that the women describe reflect the stages in Belenky *et al's Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986). The affective domain of learning is as important as the cognitive, addressing Baker *et al's* call in *Equality* (2004) to change the way education is provided.

Each woman's personal needs are treated as a public issue: providing supports around social care, transport, timetabling etc. provide the conditions under which she can participate. Each woman's desire to remain connected to her role and family means that she doesn't have to separate her private life from her public one. Seeing the political in the personal enables each programme to respond to the set of the individual needs and the collective agreement on learning. This feminist model of growth challenges dominant notions of personal development based on the idea of the autonomous individual whose condition of participation is the separation of the private from the public. It also challenges the fear of the emotional sphere in mainstream adult education provision.

The paper describes the origins of the organisation in feminist and Freirean ideals, the nature of the programmes, the profile of the learners, and the research process that enabled the significant elements of identity changes to be identified.



What changes in the *habitus* of women as they participate in the activities and processes of a Women's Centre? This is the core question underpinning a reflexive examination of practice in a women's community education centre in the Republic of Ireland. The centre has been established nearly ten years, and provides personal and community development training to women in the locality who would otherwise not be able to access formal education and training provision. The centre's origins and the nature of its practice are described, along with the rationale for the research.

The use of the method of institutional ethnography is considered and how it enabled a sense of the overall learning culture of the organisation to be gained. Conversations with participants and staff on the theme of transformation from the data generated some surprises, particularly in the area of how personal development relates to social development. One group of participants valued aspects of this particularly highly. The aspect of the social and the emotional in women's personal development is reviewed in this paper, and analysed using the framework provided by *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule 1997).

### **The Women's Centre**

A Women's Centre in the south-east of Ireland was established in 2000. It was founded out of the grassroots feminist activism of the 1980s as a means of enabling women access education and training. The belief of the Centre is that many women face barriers in availing of education and training opportunities, and that addressing personal barriers of self-confidence and structural barriers of lack of supports enables women take steps to change their lives for the better.

The Centre provides developmental programmes for approximately 60 women a year. The programmes range from an Early Engagement drop-in facility, a personal development group, and a three-year part-time higher education certificate in Community Education and Development. The follow-on ordinary degree and honours degree is available in the local third-level institution. The Centre also facilitates emerging women's groups that are concerned with specific issues such as lone parenting and asylum-seeking.

The Centre's management structure is as participative and democratic as possible. Action Groups consisting of staff and voluntary members who are participants of activities in the Centre make proposals to a central management committee for ratification and communication back to all other Action Groups. These groups deal with the childcare service, policy, operations and community education.

The programmes use the radical and feminist pedagogies characteristic of women's community education in Ireland. Three features of the practice are worthy of note at this point:

1. The Government's White Paper on Adult Education acknowledged its "*ideologically driven, highly innovative*" nature (2000 p.111).

2. Bríd Connolly notes that “*Women’s community education analyses social and personal experience, locating it in the subjective knowledge, before moving into knowledge that is relatively more objective. ... it does not privilege objectivity over subjectivity*” (Connolly 2008 p.7).
3. Community education for women in Ireland has provided “*a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people*” (Connolly 2003 p.26).

The Centre and its programmes are funded by different State departments and agencies. These funders determine the type of outcomes to be reported. Women who participate in the programmes, however, often make statements about the difference they see in their lives as a result of participating, but many such outcomes do not fit any of the funders’ criteria, yet the Centre’s facilitators and co-ordinators are motivated and inspired by such personal stories. The Centre, as an organisation and provider of community education, has to compete with other forms of adult education for state funds. It must be able to value the range of developmental outcomes that is achieved. The management committee of the organisation identified a need to systematically and methodically identify the more intangible outcomes of participation and move the reportage of such outcomes beyond the anecdotal. A range of outcomes from the personal to the community level is claimed (AONTAS 2004), but it is the qualitative rather than the tangible that is of concern in this research, specifically the individual shifts in identity and habits of mind that come about because of the interaction between the participants and the activities and ethos of the centre.

Grenfell & James point to the usefulness of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus in educational research (1998 p.14). The individual woman presents with an often unconscious framework for making sense of the world, operating and reproducing her habits of being. Entering women’s community education is a new field of practice for participants. Its aim is change, which is achieved through a particular methodology. Women learn a new way of being through reviewing their experiences. The unthinking or unmindful nature of habits and dispositions is brought to a conscious level through group discussions of different experiences.

Ostrouch and Ollagnier state that the researcher’s task is to “*generate empirical insight*” (2008 p.9) and this was required by the Women’s Centre for the purpose of showing the experience of participants as stated by them, and how they experience it. The Centre had amassed a considerable amount of data from evaluations of its programmes, but the focus on specific courses excludes any assessment of the contribution made by any or all of the other elements of the Centre. The total culture, in other words, was not incorporated into the evaluations. Institutional ethnography allows the process and activities of an organisation to be made visible and establish what type of connections or interrelationships exist that result in transformation. To show “*how this reality is created*” and “*how the learner experiences it*” is the focus of the research (Ostrouch and Ollagnier 2008 p.9).

Becoming the Centre's ethnographer required me to suspend my normal voluntary management activities in the Centre and be the 'fly on the wall' for a period of six weeks in 2008. The rationale for the research was clarified with the voluntary management committee, and the Policy Action Group formed an ad-hoc Research Advisory Group to supervise. This Advisory Group helped communicate the research process to all of the groups, and communicate clearly that participation was voluntary. Individuals were invited to talk with me during their tea-breaks and groups could invite me to participate in some of their activities, as they saw fit, during the period. By means of a fieldwork notebook, I was able to record the activities of the Centre, and note aspects that I had previously taken for granted such as the relationships between staff and participants, the amount of laughter I could hear as a session was under way, and the voices of the children playing in the playground of the Childcare Service. This method gave me a sense of the overall, and showed me the amount of features and elements that are not included in our usual practice of evaluating and reflecting on individual programmes.

Subsequent to the fieldwork, I summarised the data and made this available to all participants. The facilitators and coordinators of the groups discussed it with participants, then convened for a three-hour focus group to discuss the data and the theme of transformation: what it means, and how it is facilitated.

The research process had core questions at its heart: what was it about the Centre and its culture that impacted on the participants: what shifts in the minds and identities of the women happen as a result of this participation? Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' help keep the focus of study on the impact of the whole organisation rather than only considering the individual participants and staff involved. The culture of the organisation becomes more visible, and can be reviewed and discussed.

The challenge of this approach is that boundaries are not clear. This, however, provides flexibility, and gave me freedom to decide where to observe, where to sit in, and when to participate in an activity. Hammersley and Atkinson direct that the research should be sensitive to the setting (1995 p.6). The naturalist, realist approach in ethnography portrays people as active subjects in their world, creating their world and constructing their own means. This approach is congruent with the constructivist approach in women's community education practice, where women are seen as subjects, active in their own worlds, rather than objects. The advantage of the ethnographic approach is that it is opened-ended (ibid 1995 p.24). This suits the curious researcher who is willing to be surprised, and even have some assumptions overturned. There is no hypothesis to be tested. The research question determines how the research process unfolds.

This methodology enabled substantial data to be collected. Themes were identified to help organise it, and it is the theme of social connection and voice that I now consider.

Women spoke about ways in which very basic social-level needs were being met: many participants spoke about making friends, and having new and better relationships. One woman

said she had never been able to face strangers before, and wouldn't have gone into town to join friends for a cup of coffee. Another said: *"I've never felt so well since I came to the Centre. I have a new lease of life, the way I see things, the way I deal with situations"*. A young woman said: *"I was isolated with three children. I like that you can just come, because for me it's about mixing with people again."* One participant's marriage had broken up. She spoke about how she had given up friends when she took up with her partner. This left her with difficulty in mixing with friends. An older woman spoke about needing an outlet now that her two daughters were no longer dependent on her.

The groupwork process at the core of the programmes in the women's centre ensures that women are given the chance to speak and be heard. One woman remembered her reaction to this: *"Everyone involved me. I was asked for my opinion. No-one had ever asked me for an opinion before. I never had a say at home and I felt withdrawn, didn't feel strong enough to give an opinion."* The experience of being silent which is at the root of this quote was echoed by many others. Many expressed the effect of this participation in similar terms, such as: *"It made me feel good to be involved and participate."*

The ability to speak and to listen is a fundamental part of the lifelong learning process for these women. The data showed that changes were frequently identified in terms of feelings rather than learning. Speakers were also very enthusiastic about the relational and social aspects to their participation. Their statements raised questions for me, as follows:

- How does this social gain relate to personal development?
- Is this 'learning' as I understand it?
- Is this therapy? I feared that therapy is not a legitimate educational activity.

A grounded theory approach then allowed me search for explanations that address these questions. The role of the emotions in learning is well documented in adult education theory, as is the need to allow learners to be comfortable by tutors being aware of the affective element in the learning situation. The affective domain in this view is put to the service of the cognitive development of the learner. That is the view I was familiar with, and comfortable with, in the higher education setting. Women's community education, on the other hand, claims it works from where people are at (Walters & Manicom 1996 p.12), so that each group determines its own starting point. The ability to do this achieves a valuable sense of ownership of the curriculum decided by the group, and it is regarded as a major contributor of motivation.

The participants quoted above were speaking about a movement from isolation and silence to connecting with others, resulting in feeling better about themselves. Their starting point is a position of Silence, or Silent Knowing, in terms of epistemological stances. Belenky et al's *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1997) explored the question of whether women's patterns of intellectual development differed from those of men. They based their study on Gilligan's thesis that women's identity development is in relation to others and responsibility for others, in

contrast to men's orientation towards rights. The rights orientation requires separation and autonomy (Gilligan 1993). They were especially interested in interviewing women who were participating in programmes in organisations catering for women, and women who found formal education problematic for themselves (Belenky et al p.13). Epistemological development is a mapping of "*perspectives about how women know and view the world*" (ibid p.15), and they identified different stages or positions. They also stated that their research did *not* consider or investigate how women move from one stage to another (ibid).

The first stage of intellectual development they identified is that of *Silence*, characterised by passivity and lack of agency. Women at this stage do not have a sense that they have a right to use their voice, or that their opinions might be heard, or that they are capable of learning. The authors use the term 'mindless and voiceless' to describe how that feels. The next stage, *Received Knowledge*, is the shift to perceiving themselves as capable of learning, but dependent upon external sources of authority to determine what it is they learn and how they should learn it. It is the shift to the third stage that is particularly interesting in this analysis, the position of *Subjective Knowledge*. This is a major transition where truth is no longer external to the person but subjectively known or intuited. Women at this stage are able to listen to the stories of people who are most like them in terms of the type of experiences they have had (ibid p.68). The later positions enable women be capable and familiar with abstract thought. Women at the subjective knowledge stage prefer to talk in terms of the personal and the concrete, that which is known to them through their own experience and reactions. At this developmental stage, women do not like to 'go it alone' (ibid p.83). This reliance on personal experience and subjective knowing can be 'antirationalist', according to the authors (ibid p.71).

Silent women have the same lack of confidence that they can learn from their own experience as they can learn from what others say (ibid p.26). They must enter a social learning situation, where thoughts and feelings are communicated with others, enabling their own experiences to be reflected on and engaging in abstract thought to some extent. Without such interactions, "*individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self*" (ibid). At the silent stage, there is no awareness of the power of learning with a group: "*They have no sense of "we-ness" with others*". Establishing basic connections with other people is difficult (ibid p.27).

Gaining a voice is defined as a core aspect of intellectual development (p.16). Belenky et al maintain that women use voice as a metaphor for their development, and observed that development interlinks "*a sense of voice, mind, and self*" (ibid p.18). They also maintain that identity development, moral development and intellectual development are linked. The women who participated in this research all conveyed a sense of excitement and valued the processes they were experiencing. The overall culture of equality in the organisation underpinned the maintenance of a safe space, enabling participation and thus enabling movement from one stage of knowing to the next. The women quoted in this paper were finding their voice, and moving



from invisibility to recognition. They were becoming aware of their feelings, and could speak in terms of how they felt better.

Feeling better means that hurts are being healed. Radical educators need to emphasise well-being of learners, according to bell hooks: this entails acknowledging the presence of every participant (hooks 1994 p.8). Every woman is first of all seen, recognised as a person. The criteria for participating in the Women's Centre is first of all, to be a woman, and secondly, to want the services. Hooks writes as a lecturer in the higher-education, formal context, yet her prescriptions about critical education are valid for women's community education, in that this centre has the autonomy and culture to put into place many of her prescriptions. Her concept of 'engaged pedagogy' requires going beyond 'conventional critical or feminist pedagogy', in order to emphasise well-being. (ibid p.15) This emphasis requires practitioners to be committed to their own personal development in order to support the personal development of others.

Affirming the learner, then, is essential, as is minding the well-being of all concerned. This requires the mind-body split to be overcome, and contradicting the privileging of the cognitive aspects of development over the emotional aspects. She says:

*"I do not think that they want therapy from me. They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful."*  
(hooks 1994 p.19).

Healing, not therapy, is what is wanted by learners. This is done in women's community education by maintaining a safe space for all concerned. A sense of 'home' needs to be in place (Walters & Manicom 1996 p.21), and ensuring that no-one is invisible. Visibility is an essential foundation for well-being in the learning context.

The issue of well-being in the educational context is the subject of Ecclestone's & Hayes' *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (2009). Their work is about the spread of the therapeutic ethos into the realm of education. Their particular concern is that the conception of the self at the core of this ethos is 'the diminished self', one who is emotionally vulnerable and in need of therapy. This view denies the potential of the person, and denies the need to develop people intellectually. It 'privileges' the emotional sphere and jeopardises the cognitive development. It forms 'an attack on reason' (Ecclestone & Hayes 2009 p.22) and as such, is antirationalist. While their critique concerns formal education, they say that 'empowerment' is more rhetoric than real. Empowerment is a characteristic claim for women's community education. They claim that this disguises the view of the person as *not* having potential, and encourages expectations to be lowered (ibid p.xiii). Emphasizing emotional well-being through education is dangerous because it disguises the effects of poverty and social exclusion, and individualizes it. The negative psychological effects of social exclusion are recast as psychological problems rather than structural problems (ibid p.11). Therapeutic education, in other words, puts too much focus on the self and not on structures. A sense of agency is only to

be applied to the self rather than to society. Ecclestone & Hayes point to the possibility that the emphasis on subjective aspects and well-being could result in victimhood, thereby diminishing the collective and social change outcomes claimed for community education (see AONTAS 2004) and having only domesticating, individual outcomes.

This critique causes us to reflect on the balance between emotional development and cognitive development. The participants have shown that for them, personal development, through collective and groupwork processes enables them achieve social gains and feel better. The extracts from the data illustrate the lack of a type of social connection where the women are seen as individuals rather than their roles. Their ascribed roles robbed them of a sense of voice and limited their chances to be with others outside their immediate circles. Meeting women who are like them, and women who they sense like them, enables a significant psychological and social transition to be made.

If the social or group aspect is enabling women change their habitus and report improvements in the personal and social lives, is this a legitimate educational activity or is it antirationalist? If we agree that development involves movement through the stages identified in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, then the emotional, subjective and antirationalist position is temporary. This position allows hurts to be healed, and attitudes about experiences changed. Other changes then become possible.

Women have traditionally been allocated the sphere of the emotions, and men the sphere of rationality. The characteristic that is valued highest is deemed to be an attribute of the most powerful and privileged social groups; the less-valued characteristic is deemed to be an attribute of a less-powerful group, who are then treated as 'Other' (Hall 1997). Rationality is a modern, liberal, Enlightenment concept that requires separation from experience and emotion. It is gender-specific, "*privileging men, those of the middle and upper classes, and whites*" (Merriam & Caffarella 1999 p.334). Ecclestone & Hayes reflect the dominant value about thinking being more valuable than feeling in intellectual development. This research, however, has shown that learning about and through emotions is a useful and legitimate starting point for the intellectual development of women who prefer less formal educational cultures.

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