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## Sex Workers and HIV/AIDS Education: Adult Learning as a Sociocultural Experience

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# **Sex Workers and HIV/AIDS Education: Adult Learning as a Sociocultural Experience**

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**Abstract:** *Lave and Wenger's situated learning paradigm offers that learning is a function of the activities, context and culture in which the learning occurs (i.e., it is socioculturally situated). This study explores HIV/AIDS education for and by sex workers from the perspective that learning is a sociocultural experience that fundamentally involves identification with a community of practice. Sex worker learning communities not only use HIV/AIDS education for safer sex, but as opportunities to make sense of larger life experiences, to resist moralizing discourses, to practice counter-hegemony, to supplement mainstream HIV/AIDS education, and to circumscribe who and what comprise appropriate authority.*

## **Making HIV/AIDS Education Relevant**

Education around HIV/AIDS includes topics on prevention, modes of transmission/infection, care of symptomatic and asymptomatic self and others, viaticum issues, and the dynamics of living with and dying from the disease. HIV/AIDS are complex events that offer numerous opportunities for adult education, however, mainstream education on this issue has often not been relevant to a number of subpopulations, including sex workers (self-labeled prostitutes, street workers, lap dancers, nude and sexotic dancers, phone sex workers, sex cammers [those engaged in cybersex, online camera sexual engagement on “for-pay” websites or for recreation], strippers, hustlers [face to face solicitation], call girls/women, call boys/men, masturbation dancers, phone-sex workers, and exhibitionists, etc.). Hill (2005) reports that there is no single set of health needs—and therefore no single educational “curriculum”—for sex workers. Each type of sex work has its own distinctive implication for educators, i.e., each group has a unique set of health requirements. For some types of work/ers, HIV/AIDS education is critically more important (prostitutes) than for others (cybersexers), however, all venues provide opportunities for safer sex learning to occur.

## **Purpose of the Study, Theoretical Framework, and Research Design**

Purposes of the study included: to review the literature on HIV/AIDS education relative to sex workers; to explore sources and content of HIV/AIDS education in members of the sex work industry; to explore sex workers' attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs about—and responses to—HIV/AIDS education; to investigate the roles of culture, context, and content in learning about safer sex behavior in the sex worker industry.

The theory of knowledge acquisition known as *situated learning* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) informed this work; activities, culture, context, and content are elements of successful educational endeavors—that is, learning is a sociocultural experience. For Lave and Wenger social interaction is the primary means through which learning occurs. Learning fundamentally involves association with, and within, a community (e.g., sex workers in this study) of theory, practice and identity. They argue that activities (contexts) are significantly more important than knowledge and skills in the learning process. It is through a “community of practice” with its beliefs and behaviors that learning happens. Learning communities function in multiple ways,

such as to make sense of experience, to reproduce dominant discourses, to resist contrary discourses, to practice hegemony (and counter-hegemony), to function in disciplinary ways, and to circumscribe who and what constitute legitimate authority. Lave and Wenger theorize that communities establish, support, sustain, and challenge norms; communities also foster negotiations around the socialization of members. To Lave and Wenger, the sociocultural context is thus a primary location where learners interface with their environments, and where personal and social transformation may occur.

I used a mixed methodology beginning with a systematic review of the extensive HIV/AIDS literature (both mainstream and “alternative”) to better understand current knowledge about HIV/AIDS education in the sex work industry. This was followed by a qualitative study utilizing the ethnography of everyday life of sex workers, with face to face and online discussions to learn sex workers’ stories about, emotional investment in, and management of HIV/AIDS education.

### **Findings**

The dominant/mainstream HIV/AIDS education has missed the mark in the arenas of culture, content and context for many subpopulations, including sexworkers. It is often sex-phobic, moralizing, medicalized, and canonical. As a result, sex workers constitute a community of practice that often engage in their own adult education and learning, which is by and for their communities—and has outreach to non-sex worker “Others.”

#### *No One in this Material Looks Like Me!*

Primary health care givers, health center and clinic staff, school-based programs for adult learners, public service programs in the media (television, radio, and press), roadside billboards, bars, sex clubs and other adult recreational venues, the Internet, libraries, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and voluntary associations—among many others—provide adult education information and programs on HIV/AIDS. Despite the recognition that activity- and content-specific information are critical to adult learning, much HIV/AIDS educational material is insipid and often asexual, sexphobic, homophobic, and transphobic (fear of, or prejudice against transgender individuals). These materials are often sponsored by government, quasi-governmental organizations, and faith-based agencies. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC), major sources of information, have developed educational materials and programs supposedly marketed to target audiences, but remain restrained in their representations and efforts. Despite the seriousness of the disease, and the breadth of populations impacted, most HIV/AIDS educational materials do not reflect many communities of practice, such as sex workers, prompting one sex worker to report, “No one in this material looks like me”! On the other hand, some materials, often produced by CSOs, are sexually, erotically, and richly descriptive.

Human relations, behavioral practices, and knowledge are contested terrain; HIV/AIDS education materials, positioned in “street vernacular,” was found to be more relevant to those for whom sex is an easy-to-acquire commodity—and one that is traded for pleasure or material reward. Commonly available, meaningful HIV/AIDS education has not been designed for the sex worker populations who share specific social spaces—often marginalized by the dominant culture.

### *Resisting the Politics of Re/presentation: HIV/AIDS Education as a Vehicle to Destigmatize Sex Workers*

Notions of individualism and social assumptions about sex—especially gay-sex and sex-worker behaviors—are found in scientific and biomedical paradigms that influence mainstream educational efforts. The mechanics of HIV commutability are at the heart of much educational work. The education taken up by sex worker communities expands this focus in favor of the social context of people's lives and the structural conditions in which people live.

There are at least three socially constructed views of sex workers. The dominant view is that sex workers are decadent and vectors of infectious diseases including AIDS. This historical re/presentation claims that sex workers are primarily contagious, immoral, ignorant, hardened, and insensitive. There has been some development in the mainstream culture to rethink this position, to re/present sex workers in light of patriarchy and economics (poverty). This second view has primarily been sponsored by “liberals” and rests on the notion that sex work is both a cause and a symptom of people oppressing people, especially the subjugation of women by men. The third view comes from some sex workers themselves who are vocal, organized, and producing, theorizing, and communicating their lifeworld. They have become out-spoken in building an alternative position—a new social movement—that advocates for sex worker rights, and “self-representation...propelled by a new construct of female identity” (Leigh, 2004, p. 12). This movement uses HIV/AIDS education venues to construct sex workers as intellectuals, artists, performers, lecturers, poets, and human- and civil-rights advocates seeking social justice brought about by policy changes. Activities, through deeply personal performances at artistic events, show the many sides in the on-going struggle for redefinition of their subject self, and for reinscription of their identity with notions of respectability, dignity, honor, and self-regard. The ways that HIV/AIDS knowledge is constructed by sex workers reveals a broader agenda—one that destigmatizes them, and intersects with social justice.

### *Broadening the Agenda to Include the Personal, the Social, and the Political*

In discussions with sex workers, they often expressed that HIV/AIDS is only one concern, albeit a significant one. Other anxieties included sexually transmitted infection beyond HIV, rape and other forms of violence, drugs, homelessness, spousal or partner abuse, the absence of health insurance, lack of routine health care providers, discrimination, unemployment, police brutality, and the unique hazards associated with particularly vulnerable populations such as transgender people, and youth. High on the list of apprehensions was violence, often associated with transphobia, homophobia and sexism. Survival sex and sex-as-illegitimate-employment can create extreme conditions for vulnerable people. In a needs assessment, 78% of the sex workers reported that they desired “a home or safe place”; 73% wanted job training; 67% asked for drug and alcohol treatment; 50% wanted peer counseling; 50% wanted self-defense training; and 50% reported serious health problems for which they needed help (*San Francisco Bay Area Homeless Project*, 1995). An example of an initiative that has a broad mission is BAYSWAN (Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network), a “collaborative project providing information for sex workers and about the sex industries, [linking] sex workers...to resources provided by sex workers' organizations....BAYSWAN organizes to improve working conditions, increase safety [including around HIV/AIDS] and services for workers, and to eliminate discrimination on behalf of individuals working within the sex industry” (<http://www.bayswan.org>).

### *Learning from Experience/Learning in Experience: Educating “Their Own” on HIV/AIDS*

While many researchers acknowledge that learning occurs through reflection *on* experience; sex-worker HIV/AIDS education offers an opportunity to explore learning *in* experience as well. For instance, novices, are often “initiated” by more sagacious workers. Apprenticed into learning communities, and into communities of practice, they learn to speak like and eventually speak as one with authority. As posed by Lave & Wenger (1991), beginners migrate from the margins of this community to its center, and become more active and engaged within the community, reaching the (unnamed) status of “expert.” Mentoring assists them in making meaning from their experiences. Peer “counseling” and education by street workers allows for greater comfort experienced by street learners. Peers are used to help others to take more active roles in their personal lives, to cultivate better health, and to improve their existence. Transgender people have called for the development and implementation of transgender educational programs on transgender health care in order to be “informed consumers” and to build greater awareness of their bodies and sexual anatomy (*The Washington Transgender Needs Assessment Survey*, 2000). Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) propose that learning situations are never culturally neutral, but rather, are mediated by various social, economic, political, and historical factors. Since norms and values exert an enormous influence on learning, for effective HIV/AIDS sex worker education, self-worth and self-esteem are critical. These are built by sex workers in communities of practice that are also communities-learning-*in*-experience.

### *Learning from Experience/Learning in Experience: Educating “Their Clients” on HIV/AIDS*

“Clients” for sex worker education (i.e., the intended audiences) include several groups: persons who receive sex services, establishment health care workers, lawmakers, social workers, substance abuse facility staff, housing agency personnel, and members of community based organizations. One of the sex workers who performs in a national touring artfest, the “Sex Workers Art Show” opens her act with, “Good evening ladies and germs!” This salutation transforms the subject position “client” into “vector of disease,” and turns the table on the discourse that positions sex workers as the contaminated “Other.” Recognizing the potential harm from occupational contact means not only being educated about disease commutability, but also ensuring that clients have some knowledge, or at least follow safer sex practices and behaviors. Seeking justice requires that policy makers are aware of their plight and equality is packaged in HIV/AIDS awareness when communicating with politicians and other rule makers. Additionally, medical providers are often earmarked by sex workers for education on their unique needs, and to change attitudes in the health care community towards sex workers.

### *Occupational Studies*

Sex workers are educated on HIV/AIDS in multiple places and venues. These include on-the-street outreach and education programs *by* sex workers *for* sex workers, street foot patrols, network meetings, international exchange of sex work advocates, hotlines staffed by sex workers or sex industry-trained volunteers, peer-developed venues, and speaker’s bureaus. Additionally, sex workers combine health education with multiple discourses on occupational rights (the right to safe working environments, the right to health insurance, etc.) and on the individual occupational choices they make. For example, *Whore College* is “a day of classes for sex workers and our communities....[Courses include], ‘Sex Worker Well-Being’ [which

focuses] on a broad range of occupational health and safety issues for sex workers... ‘Safer Oral Sex Techniques,’ [and] ‘Six Herbs that Can Cure Anything’ [focusing on genital health]...and ‘Spiritual Tools’ ” (*Whore College*, 2005).

### *Using the Internet to Educate*

The internet is an alternative way for sex workers to share their knowledge and experiences. This is accomplished through websites, listservs, internet conferences, and blogs. The internet provides a space where sex workers can speak and be understood outside of mainstream settings where they are not accorded credibility, legitimacy, or authority to speak. The internet is an alternative way to distribute sex workers’ HIV/AIDS materials and to move various social agendas forward. Sex worker discourse has been positioned as a form of the “counterpublic sphere,” that is, one that is a “useful communicative sphere for oppressed or excluded groups” (Price, 2001).

### **Conclusions**

The HIV/AIDS educational materials produced by sex trade workers shows the following characteristics: (a) HIV/AIDS prevention awareness functions best when it is situated in a social (group) context, (b) Presently there are models of “good practice” worth sharing, (c) Transgender, youth, male sex workers, female sex workers, sex workers of color, and other subpopulations, on the one hand have similar needs, and on the other have unique requirements—which they often provide for themselves in the absence of mainstream assistance, (d) Motivation to change practices (e.g., to use condoms) in a sex-positive climate—which sex work materials portray—is reported as a key to prevention, rather than attempting to alter behaviors (e.g, abstinence), (e) Sex worker education shows regional sensitivity and is community-specific/community-based, (f) It is geared toward responsibility to self and others, (g) It is action-oriented (including for policy change, and for personal and social transformation), (h) It seeks a holistic understanding of people’s lives, (i) Frequently it employs mentoring and coaching, with materials in the vernacular, as well as with extant materials from the mainstream, (j) Sex workers’ educational texts are non-judgmental, sex-, body-, and erotic-positive, fun, culturally sensitive and responsive, and constructed in colloquial idioms, and (k) Is transnational, i.e., found in many countries, such as the U.S., Canada, Brazil, South Africa, and places in Asia and Europe. The need to become informed about sexually transmitted infections—and other issues relevant to sex workers such as safety, and self-defense—stems from common desires for continued pleasure, economic gain, and social achievement. Some material *for* sex workers, designed *by other* subaltern populations (members of gay or lesbian communities), occasionally offer guidance to sex workers who want to quit the trade and ease into non-sex work lives.

Educational products by sex workers are usually realistic and written with an understanding of the needs of the target groups for whom the materials are designed. They are complex and are both “health status dependent” (geared toward those with compromised health) and “health status independent” (not based on an individual’s immediate wellbeing). Frequently “harm reduction” methodologies are employed by sex worker HIV/AIDS educators. These methodologies are a set of pragmatic approaches that reduce negative consequences of various behaviors, such as drug use. These approaches meet people “where the educator finds them,” rather than “where the educator desires them to be.” Educational strategies in this model work to minimize harmful effects of human behaviors rather than simply discount or censure them.

### Implications for Adult Education

A convention-defying adult education, something that Hill (2004) has called for, can be theorized from this research. It is one that is radically open to possibilities and hope. Having direct experience of the raw world (i.e., being “street-wise”) has value. Occupational education—including, but extending beyond HIV/AIDS—for sex workers is often a matter of life and death, and presents professional adult educators with the vital question, “What would a critical theory of adult education ‘from the street’ look like?” This research shows that people are creative, social agents within “fields of social practice,” responsibly strategizing to maximize life opportunities as persons located within often oppressive social structures. It can lead us to theorize an unbridled, uninhibited, undomesticated, transgressive, and convention-defying adult education. In one aspect, it opens up possibilities to help learners (and ourselves) move from “reading” sexual texts, to “being” sexual texts, and from examining erotic beings (as researchers, and as cultural voyeurs) to becoming erotic beings.

Education by and for sex workers is often more fluid, functional, and with better understanding of the people involved (themselves!) than that found in the mainstream. It utilizes both subjective knowledge and fugitive forms of knowledge. Subjective knowledge is expressed in terms of the data of: experience, sensation, and action (Sutton, 2001). Fugitive knowledge is knowledge that is not controlled by alleged “experts.” Fugitive knowledge is radical knowledge that is based on every day experience. It is outside of the control of knowledge-elites or professional knowledge makers. It is fugitive in the sense that it has escaped their control, and may well prove to be the most transformational form of adult education and adult learning.

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