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Women Crafting New Work: The Learning of Women Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: *This report presents findings of a cross-Canada qualitative study examining learning processes of new women business-owners, to explore the emergence and nature of women's experiential or 'informal' learning in work they invent.*

Overview of the Study

Workplace learning is coming to be understood as a complex phenomenon entwining identity, desire, cultural communities of practice, discourses of work and success, multiple knowledges and spheres of life activity, and cognitive processes. This three-year national study¹ is a qualitative inquiry exploring complex relationships between learning and work in women's lives. Participants were selected because they had precipitated for themselves a significant work-change that generated intense learning: each woman left a job with an organization to start her own business, often without previous business experience or education. This study explored the process of work learning and personal change reported by these women after at least four years running their new business. Emerging themes have opened directions for further research in workplace learning described in the summary below. Some of the most interesting center on the relationship between how and what these women say they learn, their personal needs in work, their meanings of both learning and success, and the work communities that emerge around them. Many women have crafted patterns of work/life/learning balance in shaping their own work-place and work-life which defy dominant discourses of productivity, profit, knowledge, and success. Ninety-five women across Canada were interviewed speaking from different cultures, business types and sizes.

Background and Framework of the Study

The study is grounded in the theory of women's learning and development and feminist perspectives on women's work, especially entrepreneurship. Studies of women's development consistently report that their work and learning are rooted in self and relationships (Caffarella, 1992; MacKeracher, 1994). Their work-lives and work-learning are also

woven into family and other relations with fluidity and complex tensions. MacKeracher documented different knowledges that women develop in work, showing interrelations between skill, identity, relationship, and community. Fenwick (1998) found that issues of establishing and "reinventing" self in work, ethics and environment underlay women's fundamental engagement and their learning in work experiences.

Hart (1992) has described women's work experience as a terrain of particular struggle and even psychic violence. Women are leaving their jobs at alarming rates to create new kinds of work, citing reasons such as glass ceiling issues, ethical conflicts, and feeling under-valued or unchallenged (Business Development Bank, 1999; Sharp & Sharp, 1999 including limited access to capital, shortage of networks, lack of appropriate support, work-family issues, fundamental value conflicts with a competitive economy, and salary gaps (Canadian Advisory Council, 1993; Wells, 1998). Emerging studies of women entrepreneurs indicate that profound personal change is often experienced throughout the process of business development (Gay, 1997; Robertson, 1997). Brush (1992) argues strongly for new models of work and learning which recognize how many women entrepreneurs view business as a relational network in which the changing self unfolds.

Methods and Participants of the Study

One principal question and five secondary questions guide this study: *What is the learning and development process described by women leaving a workplace to establish their own business? What transitions in self and knowledge do emerging women business-owners perceive that they*

experience? What meanings of success, work, life, and learning do they create in language and action? What inter-relationships do these women trace between their development and the various communities in which they participate? What visions and values do they describe and enact in creating their own work? How do women entrepreneurs perceive that they are changing dominant work and training paradigms?

The study combines life history methods (Goodson, 1992), focus group dialogue, and comparative thematic analysis. Participants narrated stories of their unfolding 'life history', then reflected on critical incidents of learning embedded in their history, the meanings they give to their own experiences and choices, and the relationships between these experiences. Women were also encouraged to examine their meanings of work, self and learning within the cultural-historical contexts of their lives. Most women also dwelled on the important threads of relationships entwined with their work, and their activities as mothers and spouses. Finally, women often talked about environment in ways that indicated close connections between the physical, relational and psychological spaces they deliberately create, the knowledge they value, and the ways they "do" business.

The study has just completed its second phase. Ninety-five women entrepreneurs from British Columbia to Nova Scotia were interviewed and the transcripts analyzed to identify both individual issues, shared themes, and areas of difference. Potential participants were identified through a combination of snowball referrals, entrepreneur agency members' lists, awards lists, and advertising through business and women's organizations. Our criteria specified that a participant had left a job with an organization, started her own business by herself or with partners, and was still running her business after four years of operation. Participants were selected to represent a range of types and sizes of business, provincial locations, and community contexts. Our resulting group of participants appeared to be dominated by white, "middle class," "mid-life" women in central and western Canada. Thereafter we actively sought to find potential participants speaking from different experiences than those represented by these dominant categories. We have been only mildly successful in our search to date.

Findings of the Study

At this point in the data analysis, individual interpretive life histories have been prepared, and thematic analysis across cases completed, assisted by qualitative software (NVivo). In comparing individual women's entrepreneurial experiences in different contexts, it has become overwhelmingly clear that workplace learning cannot be considered separately from other dimensions of a woman's work, family, and personal life. The term *workplace* is problematic in itself, and the meaning of *work* is highly individual and dynamic. *Learning* has different associations for people, but throughout this study its meaning focused on the process through which an individual perceives and experiences changes in her understandings, ways of behaving, personal characteristics, values, or ability to participate in a particular activity.

While a comparative thematic approach to analysis helps identify certain general patterns, its weakness is the danger of eliding and blurring important subtle distinctions between women's experiences and thus contributing to an unfortunate tradition that has served to essentialize women. However, we have come to believe that a few significant issues are clearly shared among many of these women. Some of these common themes present resistance to popular images of entrepreneurship and particularly of women in business. Others help contest certain understandings of experiential and informal learning, and open some interesting approaches to understanding knowledge production as entwined with relationships, environment, and identity.

For the purposes of this short report, we have chosen to present four themes that we believe help illuminate some important issues in these women's learning through a period of entrepreneurship. *Work needs* and *meanings of success* are significant because they are closely tied to a woman's choices about what kind of activity she seeks in creating her own business, what kind of people she seeks to work with, and what effect she is striving to have. Learning challenges are substantial in all these areas, and they mostly result from personal choice about what to learn. *Knowledge produced in practice* helps point to the knowledge these women value, where they believe it's located, and the nature of this knowledge. *Learning processes* illustrate what these women describe as their

experiences and interactions with resources, both inner and outer, that produced their most valued knowledge.

1. Work Needs Reported by Women Entrepreneurs

Although a few women truly enjoyed former jobs, most indicated they left jobs because these did not fulfill important work needs. Women often described needs for hard work they could 'throw themselves into', meaningful vocation, creative opportunity and projects, stimulation and challenge, freedom to choose activity and time, freedom to schedule around family demands, personalized environment, ethical alignment of work activity and personal values, warm collegial relationships, a flow of work and learning, and clients'/ colleagues' genuine respect.

Like others (Business Development Bank, 1999, Industry Canada, 1999), our findings show clearly that many women say they start a business because they want more *control* over their lives. Most participants stressed their need to choose how they spend their working day. The amount of work (usually overload, these women admitted) is a secondary issue. In fact, several emphasized how much they enjoyed 'work' over any other activity: "I need work, I need projects I can throw myself into." The word *love* occurred frequently, as in "Now I'm doing something I love". Some started their businesses because they perceived it was the only way to do what they loved. *Fun* also appeared frequently: "The day this stops being fun is the day I stop doing it". Fun is described variously: lots of humor and laughing with staff, creative projects, meeting new interesting people, unpredictable everyday activity, minimal rules and a home-like work atmosphere.

Women also described strong needs for continuous *creative challenge* and stimulation. Many enjoyed inventing their own projects, products, services, and approaches to managing the business. Past jobs were described as lacking creative opportunity, "stifling", "on a plateau", "being in a box", "having a noose around my neck", and where ideas were 'shut down' or projects terminated mid-stream. Finally, many women identified a need to *make a difference* in their communities through their work. Their business vision was often described in personal terms, entwined with a sense of life purpose and ethics. Some explained that they

had learned to reject contracts (and their income potential) to maintain this integrity.

2. Personal Meanings of Success of Women Entrepreneurs

Traditional signifiers of business success (profit, size and growth) are being challenged by women entrepreneurs in ways that have potential to reshape models of business, workplace learning, and subjectivity in work. Many describes their work "success" in terms of their children, their ability to choose daily activity, their daily satisfaction and fulfillment, the quality of relationships comprising their work networks, the contributions they perceive themselves making to their communities, the reputations they build in those communities, and their overall perceived quality of life.

Women were varied in their descriptions of what success in their work meant for them, but almost all emphasized the *secondary importance of money* and material goods in their lives. Freedom from financial worry was desirable, but acquiring more wealth than necessary was disparaged: "For anybody to attribute success to the initials you have after your name or how many zeroes you have in your income or how many houses you have is irresponsible" explained a woman running an accounting firm. This seemed true even for single women supporting dependents. A common measure was finding *satisfaction in work* ("Success for me is to be happy in what I'm doing"). Another was *family*: "to have happy, healthy children"; "my kids will be in college soon and I want to have enough money for them". *Reputation*, being recognized for high quality, ethical work by those one respected, was a meaningful indicator of success for several. Above all many women deliberately *resisted dominant cultural measures* of personal and business success in material terms. Everyday freedom, fun, doing what one loved, and deep fulfillment from creating quality products seemed more important than competitive measures of growth and profit.

3. Knowledge Produced in Their Practice

Two kinds of knowledge seemed to be discerned most clearly or valued most highly by these women: knowledge about running a business and personal knowledge. Practical business knowledge appeared to evolve in a complex relation with personal choices about what kind of business to create.

These seem connected to personal work needs and measures of success. Women had to define their business into being, convince themselves and others that it was real, and learn everything to make it work – all at once. A small business owner must become “a jack of all trades”: simultaneously figuring out business goals, financing, a unique product or service, customer relations, marketing, accounting, staff management, and operational processes. Women wanted immediate information that was need- and context-specific. Knowledge seemed fluid and located in activity: women used information tentatively to help make a decision or implement a process, discerned patterns and developed names for what emerged, then moved on.

For about half the women, knowledge related to *finance* was a struggle, being farthest from their personal experience and interest. Most women discovered that *marketing* knowledge was key to business viability which they had to master or hire: “I was extremely naive. Like I didn’t have a clue. I sat there literally and waited for the bloody phone to ring . . . The learning curve was vertical”. Another area of valued knowledge was *focusing* one’s business purpose. For some, this was interwoven with identity issues and search for meaningful work. However even in cases where women viewed their business as entirely separate from themselves, most described a very long process of coming to understand exactly what they wanted to do, who they wanted to work with, and how they wanted to run their enterprise. This often unfolded in an experimentation process through which women claimed to ‘discover’ what their business goals were through, as one put it, “rearview mirror planning”. For some women this focusing process was also a personal discovery: ‘the way *I* plan is different than the traditional business plan method, and that’s okay’. More than two-thirds of the women hired staff and stressed the importance of knowledge about *managing people*. Through intuition, experimentation and advice from other sources, women seemed to gradually find themselves enacting the most important knowledge: ‘reading’ and choosing ‘good’ staff (for some this meant reliable, energetic, independent people); creating supportive relationships; creating an environment that people like to work in; understanding and mediating differences; trusting people – involving them creatively, and allowing them to make mistakes.

Finally, most women stressed important personal knowledge that had emerged throughout the business start-up process in two ways: they discovered their own abilities, and they developed new ones. Becoming *confident* in one’s choices and ability was probably the most frequently mentioned personal change. A second was ‘learning how to problem solve for yourself, *taking responsibility* for your own mistakes and your own decisions’. This knowledge was both a burden keeping one awake at nights and a source of power: “you choose, there are no permanent roadblocks, it’s all up to you.” A third important knowledge involved *positionality*, developing a sense of distance from the business while maintaining a deep personal investment or passion in it. Some women described this through stories of their critical mistakes and failures, in which they claimed to learn to take responsibility for their own mistakes: “admit it and fix it” and “don’t beat myself up”. Finally, many women emphasized *learning how to learn*: recognizing the fear, self-doubt and pain of learning new things, confronting one’s limits, and accepting one’s learning patterns, and becoming confident in framing one’s own questions to guide learning.

4. Workplace Learning Processes of Self-Employed Women

In the stories of their experiences during transition from an organizational job to self-employment, most women’s learning could be characterized as constant, multi-layered, unstructured, and frequently isolated. Women seemed more conscious of learning instrumental or ‘technical’ knowledge of their new role, than of developing the communicative or personal changes they said they experienced – although these changes must have been unfolding simultaneously. Fewer than 10% of the women we interviewed started with any formal business education. Some had management experience, usually in large organizations, which was difficult to translate to small business. Few considered enrolling in a business course. Many reported that the enormity of what had to be learned hit soon after they made the commitment to a business start-up. There was an all-at-once quality to women’s learning stories, which they characterized as “navigating the mess”, “do or die learning”, “discovering my way”, and “inventing it and then figuring out what it is.” A significant first step appeared to be learning how to

separate big messy visions into tasks, then to prioritize and select what needed to be learned.

Most described learning the technical aspects of business through a process of focused trial and error. Each new step of the business development confronting the owner had to be figured out or hired out. The figuring out process was described variously as “learning by stumbling and stumbling”, “flying by the seat of your pants”, and “tinkering”. Emotions of exhilaration and some fear often accompanied this sense of creating your way into business. Constant experimentation was often accompanied by heightened awareness and focused observation of a world to learn from: as one woman put it, “Open your eyes!” Learning to act amidst uncertainty and complexity without a sense of mastery, while trying to frame and construct meaning of a completely unfamiliar situation, became for many a way of working. In fact some indicated that as their experience and feelings of competence grew, they began feeling restless for new challenge.

Most women saw themselves choosing what and how they learned, using a variety of resources and supports. More than three-quarters stressed reading: skimming library books, government and bank brochures, and trade-related periodicals. A few used the internet extensively. Those who had accessed agencies supporting women entrepreneurs valued the links to experienced others for answers on a need-to-know basis. Training courses were often viewed as too general or basic to be of much assistance. Over half stressed the importance of having a “supportive husband” with whom they could talk about their business. Many women said they learned by talking with selected others, especially trade contacts and customers. However, women also had learned to be cautious of others’ advice and frequently stressed the need to “trust my own judgment.”

Because the learning process seemed continuously creative, it often included learning to accept as *real* what one had invented, then naming it and feeling confident in explaining it to others. It is likely that these issues are connected to most women’s strong emphasis on learning to rely completely on one’s own meanings and values, and to structure one’s own learning. As one put it, “I didn’t even know what questions to ask, or who to ask. I just figured it out . . . I’ve learned to take responsibility for myself”. A tension emerged in trying to decide if

there is a “right way” to do something. Many women emphasized discovering a way that “works for me”, sometimes continuing to “do things my way” even if this contravened accepted business practice. Many echoed the spirit of one woman’s advice on this issue: “You learn don’t look back and don’t regret – just go for it and believe in it.”

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Theory of workplace learning is often framed by the needs and structures of organizations, or by models of career development. This study offers insight into learning processes that unfold amidst women crafting their *own* work environments, purposes and challenges. Current models of ‘self-directed’ learning appear limited when compared to the emergent, participational, highly creative and unpredictable nature of these women’s learning. The ways these women produce knowledge by clarifying what one wants and actively inventing and experimenting with others, while discerning and naming what is emerging implies a dynamic, ecological understanding of knowledge. The findings also demonstrate the importance of desire and growing confidence in one’s personal preferences and judgments, which guide the value that women ascribed to different knowledges, and influence their work choices and learning direction. Finally, this study shows important dense interconnections between ‘technical skills’ and ‘communicative knowledge’, unfolding personal change and self-knowledge, and the environments of work and home. These themes appear most closely aligned with newer psychoanalytic (i.e., Britzman, 1998) and socio-cultural theories of learning (i.e., Davis and Sumara, 1998) than with models of reflective constructivism dominating workplace learning.

There are certain tensions evident in the relations among entrepreneurial work, learning and women’s lives that seem embedded in these women’s histories. One tension centers around control: women saying they desire control above all yet must relinquish control for their staff to grow and their business to thrive. Another is the elastic meaning of work, which becomes both all-consuming fulfillment and slavery. A third tension arises from many women’s conflicting desires to defy traditional business expectations and competitive bottom lines, yet sustain a viable business in the current global econ-

omy. Women also struggle with conflicting meanings of money, and tensions as their own meanings of success grind against multiple discourses and societal expectations surrounding issues of motherhood, 'balance', and 'good' business. Women talk about learning compromise: "from what I originally wanted and what I now define as success", "knowing when to mother and when to focus on business", and "truly doing your passion", but also "the bread and butter contracts that buy the groceries." These struggles may indicate a central dynamic of creativity amidst continuing tension in workplace learning, rather than problem resolution.

Governments in both Canada and the US have dedicated significant resources to "train" and support women entrepreneurs with relatively little research of these women's intentions and needs. This study suggests that we reduce training and enable more financial support, opportunities for connection and mentorship, and accessible well-advertised agencies for new women business-owners. Some have noted this study's implications for redesigning work organizations and jobs in ways that will 'keep the women' from deserting to meet their own work needs. Perhaps women need assistance or spaces in which to name their unique dilemmas, recognize evidence of their own progress, and create meaningful projects. Some may sense a call here to workplace educators to help shift current business values and success criteria. At least we can resist representations of women entrepreneurs as "valuable new resources in our nation's economy" (needing training for success), and demand more accurate reflections of the new kinds of work communities and life/work/learning connections some of these women are crafting.

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