

FINDING A VOICE

When or if your own experience of education taught you to shut up, that your opinions or questions were not wanted, that your conclusions or interpretations were wrong, then the act of speaking and writing takes courage. Your education might have taught you to be a not-knower; that knowledge was defined by others, the great and the good, and you did not belong to that group. That group consisted of white, middle-class men, and a few women were allowed in to speak, but they were middle-class too, the entitled ones.

Speaking and writing again comes from being with like-minded people, people who can hear what you say, who can understand what you mean, who respect you however you speak. They are not taking out a red pen and marking you 'wrong'. They support your right to speak your truth.

And then things change when we speak. When we bring our thoughts and feelings into voice, we can see them and hear them in a way that enables us to change, and that feels empowering. Hearing the thoughts and feelings of other speakers helps each of us recognise our own experience in their truth, and helps us see that our experiences, our truths, have been shaped *for us*, and now it is time for our experiences to be shaped *by us*.

And so the journey starts. Because the naming starts reflection on experience, the space for reflection leads us to ask questions. Some of those questions can be shared and answered with our friends and peers; other questions create a desire to know more and find other explanations beyond the local. That quest connects us to the global. Through study and discussion, we see the wider picture, and our tiny place in it. We feel part of the whole, but that does not mean uncritically accepting it. What we want to change connects with wider movements for change.

Some of us take steps into more formal study, while staying rooted in and grounded by the conversations with our peers. That study helps us find writing and theory that names our world, that help us understand things that we wouldn't otherwise have the words for. We come to such theory critically. We ask: who benefits if this is true? We get a chance to test ideas in practice, and reflect on how well or poorly they work. As we gather confidence, we then turn inwards for theory; we see ourselves as theorists: explainers, understanders, speakers and writers. We become the theorists.

But organising the theory, writing it and putting it out for critical review, involves risks. Having the skills to do it is not enough. It also needs the courage and the belief that it will be respected for what it is, a moment in time that captures our thinking. That thinking will always be, and needs to be, open to change.

Formal study gives us a framework for how to present such thinking and understanding. But it often requires us to 'twist ourselves out of shape'. These essays and articles deliberately go against this: they are written from practice, and written for practice. They examine practice in different ways: through the lens of community development theory, educational theory, and sociology.

The articles also show the academic skills that have been learned – how to introduce an article so that the reader knows what to expect; how to phrase sentences so that they are easy to read; how to critically review theory and practice so that its good points can be applied without the danger of taking everything as 'gospel'.

All of these works name the world of practice that is women's community education as we know it. They are not perfect. Neither is any one of us. But they illustrate a sense of confidence that we have the right to our voice. We express our truth. Each and every speaker in the Women's Centre has contributed their voice and their understanding to the development of such theory and meaning. We are the writers, but our understanding has developed from these conversations. The knowledge is every woman's, constantly evolving.

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