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Cynthia Lee Andruske
University of British Columbia

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Recommended Citation

Andruske, Cynthia Lee (1998). "Learning What? Content or Strategies?," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1998/papers/1>

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Learning What? Content or Strategies?

Cynthia Lee Andruske

University of British Columbia

Abstract. The purpose of this research is to explore what women learn in "upgrading" sessions in a pre-employment program as they make a transition from welfare to work and education.

Background/Problem

In preparation for the twenty-first century, Canada is attempting to streamline its economy by reducing deficits, unemployment, and welfare roles. Federal and provincial governments believe for welfare recipients "The best social security is having a job" (Improving Social Security, 1994, p. 6). Both have begun reforms to break the cycle of dependency by targeting child poverty and providing incentives for welfare to work, on-the-job training, education, and training. Single mothers are now primary targets, for they are viewed as overly state dependent and "problems" as they are no longer deemed "deserving poor" (Brodie, 1996; Fraser & Gordon, 1994). British Columbia policymakers maintain that welfare recipients are profiting from the new B.C. Benefits package. However, single mothers on assistance find the contrary, for childcare subsidies, bus passes, and clothing allowances for work have been abolished. Furthermore, if women on are not looking for a job, they can be cut from welfare at any time without question. To further divert women from welfare, the B.C. government is strongly encouraging single mothers to return to work, seek training, or enrol in pre-employment programs. Government sees these alternatives as a panacea; however, they often offer a "quick fix" to women striving to make life transitions. In reality, these programs are only initial steps in a long, arduous, circuitous, and serendipitous "walk" from welfare.

Despite the best intentions of program staff and the women, not all go on to "get a job" or enter educational programs resulting in jobs. Surprisingly, women may be worse off after leaving training programs designed to funnel them from welfare into the workforce to get "a foot in the door" only to find themselves in low paying or dead-end jobs as "working poor" (Edin & Lein, 1997; Riemer, 1997). Due to high structural employment, women may find no jobs at all, so they return to welfare or attend another program. Women seeking education often enroll in costly or lengthy educational programs. Then, they are encouraged to take out student loans to shift them from welfare roles. However, when they find no job awaits them, they discover they are now saddled with a large student loan debt. Thus, the "revolving door" back to welfare begins.

Purpose

Despite these realities, many pre-employment programs have tended to help women with improved self-esteem, some new skills, and alternate viewpoints about work and education. Although many single mothers would like to see the programs last longer than six months, they are generally pleased with the opportunity to participate and the assistance they receive. While working with women in a pre-employment program, I became curious about their satisfaction. Thus, the purpose of my research in progress is to begin to explore women's perspectives of their transition from welfare to work and education. In addition to advanced education, marketable job skills, and subsidies, I have a hunch that single mothers learn strategies to assist them in their transition. Therefore, for this initial explanation, I have focused on what single mothers learn during "upgrading" sessions in a pre-employment program: content or strategies.

Theoretical framework

At first glance, the purpose of "upgrading" in a pre-employment program might seem obvious: women learn content skills for jobs or education. However, Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social practice offers an alternate explanation. Bourdieu (1977) contends individuals possess symbolic, cultural, and social capital acquired from family background and accrued throughout the individual's life trajectory and positions within dynamic fields of social forces. Individuals possess dispositions or strategies for entering, maintaining, and navigating social fields. They strategize means to acquire and accrue forms of capital to maintain or acquire positions within fields throughout their life trajectories. This theory takes into account influence and power of structures within fields that inhibit or assist individuals in making shifts to new fields. Fields, such as pre-employment programs, are sites of "culture" and catalysts where women learn new knowledge and strategies for making shifts in meaning and understanding.

As the discourse has changed, learning is no longer defined solely in behaviouristic terms. According to Peter Jarvis (1987), "Learning always occurs within a social context and that the learner is also to some extent a social construct so that learning should be regarded as a social phenomenon as well as an individual one" (p. 15). The social dimension of learning has come to mean "knowledge, skills, and attitudes required or needed in the process of social living" (p. 315). This influences how individuals construct their social realities and interpret their life histories.

According to Lave and Wenger (1996), learning becomes more than a transfer of information, for it is situated in time, space, and the social world where it has the potential to transform individuals' understandings, meanings, and knowledge of the social world and relations with others. They endeavour to include social practice and participation into their definition to explain individuals as persons-in-the-world as members of socio-cultural communities to illustrate relationships between individuals, the world, communities, understanding, and knowledge. Lave and Wenger (1996) propose the theory of situated learning "refers both to the development of knowledgeable skilled identities in practice and to the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice" (p. 15). Thus, situated learning theory provides a basis for understanding an individual's personal learning within social and community contexts. It illustrates dynamic interplay between individuals and social groups and their influences on each

other. This complements Bourdieu's notion that individuals strategize to acquire different capitals to enter and navigate social fields that result in reproduction or production of communities.

Research Design

To understand the relationship between learning, content, strategizing, and navigating structures, I analyzed "upgrading" sessions I had held with women. From 1995-1997, as part of the "upgrading" component of a six month long pre-employment program for women on social assistance, I held informal, focus group type discussions with 67 women from five different groups. Sessions lasted for 3 hours one day a week for three months: one session in the morning and one in the afternoon. Approximately six to nine women attended either session. The purpose of the "upgrading" was to assist women in "brushing up" on skills needed to enter the job market or a course. Based on an assessment test and the women's input, a program of study was set up to assist women in improving their skills.

To inform a larger study, this research in progress concentrates on three different in-take groups totalling approximately 22 women. These groups were chosen because brainstorming, popular theatre techniques as games, and, in part, content determined by the women directed sessions. All the women happened to possess a Grade 12 diploma or a GED certificate although, in some cases, the grade level may not have been reflected in their academic skill levels. Women ranged in age from 20 to 50 plus years. The majority had a least one child. Not all women had found formal schooling a pleasant learning experience. By the end of our time together, probably all had taken at least one continuing education course at the local college. At the conclusion of my time with the women, only about two or three had decided not to continue with education, for the jobs they were going to did not need more education; they may not be able to access student loans in the future; or they just were not quite ready to make that kind of commitment.

The "upgrading" classes were small with 6 to 9 women gathered around one large table so all had eye contact. A blackboard and flipchart paper were available. The small group size provided women with opportunities to speak and become well acquainted with each other. Attendance was expected; however, if an emergency arose or if women had appointments that could only be booked during "upgrading," they were free to miss the session. Homework was given related to topics under discussion; however, marks were not given for assignments. Also, often time was provided within class to help women get started on homework. All attempts were made to encourage women to complete and hand in assignments; however, if for some reason, a woman continually did not hand in exercises, no disciplinary action was taken. Three underlying goals guided the sessions. One was to act as a bridge to formal education and to portray learning through education could be fun and worthwhile. Another goal was to illustrate to the women how much experience, knowledge, and skills they already possessed. The third goal was to encourage women to problem-solve and practice reflexivity. Another purpose was to show how content can be used in the workplace as well as academia. The hope was the women would continue their education. To accomplish these goals, I used three techniques: brainstorming, popular theatre as

games, and content determined by the women. To set the context, a brief description of each technique is needed.

Brainstorming is generally used as a pre-writing technique for generating ideas for writing. However, it can also be used as a discussion tool with groups to generate knowledge about different topics or problems. In brainstorming, a circle is drawn either on a blackboard, flipchart, or some other means so that the group can see the text. The next step is for the group to generate all the points about a particular subject that comes to mind. The key here is to leave ideas unedited. The recorder simply writes down what is called out to her verbatim. Once generated, ideas can be used for essays, for discussions, or for course content selection.

Popular theatre may have numerous definitions depending upon the interpreter; however, the way I used it was to combine ideas from Paulo Freire (1970) and Augusto Boal (1979). Freire devised an educational methodology whereby through conscientization or the process of critical dialogue, critical reflection, problem-posing, and action about a community' socio-cultural realities, communities of individuals could instigate social transformation. Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal (1979) incorporated Freire's concept of conscientization into people's theatre or popular theatre. He took the concept even further by having oppressed peoples become active observers through participation within the theatre to explore alternative solutions to issues important to the community for social transformation. Boal's (1979) process of popular theatre ranged in exercises promoting awareness of the body, expression through the body, communication with the body, and problem-solving with the body. This theory was complemented by my own use, experience, and continued involvement with a popular theatre group. Thus, all served to influence my decision to introduce popular theatre to women during "upgrading."

The third technique I used was to have the women assist me in determining content or "curriculum" for our time together. Since most of them had a Grade 12 or GED, giving them busy work or concocting irrelevant exercises seemed a definite way to create frustration and aversion to academia. Thus, using brainstorming techniques and Freire's (1970) theory of conscientization, we set out to determine for the different groups what they felt they needed to learn that would be relevant to their transition to education or the workplace.

Since this research in progress was meant to provide initial, contextual, informal information, I only kept descriptive fieldnotes of my sessions with the women. I also copied blackboard and flipchart discussions of brainstorming sessions, and I typed out handouts of group topics we decided to use to guide us. I analyzed the rich data to understand the relationship between content, strategies, learning, and women's transition from welfare to work and education. I also examined the data to see if any common themes emerged.

Findings/Conclusions

From my initial analysis, I discovered that brainstorming, popular theatre as games, and determining content assisted the women in building support networks with each other and

learning to work more collaboratively. The small "upgrading" groups provided the women with the opportunity to get to know each other, share ideas and information, test out new knowledge, and break stereotyping and isolation they had encountered on welfare.

Furthermore, through brainstorming, the women discovered information, experience, knowledge, and similarities they held in common. Probably most important is that it illustrated to them they are problem-solvers with expertise. Also, it provided them with a vehicle to gain or regain their voices, and it helped create a learning community and a support network. One group enjoyed this process and the critical dialogue so much, that they intended to meet to brainstorm discussions even after I left. In addition to furnishing relief from academic work, popular theatre or games, as the women called them, provided a novel means for learning communication skills, collaboration, creation of community, body awareness, fun, play, and discovery that learning comes through other means. One group, in particular, became so attached to popular theatre that they demanded we not miss our "game." Determining content gave women a sense of control over deciding what they deemed important for their transition from welfare. Moreover, it assisted them in working collaboratively with others while learning to negotiate compromises about content we would discuss and explore. Furthermore, the women felt a sense of ownership in the process of their "upgrading," so much so in one case the women named their group the Cynth-a-sizers to distinguish themselves. This technique helped create comradery, a learning community, and support networks.

Five themes emerged from the data analysis of the research in progress: content as strategy, strategize use of content, content reveals new perspectives, content reminds of forgotten skills, and content as skill. The women tended to use content we discussed in the sessions as strategies to begin moving from welfare into a new field, such as student or employee. For example, we began discussing grammar and language use in various groups. Women mentioned that they noticed individuals talked differently in some workplaces. We discussed how language was an unwritten code (type of capital) signalling an individual's education, background, and knowledge. We brainstormed on some common grammatical errors, such as the use of being, improper use of pronouns, and very informal language. They decided to use our discussions and the way we used our language as content to begin strategizing how to overcome improper language use that would indicate they lacked command of the language. Only after we agreed as a group did we stop people during discussions and highlight improper use of words. Overall, we were supporting Bourdieu's theory about the acquisition of different types of capitals as the women used content to strategize entry into a new social field.

Women were also quite adept at strategizing ways to use content. For example, when the small groups were initially allocated, women were quite concerned about the group they had been assigned to. They tried to figure out if one group was supposed to be smarter than another. Many were quite sensitive as they had had unpleasant experiences in school because they had been considered problems or slow learners. To allay their concerns, I had them engage in an introductory exercise where each woman would partner with another woman she did not know very well. Then, I gave them a series of questions so that they could discover the person's strengths, potential contributions, and expectations. In addition to interviewing, the partners drew each other. Although they showed initial reluctance, the women drew some stunning pictures of each other that reflected the responses they had given to the questions. At the end of this

exercise, the women indicated this had helped them think about strategies for interviewing individuals for their upcoming information sessions. Plus, the exercise allowed them to think about how to respond to questions in a job interview. Neither outcome had been my intent. It had been to create a learning community and to recognize their attributes. Again, these findings support Bourdieu's contention that individuals strategize ways to use types of capital to gain entry into new social groups.

The content we worked with revealed new perspectives to the women. Our popular theatre "games" assisted women in looking at the world differently through more than just verbal communication. For example, in most of the exercises we talked with the body. In one instance, I asked the women to portray happiness and relief with their bodies. Each individual chose her own body position and then was asked to show it to a partner. Then, the partners had to mirror the positions the painters portrayed. They could not believe the six different body interpretations they discovered around these concepts. This enhanced new knowledge about communication, for the women indicated that this exercise would help them listen and communicate differently with others. It also broke down stereotypes from others about their abilities.

Additionally, content we worked on reminded many women about skills they had already learned. For example, some women had been out of school for at least ten years. They were convinced that they could not remember anything. However, when women indicated they could not remember how to perform math calculations, they were pleasantly surprised to see how many of the math concepts they practised in their daily lives through budgeting, shopping, and cooking.

Finally, the data revealed content as a skill. This was illustrated when women began practising essay writing and learning how to solve ratios and proportions and fractions. Many of the women had either never worked with the concepts, or they knew very little about them. However, they discovered that through explanation and working through problems that they could practise a skill until they became adept at performing it. Much of this was a result of their willingness to practise the activity to master the skill.

As Jarvis (1987) and Lave and Wenger (1996) pointed out, learning is situated in a social context whereby individuals learn to transform their social realities. Through social interaction and critical discourse leading to action (Freire, 1970), women in the "upgrading" sessions have begun to consciously strategize ways to acquire forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1977) to begin the "long walk" from welfare to work and education.

Implications for Adult Education

Mechthild Hart (1990, p. 136) states, "Education is always inevitably caught in a tension between leading to new patterns of thought and action vital to...individual consciousness, and the fact that structures...[and] content of individual consciousness are thoroughly permeated by society." As adult educators, our role may be to act as experts or guides within learning sites. We must be cautious though in working with women making a transition from welfare, for we may

influence their transformation of understanding, meaning, and knowledge of relationships in the social world and their role in it. If we act as experts, we may model a world governed by rules and roles individual must fit themselves into. On the other hand, we can model a social world where rules, roles, and walls are not solid, rigid, or structured. As guides, we may communicate "the social world is constructed by people and those people do make some rules and they do enforce limits to what can be done, but the individual has to seek out and change the shape of the room when necessary" (Horowitz, 1995, p. 230).

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