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Recommended Citation

Baird, Irene C. (1997). "Imprisoned bodies - free minds: Incarcerated women and liberatory learning.," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1997/papers/3>

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Imprisoned bodies--free minds: Incarcerated women and libertatory learning.

Irene C. Baird

Abstract: Using women's literature as a medium for self-exploration for self-awareness, incarcerated women learn to free their minds from their limiting situation. Examining the model through prison, Freirian, feminist methodologies affirms its significance/effectiveness as the essential first step for saying things differently, for liberation from oppression.

Introduction

In an article celebrating African American women, Toni Morrison wrote, "The mind is never still ... is going to learn whether you like it or not (1995, p.274)." For incarcerated women of all races and ethnic groups, the mandate is that, within a relatively short period of time following release from prison, "whether [they] like it or not" they better have learned something that will enable them to find "socially acceptable" employment; otherwise, the door to prison becomes a revolving one. Given this mandate, the prison where this research is currently taking place offers only traditional ABE, GED classes as the presumed antidote, the appropriate "corrective education" for a perceived-illiterate population.

There is limited research on the learning abilities, experiences and meanings of marginalized women, let alone the incarcerated, to support the prison's assumptions about the women and the decision to utilize literacy programs as the medium for employability (Baird, 1994, 1995; Gowen, 1992; Luttrell, 1993). To become better informed on the topic of marginalized women's learning, this study explored the efficacy of an alternative approach for acquiring practical knowledge: a humanities model that, as an essential first step, liberates them from their multiple layers of imprisonment through self-exploration, critical thinking development and action. Women's literature serves as the link. The methodology is viewed from three perspectives: prison rehabilitative education, Freirian liberation methodology and women's/feminists studies.

Methodology

A pilot project, in 1992, sparked the interest and served as the starting point for this ongoing research on learning among groups of marginalized women. Using a humanities-oriented model, homeless women engaged in an eight week process of self-examination through the writings of established female authors of similar race, class and experience. The one and one-half hour weekly sessions replaced the mandated "life skills" training designed as job readiness preparation. As an introduction, the women were told that although they were mandated to attend, they were not mandated to participate. There was no pre- or post-testing. Instead of measurement of learning skills, the intent was to introduce them to women's literature with

themes relevant to their own lives, to initiate reflection and dialogue for meaning and, as a problem-solving process, for making the link to their own situation. Creative self-expression, in a form of their choice, further reinforced this process. A publication including examples of their writing reflected not only the effectiveness of such a method for the self-search but also indicated a heightened sense of self. This was termed a paradox in learning since it successfully engaged the learners in a process contrary to how society defined and addressed their learning needs (Baird, 1994).

Since 1994, the model has been implemented with incarcerated women, parolees and probationers. Four cycles, each lasting ten weeks for one and one-half hours each week, take place at both the prison site and at a program for female offenders. The incarcerated women volunteer to participate; as with the homeless women, this project is incorporated into a structured rehabilitative program for the parolees. The basic model of reading, reflecting and writing prevails at both sites. Although the topics and related reading change according to the learners' preferences, Maya Angelou's short poem on failed relationships engages them in reflection and discussion immediately. Its relevance to their lives crosses all racial, ethnic, class barriers. Their success in relating to female authors is reflected in their assessment of the writing and, through their own writing, its connection to their personal lives. A written evaluation of this process also attests to their adaptation to this learning medium for acquiring practical, liberating knowledge about themselves.

Prison Rehabilitative Education

Prison studies address issues such as the causes for incarceration; the dramatic increase in numbers of prison inmates, especially among females; recidivism and its relationship to low literacy levels. With few exceptions, such as Askins and Young (1994) studies on the learning style preference and brain hemispheric dominance among incarcerated females, most studies focus on the incarcerated male. The underlying theme of Newman, Lewis, Beverstock's work (1995), however, is the importance of providing the "right" kind of education for the incarcerated, the rehabilitative rather than punitive approaches that save human capital and tax dollars. This kind of education must maintain a socializing perspective by developing critical thinking about one's self and one's relationship both to the community and to society at large. Although they do not present a specific model, they recommend humanities-oriented programs as a process of self-examination for self-awareness. To further enhance the rehabilitative process, corrections practitioners are urged to adhere to adult education principles; to develop programs responsive to learner's needs, with hands-on learning, the researchers find, as the preferred style.

Given the focus on a humanities-oriented rehabilitative approach to learning and the fact that the female prison population has increased over 300% during the past decade, it is unfortunate that these studies devote minimal space to incarcerated women. The research findings on behavioral patterns are helpful in understanding classroom interaction; however, this limited treatment of the women's learning experiences and perspectives highlights the void in adult education research relating to marginalized, oppressed women. The development and implementation of a humanities model, although having served only about 200 women to date, reaffirms the effectiveness of learning through this medium and provides the literature with a learning model for oppressed women.

Freirian Liberation Model

Freire's philosophy and methodology for liberating, initially, illiterate peasants from oppression through reading and writing in their own words has a political orientation: the prescription for social action to conscientize both the oppressed and the oppressor. The humanities-based model for marginalized women shares a similar philosophy about learning but focuses on individual, personal liberation from the many layers of internal crises that serve as imprisonment and oppression. In Freire's methodology, the praxis - the reflection and action - is designed as problem-solving education for the oppressed, the mechanism for them to look at their limiting situation, their reality and to find/define their own word. Succinctly, the imperative is for learners to look critically at where they find themselves, to dialogue and to take action. The same holds true for the humanities model with its liberating potential. Although its development was influenced by the meaning-making aspects of the humanities, the similarities between the two methodologies are remarkable. Learners using these methodologies, to quote Shaull in his Foreword to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "come to a new awareness of self hood and begin to look critically at the social interaction in which they find themselves". The differences are in the objective of the process. Freirian learners, with their self-constructed vocabulary, "often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation (1992, p.9)". Marginalized women, using the writing of established female authors of similar race, class and experience, take action on themselves, on their liberation through critical reflection and creative self-expression. Both methods, ultimately, help the learners find a "voice", shattering what Freire describes as the "culture of silence" of the oppressed.

Women's/Feminists Studies Perspectives

As has been noted, there is a significant void in research on the learning perspectives and experiences of marginalized women, the incarcerated being the most notable (Baird, 1994, 1995; Gowen, 1992; Luttrell, 1993). Ross-Gordon (1991) focuses on the necessity for inclusivity in adult education research and practice given that earlier studies on how women acquired knowledge and voice involved predominantly middle class, educated, Anglo-American women (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Other studies highlight learning within specific areas: some examples are Fingeret's (1982, 1984) work on basic adult literacy; Baird (1994), Gowen (1992) and Sheared (1993) studies on workplace preparation and Luttrell's (1989, 1993) attention to working women's learning perspectives, contrasting African - and Anglo - American women. Although Luttrell (1993) does not single out female learners, she underscores underrepresentation in the literature of low income adult learners, their programs, class sites, resistance or compliance to "school."

Liberation learning is the theme for Shauna Butterwick's comparative analysis of Freirian conscientization and feminist consciousness raising (n.d.). She provides the historical evolution of both philosophies and practices, noting the difference in "voice:" Freire objectifies the process and feminists write as subjects of the process (p.3). Noting that there is diversity among women in their movement and their experiences of oppression, she highlights that the nature and causes of their oppression must be identified, analyzed and changed, that "feminists are not aware of different things than other people; they are aware of the same things differently (p. 30)." Although she finds similarities in the process of liberation, of finding a "voice" for both feminists

and Freire's learners, she feels the women's process must be grounded in their every day realities. This philosophy supports the purpose of the humanities learning model, of finding a "voice" through dialogue and reflection based on daily, lived experiences, in order to deal with oppression. Where she differs significantly this is in her contention that feminist consciousness raising, just as conscientization, should be a process of social action, a "liberating social movement" rather than as an adult education technique for behavioral change at the personal level.

Findings and Future Direction

Results of the implementation of the humanities model, group interviews and written evaluations show that

- incarcerated women are not categorically illiterate. Even non-readers and non-writers engage in the learning process by listening, discussing and, using their own voices, by dictating their reactions;
- incarcerated women are capable of sophisticated analysis of the reading. Since they are not threatened by the process, they are comfortable in using the reading to examine their own life situations. They also incorporate the perspectives of others in their written response to the themes of the reading;
- incarcerated women do establish parameters on what they will share in the dialogue process. They are more explicit in their writing and use that component as a means of "freeing their minds."
- In spite of the site incarcerated women feel ownership in the process and participate on a regular basis. Currently there is a waiting list for the program.

Counselors at the prison share that because the women continue their involvement in the process in their cell blocks they are far less hostile. Their ABE, GED scores have improved and two released women are attending a local community college. One woman has received recognition from a national poetry organization for work she submitted. At the practice level, therefore, this process provides another approach for engaging women in a non-threatening, challenging learning format. It demystifies literature and confirms it as a learning tool since this methodology is grounded in the women's daily lives. Reflecting on the experiences narrated by known, successful authors seems to validate those women who learn to see things differently.

On the theoretical level, this study contributes to adult education literature by offering some perspectives on marginalized women's learning. It provides insight into how they conceive and frame learning, in how they are able to engage in critical thinking as a process for liberating themselves even in as limiting a situation as the prison. Once developed, thinking process should also serve them as they engage in the precarious transition to the "outside." Reflecting on the humanities model through the prison, Freirian and women's/feminist studies lenses, the following themes emerged: the significance of self-exploration; the importance of dialogue for generating critical thinking; the engagement in some form of action, with critical reflection considered applicable to this process; getting in touch with one's reality and finding a "voice" as a liberatory, learning process.

The women's written evaluations affirm the themes as well as the feminist perspective that even within their limiting situation, they are not aware of different things than other women but rather, as transformation, they have become aware of the same things differently. To use the learner's words "[this program] has allowed me to open up some things in my life I thought that I wouldn't have to think about for nothing at all." Another wrote, "this ... has made me take a good look at myself and my family ... I never knew how much I needed any of them until I went away ... because I had forgotten [them] just as much as they forgotten me ... thank you for taking me back to reality." Finally, "Since I've been coming here ... I have written down a lot of pain, happiness and hope for the future. I got out a lot of emotions through my writing ... It would also give me hope to read other women's struggles with life who made it and succeeded.

The "nagging" question is the degree, the extent and duration of the liberating process, especially once the incarcerated women are released and do not have the learning environment and support this program provides. For women with unbelievable crises to deal with, ten weeks is hardly adequate for more than setting the process in place. The model needs more extensive implementation, both in the prison and on the "outside", and with other groups of marginalized women to continue strengthening as well as assessing the liberatory learning process for oppressed women.

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