Feminist Popular Education and Community Arts/Crafts: The Case for New Directions

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Abstract: Through the lens of a feminist cultural organisation in Sudbury, Ontario, this paper extends the notion of feminist popular education by exploring the activist and aesthetic-pedagogical dimensions of women's community arts/crafts practices.

Introduction

As the social and economic fabrics of many communities continue to fray under neo-conservative policies (Stromquist and & Monkman, 2000), feminist popular educators need to expand our theories and practices by examining alternative spaces and practices of social learning. Women community-based educators are creating such spaces by using arts and crafts to bring people together. Their engagement with and through symbolic, aesthetic media stimulates dialogue, critique, knowledge/learning, imagination and action by developing a common space of choice, creativity and control (Farkas, 2000; Clover, 2000).

Our purpose in this paper is to extend the notion of feminist popular education by exploring the activist and aesthetic dimensions of women's arts/crafts practices. We reformulate feminist aesthetic theory and the arts/crafts debate, by placing them upon a social, political, economic and cultural, as well as pedagogical, continuum. We begin with explications of feminist popular education and feminist aesthetic theory. This is followed by a case study of a feminist issue-based community cultural organisation in Sudbury, Ontario - Myths and Mirrors. We use insights from the projects of Myths and Mirrors to re-theorize the concept of feminist popular education through an aesthetic lens. We conclude with a brief summary and comment on directions for the future.

Feminist Popular Education

Feminist popular education operates at the confluence of feminism and popular education. The traditional nature of popular education as an activity of empowerment for the people, by the people, against oppressive structures is most congruent theoretically with socialist/Marxist/radical feminism. All share a concern for structures, power, and political action for social justice against oppression. However, post-structural and post-modern approaches have questioned these straightforward views and fragmented the discourses in both feminism and popular education. This has both enriched and complicated the interpretation and practice of feminist popular education. The concept of feminist popular education can be identified by three key elements. Firstly, it focuses on women. This is not as straightforward as it sounds, for women are not well served as a simple 'add-on' to the theorization, practice and research of popular education. This demeans the breadth and depth of oppression experienced by 51% of the world's population. In addition, the notion of women as a homogeneous group is fraught with dangers. It suggests a biological base which can be too-easily cast against the 'norm' of male (Stalker, in press). It also ignores the differences among women of age, ethnicity, ability, colour and sexual orientation. Secondly, the concept of feminist popular education focuses on oppressions which are primarily experienced by women. These include rape, domestic violence, pay disparities and unequal opportunities, to name a few. These concerns drove much of the strong feminist agenda of the 70s but they have been simultaneously diminished and extended by later feminist agendas. Recently, they have broadened to include the environment, globalisation, indigenous rights and gay and lesbian concerns. Thirdly, feminist popular education concerns process. In the first instance, some authors have suggested that

popular education with women requires the removal of traditional processes of direct argument, counter-argument and "confrontational learning" (Jackson, 1995, p. 199) – activities with which women are supposedly uncomfortable. In the second instance, there are questions around processes which are targeted at women and which make them responsible for changes in our situations. Increasingly, there is an inclination to make men take responsibility for removing women's oppression and to become allies in the struggle. In sum, given the complex and muddy meanings derived from the elements above, it is tempting to say that feminist popular education might exist in our minds, but it is unlikely that it can be more than a theoretical ideal: the terms are too inexact and presume reductionistic, over-simplified assumptions and grand narratives. However, no feminist agenda today can ignore the continuing oppressions of women. Indeed, it is heartening to realize that, despite the complexities and fragmentations, the feminist agenda, to date, has accomplished much and improved the lives of women significantly. Thus, feminist popular education must continue to engage in educational endeavours which result in collective political action to remove oppressions whilst simultaneously valuing uniqueness and difference within and among our womanhood.

Feminist Aesthetic Theory

Feminist aesthetic theory uncovers the "complex codes that govern the allocation of meaning to sexual difference as represented in [the arts]" (Pajaczkowska, 2001, p.4); the "discourses of gender difference" in the arts (Nochlin, 1997, p.71); and the "entire battery of obstacles constructed to frighten women off and exclude them from the artistic realm" (Bovenschen, 1985, p.24). A major critique is on the ways women are depicted in the arts. Chadwick (1997, p.129) argues that an historical analysis of the great masters "affirms the female image as an object of male contemplation...a masculine viewer/consumer" (p.133). Nochlin (1997, p.71) addresses the general issue of power and gender inequity by arguing that "representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general...and some artists more than others about men's power over, superiority to, difference from and necessary control of women." The narratives and iconography serve to establish women's place (and their arts) at the 'bottom' of society and to point out their 'weaknesses', thereby making these "overt power relations in society...appear to be part of the natural, eternal order of things" (Nochlin (1997, p.72). A second major critique, which has three streams, is the so-called absence of women in the arts as active participants. Firstly, women critique the "marginal role traditionally ascribed to women artists in the history of painting and sculpture" (Pollock, 1997, p.130). Second is the realization that "all those canonized as the initiators of modern art are men" (Pollock, 1997, p.132). Third is the trivalization and marginalization of women's arts/crafts. While the first two critiques are very important, it is this latter which creates a space for us to analyse and theorise feminist community-based artistic/craft practices.

Women's arts/crafts, based on a patriarchal division between art (high) and craft (low) have been dismissed often as unworthy of and 'trivial' in the broader schema of the arts as well as scholarly exploration (see for example Chadwick, 1996; Collingwood, 1997). However, increasingly women artists have begun to focus on this dialectic of arts/crafts and create new discourses. For example, some have attempted to "identify an authentic tradition of women's arts [such as] quilt-making" and situate it in terms of authenticity (Hollows, 2000, p.26). Moreover, the art/craft debate consists of strong and unrealistic divides between the aesthetic and the practical, the innovative and the traditional, the active and the passive, the public and the private (Stalker, 2003). We believe that feminists have a rich history of developing arts/crafts that

challenge the status quo, put forward counter-narratives and stimulate imagination, creativity, dialogue and even anger and suspicion (Stalker, 2003; Clover & Markle, 2003). It is through this lens that we examine the implications for feminist popular education.

Myths and Mirrors

Although Sudbury, Ontario is still known as a 'mining town', the two nickel mine giants, Inco and Falconbridge, actually employ fewer than 6,000 workers in the city, whereas call centres now employ over 4,000, mostly women workers. As in most Canadian resource-based towns, the employment shifts of the past twenty years, combined with radical cuts to the welfare state, have deeply undermined the economy in Sudbury. During the 1970s and 1980s, Sudbury had a vibrant and strong feminist movement that was very active in violence and poverty issues (Kuyek,1990). Popular education theory and practice were integral to grassroots feminism, as demonstrated in the hugely popular North Eastern Ontario Women's conferences, and the formation of groups such as Neighbourhood Action and Sticks and Stones (McGauley, 1987). Like feminists around the world, women in Sudbury developed a hybrid of feminist and popular education practices. We connected our oppression to the culture industry, and challenged the absence of women's voices. We also reacted against the individual authoritative voice of the (usually male) artist, through experiments in collective creation. Sudbury's Sticks and Stones identified themselves a 'feminist popular education and theatre troupe' and they were an integral part of their local activist movement (McGauley, 1987). These were the threads that shaped Myths and Mirrors Community Arts. It began in 1996 as a three year project sponsored by Sudbury's Better Beginnings Better Futures, a community development project built upon strong feminist principles (Reitsma-Street, 1999). Grounded in the two low-income downtown neighbourhoods that made up the Better Beginnings' community, Myths and Mirrors' original goals were to engage residents in the collective creation of art works that explored modern myths and reflected their own stories and experience. The vision was to engender a sense of community identity, to challenge the manufacture of consent, and to provide a public forum for the voices of the marginalised.

The first years were so successful - with projects like 'A Show of Hands' and 'Yespace' - that the project became an organization. By 2003, the organization had involved over 5000 participants from all ages and from throughout North Eastern Ontario. Projects resulted in quilts, murals, theatre, interior design, installation and performance art, celebrations and rituals, around various themes including poverty, the environment and social justice. While each project was different, the basic premise remained consistent: a group of people shared their perceptions of the world, explored their individual and common perceptions aesthetically, collectively designed a focus for their expression and finally, created an artistic representation of them. Always, the completed art work was celebrated publicly, the creators honoured; and the art work extended the discussions into the wider community.

"A Show of Hands" was conceived as a project to collectively create a symbol of the successful fight to prevent development on the sole green space left in the Flour Mill neighbourhood. It become a celebration of the community, with over 460 residents painting what they valued about their neighbourhood on plywood cut-outs of their hands. These were then designed in a grand spiral pattern. The process began as most Myths and Mirrors projects do: with community consultations that incorporated popular education and creation processes as catalysts for reflection, analysis and discourse on the theme, in this case the neighbourhood. Participants were invited to join the 'core group', which gathered up the images, ideas and analysis generated at the consultations, and, with a professional artist, collectively designed the

final concept, which they then carried out with other community members. The process was non-hierarchical. Circles and talking sticks were used for discussions and debates, and decisions were made by consensus. The project was a huge success, both in terms of the process and the quality of the beautiful, high energy art work. But the initial site chosen for the installation was too vulnerable to damage, so the community came together again to decide where to re-install their work of art. Sessions of more than 50 people at a time became forums for debate about public versus private space, who owns what, and what space was worthy of their work of art. "A Show of Hands" is now a permanent installation in the Sudbury Public Library's main foyer.

"Yespace" brought together three visual artists with over 130 neighbourhood residents for the collective interior design of their local community centre, an old ugly school. Myths and Mirrors facilitated a process with Francophone, First Nations, and Anglophone users of the building. It deconstructed the cultural and human tensions of sharing space. Long simmering issues of everything from "Who does the dishes?" to Native smudging ceremonies and Francophone language concerns became the focus of a dialogue that analysed personal oppression in a larger political and economic context. This deepened the solidarity among the groups, and celebrated their similarities and differences. The discourse resulted in a collective design process: paint techniques, three twelve foot collective sculptures, exuberant colours and designs on 20 tables and 60 chairs, a children's playroom painted in clouds and kites, white buffaloes on the doors, French poetry on the walls, and a giant dream catcher with community members' dreams attached. Together, these transformed the building into a warm, stimulating environment that is now the pride of the neighbourhood.

"The Northern Dreams Quilt Project" was conceived as a feminist response to the neo-liberal discourse that permeates the public sphere and that marginalises women's voices. Because of the approaching millennium, the goal was to make women's voices an integral part of the public discourse about the future of Northern Ontario. Quilting, a traditional women's art, was chosen as the medium, building on the thriving quilting guilds throughout the North. Myths and Mirrors facilitated popular education workshops with women throughout North Eastern Ontario, on the issues that they face in their northern communities. They shared their stories and their dreams for the future, and then translated these into quilt blocks. Over 160 women created six quilts. These were publicly unveiled in the municipal government building of each of the six communities involved and each community now has a quilt on permanent display.

Re-Theorising Feminist Popular Education Through the Aesthetic

The Myths and Mirrors projects blend feminist principles and aesthetics and extend our understanding of feminist popular education. Firstly, the projects identify the importance of a feminist aesthetic theory which breaks from the dominant notion which defines women's arts as primarily personal expression and non-educational. The case study shows that the theory moves along a continuum of not only the social, cultural and political (Beyer, 2000), but also, the pedagogical. Secondly, it accepts that feminist community arts/crafts-based learning processes are neither ideologically neutral nor impersonal. By viewing the arts as a basis for both understanding and transforming society and politics, feminists add a more critical and social justice orientation to the repertory of artistic endeavour. Thirdly, through our imagination, we can re-enforce, re-create, challenge and/or resist meanings, oppressions and injustices. This is possible through both the form and content of feminist aesthetics. The projects illustrate the power of forms of media which are accessible to non-artists, and often drawn from traditional 'women's' art/craft forms. They demonstrate the importance of blurring the division between the art/craft worlds and subsuming it to a broader social justice agenda of popular resistance to

oppression and the creation of alternatives. The projects show the energy which results when aesthetic choices about content are driven by the necessity for expression and communication of issues, rather than by the alienated irony of the post-modern art world.

The second key insight which these projects offer feminist popular education concerns their innate character. As one might expect from a feminist enterprise, the projects demonstrate that both the collective process of aesthetic perception, focus and creation and popular education methodology transform the world for participants, create meaning and awaken what Myths and Mirrors calls a 'longing for change'. What is integral to these feminist projects, however, is that while oppositional in process and content and critical, they also exhibit and are permeated by hope, celebration and an inherently optimistic vision for the future.

Finally, the projects demonstrate the value of feminist structures which strive to give women and other oppressed groups voice. The flat organisational structure and collective governance by women are keys to their success.

Conclusion

The Myths and Mirrors Community Arts projects demonstrate the ways in which the activism and aesthetics of women's arts and crafts practice can extend our theorization and practice of feminist popular education. It is clear that feminist popular educators can use women's educational arts/crafts work education in issue-based community cultural practice. They have the potential to be powerful spaces for social learning, critique , social action and to provide alternative models of community educative-activism, cultural leadership and hope for change. The challenge for us all is to extend our notions of aesthetics and creativity and incorporates women's arts/crafts work into feminist popular education theory.

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