Finding Points of Intersection: Learning through Feminist Non-Credit Learning Processes

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Abstract: The praxis I develop in this paper comes from this empirical research and is also based on my experience as an adult educator in non-credit contexts over the past 15 years. Following a brief overview of my study, I discuss key findings, which relates to the tension between holistic and challenging practices as methods for bringing differently-located women learners together and the impact of educators' awareness of their social locations on learning processes. This research revealed the centrality of educators' identity in their practices and the limitations of intersectionality and interlocking identities frameworks in praxis.

Introduction

Solidarity within and across feminist movements is a goal shared by many feminist educators. The need to address disparities and tensions between differently-located[1] women has long presented challenges to the feminist movement.[2] These tensions play out in the many spaces where women learn and organize for progressive social change. The issue of understanding identity and the ways in which differently-located women can address and work across differences is central within feminist learning spaces and processes.

In this paper, I outline my empirical study, which focuses on exploring successful non-credit learning practices that promote an understanding of identity and equity between differently-located women. This is done through an examination of the theoretical concepts of intersectionality and interlocking identities and their role in feminist educators' conceptualization and facilitation of non-credit learning processes with women.

Specifically, this inquiry asks: what learning and/or pedagogical practices do feminist educators use that they feel help (or do not help) women learners to gain a consciousness around their identities and issues of power and oppression? In what ways do these learning and/or pedagogical practices connect with the concepts of intersecting and interlocking oppressions that theorists have articulated?

[1] The terms "differently-located" acknowledges the variety of social locations that an individual occupies. Social location refers to facets of identity such as gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, race, among other examples.
[2] I note that the "feminist" movement is often written about as a singular movement. Within this research, I refer to women's movements to honour the many different ways that women organize for social change.

Intersectionality and Interlocking Identities

Intersectionality is a way to conceptualize how oppressions are socially constructed and affect different bodies differentially (Crenshaw, 1989). "Interlocking oppression" is defined by Razack & Fellows (1998) as the way in which systems of oppression come into existence in and through one another, so that class exploitation could not be accomplished without gender and racial hierarchies; imperialism could not function without class exploitation, sexism, heterosexism, and so on (p. 1). The first academics who theorized the concepts of intersectionality and interlocking identities were responding to a need raised by communities. Indeed, historically, there has been a strong call for an intersectional approach. Within grassroots organizing, women of colour have called for recognition of difference, and women of marginalized identities precipitated Women and Gender Studies programs to theorize notions of difference. Historically, there has been a strong relationship between grassroots feminist practices and academic feminist thought. Yet, while these activists theorized notions of difference, academics articulated intersectionality, making this concept an interesting point of connection and tension between feminist theory and practice. This paper was motivated by a desire to examine feminist practice in community learning spaces in terms of their ideas for bringing women together. In this way, this paper focuses on the development of theory and practice, or praxis.

The Research Approach

In this research, data was collected through 25 interviews and two focus groups conducted with 10 differently-located women educators who lead consciousness-raising processes in a range of non-credit settings, from women's social action groups to organizational and leadership development processes.

I was guided by feminist epistemologies and ways of knowing in my analysis of feminist educators' pedagogies and learning practices. Within a feminist informed approach, I am working with feminist standpoint theory and the frameworks of intersectionality and interlocking identities. Nancy Hartsock (1998), Patricia Hill-Collins (2000, 2004) & Chela Sandoval's (2000) perspectives have informed this research in terms of how I conceptualized and valued differently-located women's ways of knowing through their multiple subjugated perspectives. To do this, I utilized the Critical Appreciative Process (CAP) in order to explore what *is* working well within feminist non-credit learning processes as they currently exist. The CAP approach builds on the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method. AI is a research methodology that focuses on positive attributes, such as what is working or what strengths exist, and is used for organizational and community change (Madruger-Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

I then used a set of questions to guide data analysis and act as a tool or lens through which to look at the data and uncover meaning in the transcripts. The questions that guided my data analysis are: Given that intersectionality and interlocking identities came out of a need raised by communities before academics wrote about it and coined the phrase, how are these concepts being taken up by communities now? Which aspects are relevant?
Specifically I looked at:

- How do the concepts of intersecting and interlocking identities make sense to feminist educators?
- How do the concepts of intersectionality and interlocking identities play a part in feminist non-credit learning processes?

Key Findings

Challenging As Method for Bringing Differently-Located Women Learners Together

One practice the educators spoke about focused on interactions between learners engaged in processes that involved direct challenging. Challenging other people's behaviours in this way is not easy to do. While educators may worry about hurting people's feelings, fear retaliation or losing the group's trust and respect overall research participants found this was a valuable practice.

One example of a challenged used to illuminate everyday behaviours and deconstruct race and racism was in Bezawit's Facilitator Train-the-Trainer process. She used this approach to effectively promote an understanding of identity co-construction, or interlocking identities. Bezawit first described the situation, as she stated (April 23, 2009):

> There was a situation where one of the [learners] challenged me in a way that really was about, was I qualified enough to train her, […] because by my appearance I looked very young. So I looked at her and I said, "Are you questioning whether I'm experienced enough to have developed this and to be able to train you? Are you questioning my experience and my level in years and numbers of experience?" I said, "I'm over fifty; let me put it to you that way." "Oh, well you look so good for fifty," she said.

Bezawit then went on to describe how this interaction was turned into a learning moment for the whole group to process. She continued (Bezawit, April 23, 2009):

> I took that up in the training process and I talked about the way that race works and the way that gender and sexuality work. […] By whose lenses are we determining age? We're looking through a White lens, because we understand a certain kind of *appearance*, based on particular chronological ages. We just have to look at our television. You know, you turn twenty and you start using anti-aging cream and all that. Yeah, like give me a break okay?
> We have all these markers, but it's really through a White lens. It's not through my lens; it's not through an Asian lens. […] What I look like has been constructed within your mindset in a particular way to *mean* certain things and I've been constructed to mean that I couldn't possibly have experience. I couldn't be a teacher. I couldn't be an author. Neither could I be an educator. Certainly if I am an educator, I have to be trained or in training, okay? Somebody else must be the person who has trained me. I could not be the person who has trained the other person, right?

I found that when analysing such feminist non-credit learning processes that the practice of challenging resonated with an interlocking identities framework, illustrating how one individuals identity is affected by those of others. This was particularly true when the focus of challenging drew on everyday experiences such as racism and colonialism.

Holistic Practices As Method for Bringing Differently-Located Women Learners Together

On the other hand one practice I found interesting was a framework Alma introduces to groups to emphasize that we need to have all aspects of our lives in balance, including the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual, to be whole and to be effective in whatever work we are doing, especially if it involves caring for others. After introducing the concept Alma had learners draw a wheel and notice how these four elements where or where not in balance within themselves.

Alma also uses this diagram as a way to help learners understand themselves as spiritual and emotional beings, and through this process relate to the oneness of all humans. Alma found this in turn helps learners connect with each other and see commonalities in the group.

I think this approach could be very effective, provided that learners have the political analysis to understand the distinction Alma makes between spirituality and religion (religion being institutional and about power, and not necessarily about connection). As Roberta noted, religions have often participated in colonization and therefore such organizations and their practices might not resonate with, or be empowering for, all women (January 23, 2009).

This approach relates to interlocking identities as well. Alma theorizes that if we are deficient, especially in the emotional and spiritual realms, this leads to behaviours that are "Othering" because we do not see ourselves in, or connected to, the Other. In this way, Alma had a different take from the other feminist educators on intersectionality or interlocking identities perspectives, which she sees as being:

> More based on a physical and intellectual realm.[…] I feel that if we as a society focus a little bit more on the emotional and spiritual realm we would probably have less interlocking oppressions and all those other barriers (May 4, 2010).

I understand this comment to mean that through seeing our oneness less othering will occur. This makes me think that theories alone do not achieve this. It also raises the issue of intersectionality or interlocking identities being taken up as only theoretical exercises that focus on dissecting and categorizing identities. Alma's view is that women can find a great deal of commonality through focusing on themselves as emotional and spiritual beings (June 11, 2009). I agree that emotional and spiritual realms are important and that frequently such aspects are considered insignificant by educators with an activist orientation. However, the frameworks of intersectionality and interlocking identities and the emotional and spiritual realms are not mutually exclusive.

This difference in opinion speaks to the different ways in which a theory can be taken up. At their best, the recognition of difference, power and oppression among women speaks to differently-situated women's fractured experiences and provide a way to conceptualize their unique embodied knowledges which include the spiritual and emotional dimensions. In addition to articulating an intersectional perspective, Hill-Collins notes that there is a deep connection between spirituality, sexuality, emotion, and women's power (2004). Educators who embrace embodied knowledges and integrate these ways of knowing in the theories of intersectionality and interlocking identities will be better equipped to use these ideas in praxis. As hooks argues, this is about educators striving for a "union of mind, body, and spirit" as well as having a "focus on practice in conjunction with contemplation" (1994, p. 14).

In effect, bringing a more human and holistic element to intersectionality and interlocking identities, as Alma's practice calls for, could realign these feminist theories with community needs.

The Centrality of Identity in Educators' Praxis

I found the feminist educators' social locations acted as the grounding for their work, which fuelled their passion and commitment, and impacted their understanding and incorporation of the frameworks of intersectionality and interlocking identities in their work.

Educators' Identity Impacts how They Do the Work

Educators also reflected on the ways in which their social locations framed (or constrained) where they were willing to go in terms of challenging others. For example, Sam noted that her identities as a lesbian living with a (dis)ability dictated how she felt she could most effectively challenge a learner. In relation to challenging, she shared (May 4, 2009):

> When I'm talking to people about (dis)ability I think it gets *heard* differently when it's from me than it would be from someone who's my non-(dis)abled ally. I'm just a bitter lesbian if […] I challenge people around that. […] They will hear me, but they will see me as being skewed.

Nina also spoke about how as a White queer woman she is more comfortable speaking about violence against women or about homophobia than speaking about racism, even though she feels it is an important topic. She noted, "If I'm talking about racism I know that I'm anticipating more resistance than when I'm talking about sexism" (Nina, May 5, 2009).

This also parallels the comfort levels educators have in sharing about themselves. A few of the educators reflected that they felt most comfortable speaking about aspects of marginalization they shared with women learners, as opposed to those they did not embody. For example, Nina shared (May 5, 2009):

> I do try to talk about myself from a variety of aspects of self. I think I'm most confident talking about the experiences of oppression from those places where I feel I experience oppression. So it's an interesting thing.

Tina echoed this thinking as she reflected on her work with LGBTQ communities:

> I find it difficult work to do, and I'm trying to be as respectful and careful as I can, not to impose the questions that come up from me as a heterosexual person on people from those communities. […] But I'm cautious […] it's not something that I've receive direction from the people who belong to those communities, and I'd feel a lot better if it was (July 2, 2009).

On a parallel note, it appeared that most of the educators were uncomfortable speaking about aspects of their identity associated with privilege. This was evident when I asked educators how they self identified; in most cases, I had to probe to discover how they identified as privileged. This omission with regard to privilege was also evident in that it was rarely mentioned apart from describing the difficulties in confronting women learners on their privilege. As Nina said, "speaking from privilege is definitely harder. It's more challenging and I feel like the ground under me just getting a little shakier" (May 5, 2009).

The one way in which the educators' social locations of privilege were raised was through their recognition that their relative privilege was what enabled them to do conscious-raising work with other women. While many of the educators spoke about being grounded in their social locations of oppression, others said that they do the work *because* of their marginalized social locations and history of oppression, but are *able to* do it because of privileges they experience. Alma connected her work to her experiences of privilege, as she noted (August 10, 2009):

> There's a certain amount of whatever, privilege, good fortune, you know, whatever, it has happened that has contributed to me being where I am and able to do the work that I am doing. And that's where the difference is, I think, I see that I am able to do this, so I also don't forget the fact that I was there at one point. So I think that that connection of what I'm able to do and where I was and how that felt, that really tells me that I need to keep doing this.

Educators comfort in primarily speaking from aspects of marginalization they share with learners has wide spread implications for how challenges and the general learning process unfolds, which are worth further exploration.

Learning Practices Informed by Educators Feminist Standpoint

Generally speaking, I found educators' social locations, and the extent to which they have drawn on their lived realities and struggled to achieve a feminist standpoint, will inform and dictate the ways they are able to take up the complex issues of identity, power and oppression within their learning processes.

As we know, marginality,[3] which is a common identification for women (albeit with variance based on other social locations), produces valuable knowledge (Hill-Collins, 2004). I would disagree with Sandoval (2000) who argues that a woman of colour's oppositional consciousness is a strategic position from which to achieve a feminist standpoint. I would argue that it is not *only* a woman of colour's oppositional consciousness that is a strategic position from which to achieve a feminist standpoint, but that any social locations of marginality can make a valuable contribution if informed by an oppositional consciousness.

[3] Although Sandoval may have implied this, I would stress again that valuable knowledge comes not simply from having a marginalized identity, but that valuable knowledge comes from those with marginalized identities who have *struggled to become* oppositionally conscious.

In fact, this research makes an argument for the collective development of a feminist standpoint, which will be nuanced by the unique intersectional contributions of the oppositional consciousness of differently situated women.

Conclusion

In this exploration, I uncovered the myriad ways that educators raised consciousness with women learners around their intersecting identities and how their identities were co-constituted through interaction with other individuals. The educators had many ideas that resonated with the concept of intersectionality; however, they suggested relatively few practices that I found would raise women learners' consciousness to form a particularly strong analysis in this area. Holistic practices such as Alma's PIES analysis is an exception, which arguable falls outside the political dimensions of identity that frameworks such as intersectionality and interlocking identities deals with. Conversely, the educators related few ideas that resonated with interlocking identities, but shared a wealth of practices that illustrated ways to raise understanding of ideas which are the focus on this same framework such as drawing on everyday behaviours for challenging.

In general, my analysis revealed that even while educators were able to present learners with a complexified understanding of identity, power and oppression grounded in principles related to an interlocking identities framework, they could not necessarily articulate practices or activities that would enable learners to take up and implement similar ways of knowing in their own lives.

Furthermore, I found that educators take up these frameworks in different ways based on their social locations. I found that educators with privileged aspects of identity endeavour to *employ* these frameworks, while educators with more aspects of marginalization that include racialization conduct their learning processes in a way that resonates with, but does not necessarily seek to *follow*, intersectionality and interlocking identities frameworks.

In terms of self-awareness, educators' praxes are inextricably tied with their own personal practices and ways of being and are not solely about the techniques they employ or their stated political orientations. The issue of self-awareness is also strongly tied to educators' social locations. Educators' social locations strongly inform lived realities and shape experience. These experiences will likely result in there being areas that educators' are not as cognizant of in terms of their analysis and ability to challenge. This kind of self awareness can be cultivated by paying attention to one's own behaviour and emotions and becoming aware of what areas need development.

Through this research, I found that there are multiple ways for an individual woman to achieve a critical awareness and oppositional consciousness. I found that women learners participating in consciousness-raising processes can contribute to a feminist standpoint based on the privileged aspects of their identities if they can see their role in creating and enacting oppression and take responsibility.

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