

‘At the barn’: Rural women’s learning for community well-being

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Introduction:

The snow reflects the bright afternoon sun through the crisp cold air as I opened the doors to the barn and carry my supplies up into the hayloft for our next workshop. The fire is already warming up the space as I put down my bags and take a moment to appreciate where I’m standing. This is no ordinary barn. Built in 1920, the outside walls are still covered in the original tin; however inside under the original rough-hewn timber beams is a potter’s studio and gallery and up the worn wooden stairs the hayloft is converted into an open space used by the community for meetings and arts and craft shows. Two cats are lying on the bench next to the fire. Soon my co-facilitator arrives and we set-up the hayloft of our workshop. As the smell of fresh, fair-trade, coffee wafts through the air the first women arrive. Soon the room is filled with conversation as the dozen women community-activists, advocates and leaders from across south-central Manitoba arrive to being the next PathMakers workshop.

Drawing from my experience as a PathMakers facilitator this presentation will critically examine how non-formal learning opportunities can support rural women’s community work for building sustainable communities and individual and community well-being. Attention will be given to the potential for feminist and participatory pedagogies to support rural women community-builders and their

need for networking, mentoring and self-care. As well, I will locate this example and experience in the broader literature on women's learning, women's community advocacy and activist mothering.

Women's Community Involvement:

In communities it is often the work of advocacy and activist committees and groups driven by political, social, secular or religious values and commitments which push issues of sustainability and well-being. Women make up a significant driving force for change in our communities (Dominelli, 1995, 2006; Naples, 1998a; Reinharz, 1983; Welton, 1995). Dominelli (1995) aptly writes "without women's work in the community, life as we know it could not exist" (pg. 133). While women's community involvement is often expected as part of their gender role it is minimalized by society and often the women themselves (Dominelli, 2006; Naples, 1998). Rural women juggle roles in their homes, work, communities, and, for some the farm (Brandth, 2002; Naples, 1994). Isolation, distance, transportation, money, childcare, time and technology, as well as gender expectations are challenges to rural women's community involvement (Dominelli, 2006; Graveline, et.al., 1991; Vickers, 1988).

As community-mothers (Dominelli, 2006; Hart, 2002; Naples, 1992, 1998a, 1998b), these women practice an 'activist mothering' (Naples, 1992) learned in various informal learning environments such as the home, church, and community (Gouthro, 2005; Naples, 1998; Redekopp, 1996; Reinharz, 1983) and

driven by the desire to improve their communities now and for the future for their families and others (Dominelli, 2006; English, 2006; Gouthro, 2009; Naples, 1998). Their learning, confirms, confronts and converts gender, class and cultural ideals of what it means to be a rural woman.

Welton (1995) notes that early Canadian women's grassroots organisations focused on culture, education and health – “the building blocks of any sustainable community” (n.p.). According to Dominelli (1995) women's community-building and advocacy “keeps communities together and adds to the quality of everyday life” (pg. 134) by focusing on issues such as affordable housing and transportation, early childhood and child-care programs, health-care (including child and maternal care) and well-being programs and services, literacy and schooling, inclusion and accessibility, transportation, minimum/living wage and other issues typically linked to caring roles (Dominelli, 1995). Through what others refer to as social or community mothering (Dominelli, 2006; Hart, 2002; Naples, 1992, 1998a, 1998b; Welton, 1995), women appropriate their culturally and socially ascribed gender role as caregivers as an authority to initiate change (Naples, 1998b; Reinharz, 1983). Their role and identity as mothers can empower women to take up causes in defense or benefit of their families (Krauss, 1998) and to take risks in the public sphere they would not otherwise take on (Krauss, 1998).

Women's leadership is most noticeable in their communities (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002) and it is in their community advocacy that they take on leadership roles (Krauss, 1998; Reinharz, 1983). Drawing

from women's relational styles and adapting their knowledge and skills in family and household management into community and advocacy leadership women have created feminist organising structures and ways of leading (Krauss, 1998; Sacks, 1993). Their styles tend to be more of a developmental rather than hierarchical leadership style, supported by a core group of leaders or centre-women (Feldman, et.al., 1998; Howe, 1998; Sacks, 1988). Due to the non-hierarchical nature of women's leadership it is often dismissed or not recognized, however when women's leadership is supported "whole communities begin to thrive in ways that are not seen with modes of leadership that emphasize more hierarchical forms of decision making" (Belenky, et.al., 1997, pg. 10).

Drawing from their roles as mothers and community-mothers and a sense and desire for family and community well-being women act as community-builders. Despite the significance of their work to the quality of life and availability of services and resources in communities, women's organising is often dismissed (Dominelli, 2006; Naples, 1998). At the same time the leadership that women perform in advocating for community well-being is often over-looked because its relational and developmental nature does not reflect the hegemonic hierarchical leadership. The remainder of my presentation will consider how PathMakers, a non-formal women's community leadership program sought to empower rural women in southern Manitoba.

PathMakers:

PathMakers, run by the Winnipeg-based organisation UNPAC, is a part-time non-formal program that provides rural women with tools and knowledge to grow their leadership and mentoring skills.

Through the program participants gain support for crafting strategies that include women in directing change in their workplaces and communities (UNPAC, 2012). Drawing from feminist and participatory pedagogies the program seeks to develop a dynamic, safe and nurturing learning community. From January to June 2012, an inter-age, multi-cultural group of 14 women in south-central Manitoba met ‘at the barn’ to learn from and mentor each other. Currently, a second PathMakers is running in eastern Manitoba and third program is in the works. The program is funded through Status of Women Canada. The PathMakers program at the focus of this presentation was the first of its kind to be run in Manitoba.

By incorporating feminist and participatory pedagogies into the PathMakers program the intent was to create a dynamic learning community in which the participants could draw upon their own knowledge, skills and experiences to mentor each other in order to provide locally relevant and applicable learning. Tisdell (2000) describes feminist pedagogy as being

about women as learners, It is about women as knowers, teachers, actors in the world. It is also

about stories—about sharing stories, feeling stories, analyzing stories, theorizing stories,

reframing them in some sort of educational space, and encouraging new action in light of our educational re-storying experience together. (pg. 155)

By using the women's own stories to build upon their experiences and ask critical questions (Shrewsbury, 1993) we hoped to create a dynamic reflective space where the women could engage in collaborative meaning-making (Mezirow, 1991) by naming and renaming (Freire, 2000) their experiences to build their praxis. Using the women's stories unearthed a deeper discussion within the group about our gendered socialization and experiences, in particular as rural women trying to create change in a culture of patriarchy. Dialogue is a significant learning tool and experience in which participants can "experience their thoughts as they are being created, dialogue sponsors the growth of self, voice and mind in the participants" (Belenky, et.al., 1997, pg. 80). Dialogue has been a critical learning tool for analyzing experiences and negotiating new meaning in various social justice movements (Preskill and Brookfield, 2009).

In what began as an organisation's commitment to feminist practices and pedagogical value of collaborative and respectful processes we developed what became a safe testing-ground for doing things differently- meaning trying alternative, perhaps what some would call feminist, methods of decision-making around curriculum. This opened possibilities for learning about and practising new ways of facilitating and decision-making including strategic-planning. For example, by recognizing that everyone

in the group had valuable knowledge and skills we included 'each-one-teach-one' sessions where those who were interested could volunteer to facilitate a mini-workshop on their expertise. Also, to explore alternative strategic planning processes we engaged in a PATHS (Promoting Alternative Think Strategies – a tool often used in schools) process to envision the future of the group. In order to get to know each other we established the first 30minutes of the program as a coffee time, appropriating the Swedish cultural customary coffee-break Fika. We also had 'show-and-tells' where everyone brought an artefact that represented a particular theme. Some of our themes were serious such as what does being a woman mean to you, and some were more light-hearted like a favourite childhood toy or what are you reading now.

The wealth of knowledge within the group provided a key resource, however we also brought in others to share their own knowledge. Inspired by our surroundings we decided to all learn how to do pottery. Considering that none of us had any experience with pottery either with the wheel or by hand this event provided a significant equalizer as we were all learners who tried, failed and tried again to turn bowls on the wheel. It was the failures when the clay would suddenly droop to the side, slide right off centre or suddenly resemble a phallic object that brought us into fits of laughter that we cherished after. At our next session our fired and glazed bowls awaited us and many were surprised that they had actually created a tangible, practical object of beauty. We also had a guest speaker, who was a former Member of

Parliament, to share with us her experiences building allies, challenging barriers, and being a woman in a 'man's world'. The experience of having both internal and external teachers highlighted that while it is significant to validate knowledge within the group, provide opportunities to mentor each other, and that we all have something valuable to share with others, it is also important when building or being in a learning community to have times when everyone is a learner.

The diversity of the group included a variety of ideas and values regarding critical thinking around gender and feminist ideas. In rural areas the term 'feminist' is often a hushed 'f-word' as feminism and feminist are seen as threats to the patriarchal hegemony of the rural idyll (Brandth and Haugen, 1997). One writer explains that "being known as a feminist in a rural community can over-ride other identities that are more acceptable, creating unwanted problems including rejection by community members whose goodwill is desired. (Heather et.al., 2005, pg. 90) .

By engaging in critical dialogue about their experiences as rural women, and actively listening in order to understand each other, where we are coming from and what has informed our ideas, we were able to appreciate the various ways that rural women could theorize and practice gender equality in our homes, workplaces, churches and communities. This experience highlighted for women that there is more than one way to be a feminist and often we have to adjust our feminist practices and language based on where

we find ourselves, not to hide our feminist values, but rather to creatively account for the gender culture of particular spaces, such as church or workplace.

In the program we wanted to make decisions in a collaborative way and so we reviewed various models of consensus decision-making. In the end we came up of a hybrid model that drew upon the various consensus and collaborative decision-making experiences of the participants and facilitators. We used our scheduling of topics and activities into our program as our practice model. In a short-term program incorporating feminist pedagogies and practices can pose challenges. This program was intended as 8 sessions over six months and we were still deciding on topics and process in the 4th session -although the 3rd session involved going to Winnipeg to see a play about the Suffrage Movement in Manitoba. The time dedicated to confirming our schedule engaged all participants in an opportunity to ask questions, learn about each other, share ideas and give feedback. Thus the decision-making process around the schedule was in fact a participatory pedagogical exercise in group-building and collaborative decision-making. In order to see the value of the process we had to emphasize that negotiating the schedule is the learning process and goal wrapped into one. Once we had negotiated the schedule we realized we had also created a culture of collaboration within our community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). There appeared a greater confidence in the ability of the group to determine the processes and outcomes of each session and raise questions – often critical questions around gender and culture, and share facilitation.

In our fast-paced world where we are socialized into hierarchical decision-making and a formal learning experience in which learners often defer to the teachers to make decisions, engaging in a collaborative decision making process can seem time consuming and a distraction to really getting on with things. This struggle between doing things collaboratively and getting things-done quickly highlighted for the group that when we default to what we know in the interest of time or functionality we lose the opportunity to try and practice other ways of doing community-building which we know intuitively would be more inclusive, comprehensive, and sustainable in the long-run. By defaulting to the norm we lose confidence in ourselves and our beliefs when these stand outside societal norms. By providing a space where the women could experiment with collaborative decision-making processes we hopefully provided opportunities to practice skills they would not gain otherwise and build confidence in themselves and their abilities to try to do things differently. As well, engaging in more collaborative decision-making experiences we can essentially speed up the process as it will become familiar and comfortable.

In describing feminist organising, Dominelli (1995) highlights the importance of starting where women are at and making space for women to explore their own reality through exchanges with other women. Two pivot-points to the program were women's own stories and networking. Integrating the women's own stories into the program ensured that the subject matter would be locally relevant and

applicable to the participants. Through self-reflection, dialogue and group activities women were able to gain perspectives on their ideas and experiences for the benefit of own personal praxis and the collective knowledge of the group. The direct application of knowledge and practice meant that women often returned to the next session with anecdotes of the outcomes of their revised strategies or application of new knowledge which fuelled further analysis.

Networks:

A significant resource the program provided the participants was a space to network and build relationships with other rural women who share similar experiences in regards to community-building. Research on women's friendships has noted that "women need to identify with each other as a gendered group" (Gullstead, 1984 as noted in Desplanques, 1997, pg. 234). Desplanque (1997) explains that "women's friendship groups and their dynamics can provide a catharsis from which a sense of identity emerges" (pg. 234). In many instances women's networks and social relationships are an important catalyst, motivation and support for women involved in community activism (Dominelli, 2006; Krauss, 1993, 1998; Sacks, 1993). Friendships among community women activists help sustain their activism and support the women themselves (Connolly, 2002; Vickers, 1988). For women who step outside the traditional gender roles, friendships can be a source of support which can inspire and influence social change (Friedman, 1989).

Networking is an organizing strategy and resource (Cockburn, 2007; Dominelli, 1995; Krauss, 1993; Rooney, 2000). Networking is defined as “a skilled process by which relationships and contacts between people or organisations are established, nurtured and utilised for mutual benefit (Dominelli, 2006; Gilchrist, 2000). Through their networks women can compare their experiences and “develop an oppositional knowledge” (Krauss, 1993, pg. 253). Networks can not only strengthen action they can also strengthen the women themselves by creating meaning (Connolly, 2002; Naples, 1991, 1992, Tastsoglou and Welton, 2003) and provide much needed emotional and social support and support for balancing responsibilities (Bays, 1998; Dominelli, 2006; Krauss, 1993, 1998; Reinharz, 1983; Sacks, 1993; Susser, 1988).

In this particular program many of the women already knew of each other – which was a bit surprising considering that the participants represented seven different communities spread across 70 kilometres. And while yes rural communities are notorious for everybody knowing everyone – in this particular case the connections could be seen through the various social and professional networks the women operated within. And it soon was discovered that the women we thought were not from the common networks represented by others in the group, did actually have ties through family and friends to the women in the group. These ties played a significant role in creating a sense of connection to each other and the group as a whole.

This circle of familiarity in the group – of women knowing women highlights several crucial points in organising and facilitating non-formal programs in rural contexts, in particular when it is put on by an external organisation – in this case an urban organisation that focuses on women and is secular. In regards to recruitment we realized that the lack of development and non-formal learning opportunities for people in rural areas, in particular outside of the church, means there is little culture or practice of expecting these opportunities or signing up for programs because the opportunities simply do not exist. We addressed this challenge by building on existing allies in one of the communities and asking them to recruit within their networks. I do acknowledge that recruiting within women’s networks can result in a cliquey feel to the group yet by requesting this of various women and asking them to invite others to bring friends expands the circle beyond a core group. At the same time, recruiting within women’s networks addressed several concerns. First it alleviated the fear among women that they won’t know anyone else in the program. Second it created accountability between potential participants to get their applications in and to attend sessions. Third it ensured a support network among participants for car-pooling and communication – such as filling each-other in on what was missed. At the same time, the threat was present that the group could be exclusive. Despite engaging in numerous recruitment strategies, including announcements on the radio and in local newspapers and church bulletins, as well as putting up posters, we found that word of mouth among women’s networks was the most effective. There were a few women

present who came from 'outside' the networks, yet as time progressed we soon learned of connections between these women and others. As facilitators we worked actively to build an inclusive community by engaging in a facilitation style that relied heavily on participation and creating a focused space of inquiry.

We also included a question on inclusion in the entrance interviews to plant the seed of building an inclusive learning environment with the women.

Self-Care

As a co-facilitator of this program, I quickly realized that for the women who are active advocates in their communities, the program became an important safe space to think, speak and to re-energize in order to continue their work to build better communities. As the women mentored and taught each other they filled their pots, so-to-say, in-order to go back into their communities to continue their work. These processes of reflection, energizing and self-care are often overlooked in development and advocacy work – despite the crucial roles they have in sustaining the work of the people involved, creating knowledge, and enhancing development and advocacy movements and actions (Holford, 1995; Kilgore, 1999; Kovan and Dirx, 2003). Initially the topic of self-care was not even considered for the program yet this particular group of women emphasized their interest to engage in a variety of self-care activities. Why this particular group was interested in self-care suggests to me some unique characteristics of the women in the group. The opportunity for like-minded rural women community advocates to gather in a safe,

nurturing space, to engage with each other on issues that they care about and dedicate significant time and energy to, provided the rare opportunity to exhale, or remove the façade they put up in order to be strong, not show their frustrations or let things bother them when they go out there and try to change their world.

In rural communities the geographical distances between women in towns, villages and farms can leave many women who question the status-quo and challenge the rural-idyll feeling isolated from potential allies. The resulting sense of isolation can be overwhelming as women continue to try to meet their various responsibilities at home, work, school, church, and farm. Sharing a space with similarly minded and active women provides an opportunity to realize you are not alone – or the only one, and to compare experiences and build relationships with allies.

Challenges

Engaging in a feminist pedagogy not only informed what happened during the sessions yet also how the program was designed and organized. We attempted to run the program at a central location; however this still meant that some participants had to travel at least 30 minutes to the sessions.

Considering that the majority of the participants worked in the school system and we decided to not run the program in a school – in order to help create a separation between work and PathMakers for some participants. We were, undoubtedly, lucky to be able to run the program in a barn converted into a pottery studio and gift-shop located on a beautifully landscaped farm yard. On several occasions

comments were made about the energy and creativity of the barn and how as soon as one walked in they just felt different.

Recognizing the expense of travelling to the sessions travel reimbursements were provided to all participants who lived outside of the local community. Although rural women often cite transportation, including the costs associated with transportation, a barrier to participating in learning opportunities some of the participants initially refused to accept travel reimbursement. Public transportation does not exist in rural areas. In rural areas driving to meetings is simply assumed as an absorbed cost to the participant. Women's participation is thus determined by her access to a reliable vehicle, ability to drive and pay for the fuel. The rarity of mileage reimbursement makes it an awkward encounter. The interesting challenge becomes how does an organisation committed to acknowledging and advocating for the elimination of barriers address the participants transportation expenses when the participants are uncomfortable or unwilling to accept financial support. In discussion with some participants the response was that perhaps others needed it more than they did - an interesting answer and hard to determine if it highlighted a perceived class or income difference in the group or if it was a tactic for declining the funds.

Conclusion:

Since PathMakers ended in June the majority of the women have continued to meet under their own direction and collaboration. I suspect that for most of these women it was the community-of-practice created “at the barn” which provided a much needed safe-space in their lives for critical dialogue about being women leaders and advocates in a rural setting. In reflecting on the purpose of the group’s continuation, one woman stated “it’s cheaper than therapy”.

What continues to stand out for me from my experience as a PathMaker’s facilitator is the need to provide spaces for advocates of community well-being to have the opportunity to engage with peers and allies for their own well-being so that they can fill their pots and continue the significant work they do in the families, workplaces and communities. The collaborative and participatory pedagogy that informed this program ensured that the women involved had an opportunity to actively engage socially, politically, emotionally and mentally with themselves and each other, resulting in a sustaining community-of-practice.

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