

# Teaching to Be Radical: The Women Activist Educators of Highlander

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# **Teaching to Be Radical: The Women Activist Educators of Highlander**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which gender has impacted the work and teaching of the women educators at Highlander. Maher and Tetreault's (2001) themes of a feminist classroom, mastery, authority, voice and positionality, provided the theoretical framework for data analysis.

## **Background**

I have been involved in social action and the education of activists for the past fifteen years and I have found that, at this time in the United States, many community organizers are feeling pessimistic about affecting change. They rarely hear of successes and, in spite of internet organizing, are often not connected to other groups and community organizers. Highlander Research and Education Center is one of the few institutions that connects and educates activists from around the country. Highlander has been an educational institution concerned with poverty and inequity in the United States since 1932. Highlander's website states,

Highlander Center was founded to serve as an adult education center for community workers involved in social and economic justice movements. The goal of Highlander was and is to provide education and support to poor and working people fighting economic injustice, poverty, prejudice, and environmental destruction. (Retrieved October 8, 2006 from <http://www.highlandercenter.org/about.asp>)

Much of the discourse in the field of Adult Education emphasizes the critical influence of adult education in social movements; yet, there are relatively few studies of educational institutions which specifically address adult education and organizing within social movements. According to Susan Williams, the Coordinator of Education at Highlander, much of the work of the recent activists who attended Highlander workshops has not been documented. It is important that the field of Adult Education continue to document and analyze this Institution in order to further our understandings of the connections between education, community organizing and social movements. Highlander is one of the few educational institutions which has systematically provided adult education for community activists for more than seven decades. While much has been written about Highlander and its influence in the Civil Rights Movement (Adams, 1975; Berson, 1994; Glen, 1996; Horton, 1971; Horton & Freire, 1990; Horton, 1990; Langston, 1990; Morris, 1984; Wigginton, 1992), there have been only a few studies analyzing the role of women's teaching or women's learning at Highlander (Austin, 1991; Clark, 1990; Gyant & Atwater, 1996; Langston, 1990; Oldendorf, 1990).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the ways in which gender has impacted the work and teaching of the women educators at Highlander. These educators have developed a concept of education which utilizes the experience and wisdom of local community leaders in the production of knowledge and the planning for action. Yet, they also acknowledge the ways in which systems and structures of oppression can be reproduced even in community organizations and institutions which work for social change. The study was guided by two questions:

1. How did gender impact the work and teaching of the women educators of Highlander?

## 2. How did these women educators develop a feminist pedagogy?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social change always occurs within the context of existing power structures. For the purposes of this study of the women educators of Highlander, gendered power structures were investigated. In order to be effective, education designed to foster social change and develop activists must confront existing power structures; consequently, the theoretical framework that will guide all analyses in this study is guided by notions of gendered power structures and resistance as discussed by Maher and Tetreault (2001) who identified four themes common to the feminist pedagogy and learning in the classroom: mastery, authority, voice and positionality.

Maher and Tetreault (2001) found that feminist teachers “reframed the idea of mastery” (p.57) to include the experiential knowledge of women and other marginalized groups rather than limiting knowledge to the realm of the “expert.” They discuss the traditional model of education in which authority is constructed hierarchically and the ways in which feminist teachers resist this and attempt to create more egalitarian practices. In the traditional classroom, it is held by the “expert” professor who is responsible for “handing down” this “expert” knowledge and evaluating his students.

The concept of voice is another key element in feminist pedagogy. Through repeated classroom observations, Maher and Tetreault (2001) suggested feminist classrooms were used as “arenas in which teachers and students fashion their voices rather than ‘find’ them” (p. 19). The communal nature of knowing is highlighted in their presentation of “positionalities.” They state, “ postmodern feminist thinkers have seen knowledge as valid when it takes into account the knower’s specific position in any context, a position always defined by gender, race, class or other socially significant dimensions” (Maher & Tetreault, 2001, p. 22). They analyze the classroom discourse from the viewpoint of positionalities which rely on assisting students to identify and analyze the communities and community relations which form them as students.

### **Method**

This study was conceptualized through conversations with the staff at Highlander who are interested in a better understanding of their educational process and the ways in which gender impacts their organization and its practices. In order to address the research questions a variety of data sources were collected and analyzed. Data sources included in-depth interviews with educators, review and analysis of video and audio-taped workshops and examination of educational materials used in the workshops. One workshop, in particular, greatly informed this study. In the spring of 1994, Highlander sponsored a workshop for women who had worked on the staff of Highlander or had served on the board. Women from across the span of Highlander’s history attended the workshop from the earliest labor workers in the 1930s to Highlander’s (then) current staff and board members.

This research represents collaboration between this researcher and the staff at Highlander. Data collection occurred in late fall and winter. The data were analyzed using an iterative process of continuous coding of interviews and analysis of educational materials. This was followed by the adjustment of interview questions to incorporate the four areas of investigation.

Following the directives for “movement-relevant research” (Bevington & Dixon, 2005), I worked closely with Susan Williams, Highlander’s coordinator of education, to develop a study which “puts the needs of social movements at its heart” (p. 186). Therefore, she assisted me to construct a purposeful, theoretical sample (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in order to select workshop participants which represent the diversity of age, organizations, locations and time periods.

Robnett's (1997) investigation of the critical role of women in the Civil Rights Movement suggest that a focus upon the role of women at Highlander would allow me to explore previously unexamined leadership roles and roles assignment at Highlander.

### **Findings**

Almost immediately in the analysis of the data, the power of the Highlander "myth" exemplified by the focus upon Myles Horton as the sole visionary and originator of Highlander and the success of Highlander in providing education for the Labor Movement in the 1930s and 40s and for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. The notion of myth and the power of myth emerged strongly in the interviews and the Women's Workshop. I explored this notion of myth using the categories supplied by Maher and Tetreault (2001).

#### *Mastery: The Strength & Burden of the "Myth"*

Highlander's methodologies include popular education which is defined as:  
*A participatory process that combines people's experiences, to develop collective analysis and strategies for action for positive change. In this process everyone is a teacher, everyone a learner and everyone contains within them the seed to make change.*  
(Methodologies Handout, Spring 2007)

This definition demonstrates how Highlander's methodologies resist traditional models of knowledge construction which privilege expert knowledge. The goal of Highlander's popular education is to connect the workshop participants to others with similar problems and to facilitate the discussion and analysis of these problems by the participants. Marie testified to this experience saying she left her first Highlander workshop, "confident in what I know."

In reflecting upon how decisions were made and who represented Highlander to the "outside" world, the women educators of Highlander noted that these functions were gendered. They discussed the predominance of the "myth of Highlander" in which one man, Myles Horton represents Highlander and, indeed, did influence its growth and vision for nearly 60 years. They appreciated being part of Highlander and its participatory education and research process; yet they felt a dissonance that they did not understand as workers at Highlander. They experienced Highlander as a place shaped by communities of workers and yet the narrative of Highlander credits Myles Horton with the success of Highlander. One workshop participant said, "When Myles died, people actually asked me if Highlander would continue! There is more here than one man could have accomplished." In fact, women did much of the work of building Highlander. They suggest that there were many "experts" who constructed Highlander.

#### *Authority: The Power of the "Myth"*

The women who attended Highlander workshops and later became staff or board members discussed how Highlander helped them to learn to speak with authority. They learned they had a right to information about their communities – about who owns the land, about pollutants and their health effects, about tax laws and how to change them. Again, they referred to the myth of Highlander and the power of being connected to Highlander as an activist with its history of success in the labor movement and the Civil Rights Movement. The power of the myth strengthened the activists, but it also limited them.

The myth of Highlander with its success was experienced by women staff as a finished product; therefore,

*We know what we're doing, where we're going. We got the race thing down. We know how to do good workshops, no need for evaluation and training....you can't admit what*

*you don't know, it would be an embarrassment to the organization. (Women's Workshop Discussion, Spring 1994)*

Thus, the myth of Highlander served as an authority figure not only to strengthen activists efforts but also to restrict questioning and limit the exploration of new categories of analysis such as gender oppression. "Because we're working on the 'important' stuff of economic and social justice, it would be divisive to work on women's or other 'subgroups' issues" (Women's Workshop). Women's issues both individual and regional were framed as personal issues while the men in leadership defined the "big issues" of economics and social justice that would be addressed in Highlander workshops.

The women educators recognized that Highlander was created as a patriarchal institution with primarily male leaders and hierarchical leadership practices in which "women usually did the work and men got or took the credit and had the say" (Women's Workshop participant). Several of the women educators asserted that leadership should be a function and not a person. Sara (a pseudonym), who had been working with Highlander for years, said she did not realize the extent to which women were marginalized until Myles Horton told another staff member that, now that she had a child, she would have only limited work at Highlander. At that time, there were several women with children on the staff and attending workshops. She said, "It was then I realized what had been going on." She attested to the dissonance of the power of working for social change but being "limited" within the institutional structure.

The women working at Highlander today attest to a different experience and a different structure. There have been two women directors of Highlander since the 1994 workshop. Issues of gender, homophobia, ability and race are analyzed both internally in the organization and externally in the region. The women educators of Highlander are reclaiming the history of Highlander to incorporate women's work and women's voices.

### *Voice: Naming the Silence & Reclaiming the Experience*

At Highlander's workshops, participants share their stories in a circle of rocking chairs. Pat, who attended her first workshop in 1977, remembered her plan to just observe, "but you couldn't come and just observe." As the workshop unfolded, she was invited to share from her expertise which she originally thought wouldn't be relevant to the topic. She came to Highlander and experienced a different way to teach and to learn. "It changed my life."

But, the women on staff felt silenced. They came to the 1994 workshop to "find voice and be heard." In the workshop, one participant learned, "the extent to which we've had to deny our inner voices, lives and nurturing spirits to work in social change organizations" (Women's Workshop, evaluation card). They discussed the many times that women's issues were dismissed since they did not address the primary social justice agenda of Highlander. The Women's Workshop provided the women educators the opportunity to name their silence and complicity with the patriarchal structure of Highlander. They articulated this as an opportunity to do break down the myth; thus, they began the workshop by naming deceased women educators who had shaped Highlander's educational philosophy and community. Next, they discussed their experiences of working at Highlander. Then, they presented their understanding of women's issues in their work in Appalachia and the Deep South and the ways in which Highlander's work might be expanded to incorporate these needs.

### *Positionality: Analyzing the "isms"*

*I am a Southern farm girl with a shitty education and was scarred by class-scars that I carry to this day. (Panelist introducing self at Women's Workshop)*

The experience of the staff as raced, classed or gendered was not acknowledged or identified and yet the experience of being raced, classed, gendered was a critical element in the experience of the staff of Highlander. According to the women I interviewed and to the women who participated in the Women's workshop, their positionalities affected their position in the organization. When they were in the circle of learners, they spoke from the knowledge and experience gained through their particular positionalities, but, as staff members, these same positionalities limited their role in the institution of Highlander. When asked about the role of women in the early 1970s, Brenda responded sarcastically, "Were there women involved then? Only men went out from Highlander (to promote Highlander's programs or to fundraise)."

Sara stated, "We took care of the property, they (men) went out." This reveals the ways in which the roles of Highlander were gendered. During the Women's Workshop, the women discussed the ways in which class and race also affected role assignment. At many times in Highlander's history, those with formal education held more power in the institution. After the Civil Rights Movement, there were few African Americans or other people of color on the staff of Highlander. Few of these women attended the women's workshop. The attendees speculated that they had experienced racism at Highlander which was not discussed because the myth of Highlander with its success in the Civil Rights Movement precluded any analysis of racist behavior internal to the institution.

The current Highlander staff is much more diverse than the staff of the 1930s, '40s, '70s and '80s. Role assignments do not appear to be overrepresented by any one gender, race or class. Women from a variety of races and classes hold a variety of positions. According to the staff, the decision-making processes are more transparent than in the past. They conduct regular staff meetings in which organizational processes are analyzed as well as "big picture" issues. While staff conflicts still occur, there is now space for their articulation and analysis.

### **Implications**

Much of the adult education research of Highlander focuses upon Myles Horton and the ways in which he developed the educational practices of Highlander. We, as researchers, have accepted and even promoted this part of the myth. This study suggests that it is important to bring a critical lens when analyzing our data. We need to question the "common narrative" and ask "Who is doing the work? Who makes the decisions? Whose interests are represented? Whose are missing?" We need to analyze institutional practices to look for ways in which "isms" are either replicated or resisted in adult educational activities. It is important that our research does not replicate oppression by leaving out power and positionality in our analyses.

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