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# Self-Directed Learning as a Political Act: Learning Projects of Women on Welfare

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores self-directed learning of women on welfare in their transitions to paid work and education as political act, and expands the definition of self-directed learning to the political realm.*

## Background and Purpose

For the past year, I have been following the transitions from welfare to paid work and education of 21 women living in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. In these communities, taxpayers, policymakers, social workers, lawmakers, employers, and others, often stereotype women on welfare as lazy, dependent, unmotivated, undirected, lacking initiative, and possessing few if any skills. However, I have found a different story. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how women on welfare are self-directed learners engaging in a variety of learning projects as they navigate structures in their transitions to paid work and education. As self-directed learners, women on welfare actually become political change agents as they attempt to control and to initiate change in their everyday worlds in response to oppressive external structures.

## Theoretical Framework

Over time, numerous definitions have evolved for the concept of self-directed learning. Sometimes definitions overlap, causing confusion and sometimes even contradictions between meanings (Chovanec, 1998). Some definitions include dimensions of process and personality; others are multi-dimensional; still others itemize characteristics of the self-directed learner. Some even include social contexts of self-directed learning. According to Candy (1991), "The term self-direction embraces dimensions of process and product, and that it refers to four distinct (but related) phenomena: 'self-direction' as a personal attribute (personal autonomy);... as a willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education (self-management);...as a

mode of organizing instruction in formal settings (learner-control);... as the individual, non-institutional pursuit of learning opportunities in the 'natural societal setting' (autodidaxy)." (p. 21).

According to Brookfield (1984), adult educators need to expand the definition of self-directed learning to include marginalized groups, for researchers tend to focus on self-directed learning amongst the white middle class or within educational institutions. Brookfield (1993) maintains that adult educators need to consider that self-directed learning is often political, for power and control are frequently catalysts for self-directed learning influenced by "political" structures and conditions. Learning is an activity influenced by social contexts, not divorced from them (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991). Furthermore, social contexts provide arenas for self-directed learning influenced by structures locally, globally, and cross-culturally (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). According to Brookfield (1993), concerns over the omission of "political context, cultural contingency, and social construction of self-directed learning activities" have been in the background for a while. He notes that Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) recommend: "The political dimension of self-direction continues to be largely overlooked by adult educators, and this needs to be remedied" (p. 220). Brookfield (1993) argues that self-directed learning is inherently political in nature, and maintains that, "Instead of being equated with atomistic self-gratification, self-direction can be interpreted as part of a cultural tradition that emphasizes the individual's standing against repressive interests" (p. 225). Moreover, when individuals take control of their learning, it will likely bring them "into

direct conflict with powerful entrenched interests” (p. 237) and structures.

In his theory of social practice, Bourdieu (1977) maintains that individuals tend to operate within dynamic fields of forces or symbolic sites, called fields, where collective symbolic struggles occur for positions based on an individual’s strategies for delegating or imposing decisions on others (symbolic violence) (Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990). Within fields, individuals strategize for position and power depending upon their dispositions (habitus), social capital (networks), cultural capital (education), and symbolic capital (prestige). Bourdieu acknowledges the individual operates as a creative, social, and political agent. Bourdieu (1977; Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990) has explored individuals’ social relations individually and collectively within ‘fields of social practice’ as they strategize to maximize their life opportunities. Bourdieu’s theory can be applied to women’s transitions from welfare to paid work and education, for he proposes a way of thinking to describe and analyze individuals holistically as social actors by examining the “genesis of the person and of social structures and groups” (Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990, p. 3). Furthermore, this theory offers a way to analyze practical life dialectically by taking into account “the interplay between personal economic practice and the ‘external’ world of class history and social practice” (p. 3). Thus, we may look at the relationship and interplay of social structures and the ability of individuals as social and political agents to navigate through and within social spaces by examining the individual’s patterns of practice in everyday life. Furthermore, Bourdieu purposes social relations link individuals to dynamic collectives of persons bound together in socio-structural relationships reflecting micro and macro structures within everyday worlds.

I believe that women on welfare, while undertaking self-directed learning endeavors, engage in “political” activities that challenge structures that control their lives. They participate, actively, and in some cases, unwittingly, in struggles to challenge structures, agencies, and individuals by acquiring knowledge through self-directed learning projects leading them to strategize ways to gain control over their lives. Using Brookfield and Bourdieu’s work as a backdrop, I maintain that women on welfare en-

gage in self-directed learning endeavors as political acts leading to greater power and control over their lives as they act as agents against repressive structures.

### **Research Design**

To explore these theories, I have been interviewing three groups of women on welfare: 9 women age 40 and older, 5 women with children under age 7, and 7 women in their thirties. Selected through snowball sampling, these 20 single women and 1 married woman on welfare, are participating in my year long study with interviews at 3 month intervals. I chose the first two groups, for they seem to ‘fall between the cracks’ of government policy and programs. The third group tends to be the focus of government policy. Since the purpose of this research is to explore women's transitions and learning within their everyday worlds, I am collecting data through thematic life history interviews. These include: welfare, education, learning, work, family, children, and transitions. However, for this paper, I am focusing on how women become active political agents through self-directed learning endeavors. Life histories link women's lived and unlived lives, experiences, and relationships to social structures over time (Alheit, 1992; Bertaux, 1981). This approach highlights structural influences and women's abilities to plan their lives while instigating changes on institutions, agencies, and individuals through dispositions they discover through self-directed learning “projects.”

All women, except two, are mothers of at least one child. Two women grew up in very affluent homes while others grew up in low income working families. Only two women were raised on welfare, and their mothers later left welfare for paid work. Before resorting to social assistance, three women indicated that their combined spousal income surpassed \$120,000 a year. All but two women have a GED (General Education Diploma) or Grade 12, and one woman is one credit short of Grade 12, but she has attended college. Currently, 6 are enrolled in college; 5 are working; 3 have disability benefits; 1 lost her job recently; and the others are on welfare.

### **Findings**

Initial analysis of the transcribed, taped interviews indicates that self-directed learning endeavors play a

significant part in women's lives as they attempt to leave welfare. Women acquire knowledge, information, and benefits that assist them in their transitions to education and paid work. Analysis of the interviews reveals that women's self-directed learning projects result in women becoming political agents seeking to regain control over their lives in five areas: welfare entitlements, education and training, employment, legal rights, and health resulting in social justice and citizenship. The following excerpts highlight the themes resulting from learning endeavors women undertook to facilitate their transitions from welfare to paid work and education.

Often, women research welfare policy to find out their entitlements, for welfare staff frequently do not alert the women to available benefits that may help women with employment and health. For example, Moe took it upon herself to read every new pamphlet in the welfare office. Frequently, she said, "I read every pamphlet that I can get my hands on in the welfare office. Often, find information that you're entitled to, but nobody takes the time to tell you about them." For example, she discovered services, like pre-employment programs exclusively for abused women, or benefits, such as medical entitlements, not mentioned by her social worker. Lila, also, continually asked questions and took it upon herself to read government policy on her entitlements. "The only way I was able to get my IUD is that I knew from reading *BC Benefits* that I was entitled to birth control. Even though my male social worker said that it only covered birth control pills, I demanded that I be given the IUD, for did they really want to interpret the act so strictly as to put me in danger of becoming pregnant!"

Not alone in her experience, Tumbleweed found that the only way she could gain access to education and training was by engaging in intensive research on programs, services, and career opportunities before she was "allowed" to enroll in a pre-employment program. Tumbleweed was told by her social worker that she was "too old to go to school because in five years she would be 45, and no one would want to hire her." Undaunted, Tumbleweed began going around her community and researching the programs and services available to her by talking to program staff and reading program descriptions. She also enrolled in mini career-planning courses to

help her find a direction for a career that would not "take her forever." Finally, after a couple of months, she returned to her social worker and showed her what she had found. Reluctantly, the social worker "gave her permission" to enroll in a pre-employment program that would help Tumbleweed practice skills and help her find a career through education and training.

After staying at home for seven years, Mary decided that she would like to return to the workforce now that her son was in school. She knew that her work skills were a bit rusty, so she set out to improve them while researching potential jobs and following up on any leads to jobs. At home, Mary had a computer, so she bought a software program to help her improve her typing speed through daily practice. At the same time, Mary took several mini-workshops on resume writing to find out the best way to market herself. In the meantime, she took a very part-time job at a retail store with the hopes of advancement or of gaining some experience to find another job. In her spare time, Mary enrolled in a series of mini-seminars to help her with interviewing skills, overcoming barriers, career planning, and networking. Then, she applied to a government agency and was called to write an entry exam; however, after three weeks of waiting, she discovered that she had failed the exam. Undaunted, she got out her old GED book and began reviewing math and English skills. After several months of hard work and self-directed study, Mary was hired for a limited two-week contract with the same government agency. Now, while she is waiting to be recalled, she is continuing to practice and improve her skills through her self-directed endeavors.

I was amazed to discover through my conversations with Mia and Lovey that many women on welfare engage in complex legal research to help them become experts in divorce and custody battles with vindictive ex-partners. For example, Mia told me, "I've spent hours in the public library, college library, and the law library to research my legal rights. I have to know them because I need to know what the judge and my ex's lawyer are saying and how it will affect me and my children. Also, I have to know my rights and the questions I have to ask my lawyer." She continually haunts the libraries, for she must help her lawyer to keep cost down, for with

the new legislation, women on welfare are no longer entitled to legal aid for divorces or child custody. Lovey says the same thing, and she keeps abreast of policy changes, in part, through her volunteer job at a library where she can read new policies and legislation pertaining to divorce and child custody.

Lilith has become an expert on her anxiety and eating disorders through her continual self-directed research projects. For example, Lilith reads any new policy and legislation she can find on health benefits. She also continually searches out programs that might help her with her anxiety. She has discovered by investigating the Web, medical books, and other resources the kind of care she needs. This is not offered in her community. She has also found out through her explorations that "I've learned more about my disorder than any of the health professionals or social workers. I know the kind of programs that I need. I don't need to be given pills or put in the hospital again for what I have. What I need are breathing exercises of a particular type, and you can only get these, if you're lucky, in Vancouver. No one wants to help, and they certainly can't believe that a woman on welfare would know as much as I do about her condition." Lately, she has gone to Vancouver on her own to seek out a program. Now, she is on a two month waiting list with the hopes of getting into a program that offers the service she needs.

### **Observations**

What I found most significant is that women are undertaking often quite complicated learning projects requiring much research on policy, laws, consulting with staff from a variety of agencies, the Internet, and various texts. What is really interesting is that most women do not see this as self-directed learning, nor do they understand the complexity of their research endeavors. They often say that they are just "doing what needs to be done." As mentioned, women must research welfare policy to find out their entitlements, for welfare staff frequently do not alert them to available benefits. For education projects, women research much information for careers as well as ways to "get permission" from authorities to pursue their career goals. They undertake complex research of child custody and support laws and policies in order to get benefits from ex-husbands as

well as ways to divide property assets with ex-spouses. Women tend to see research on health as a way to get services, benefits, or even medication for themselves or their children.

From my discussions with and observations of the women in my study, I have watched how their "learning projects" have brought them into direct conflict with government bureaucrats and others. However, in the end, many of the women's learning endeavors have enacted them as political agents creating change in their lives and those of their children. Moreover, many have shared this information and success with others attempting to make transitions. Many of the women's self-directed learning projects have led to greater social justice for them as well as different treatment of them citizens. Although often surprised, bureaucrats generally grudgingly gain respect for women's learning and their efforts to leave welfare. Furthermore, women's learning projects help them as political agents of change take some control and power back from a variety of agencies, institutions, and individuals.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

Examining self-directed learning endeavors of women on welfare has implications for adult educators. First of all, as Brookfield (1993) mentions, this type of research pushes us to expand the definition of self-directed learning to include marginalized individuals instead of just the middle class or professionals. Secondly, this exploration pushes the definition of self-directed learning into the political realm and beyond just personal development and self-fulfillment. Thirdly, as adult educators, we can look at self-directed learning in the social context as it is influenced by external, social forces, and structures. Fourthly, this research would help staff from government training programs understand that women on welfare have greater skills and need more than just life skills or budgeting in their programs. Fifthly, this research helps "emphasize women's interdependence, connectedness, and the politics of nurturance" (Brookfield, 1993, p. 240) to women's transitions and of their actions as political agents of change. Finally, this research encourages us to notice that women on welfare through their actions are political agents seeking to regain control and power

over their lives as they navigate social spaces and social structures in their everyday worlds.

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