

Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2005 Conference Proceedings (Athens, GA)

Training Critically Conscious Educators: Bolivian Women in Popular Education

Judith Kollins
Cleveland State University

Catherine A. Hansman
Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Kollins, Judith and Hansman, Catherine A. (2005). "Training Critically Conscious Educators: Bolivian Women in Popular Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/26>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Training Critically Conscious Educators: Bolivian Women in Popular Education

Judith Kollins

Catherine A. Hansman

Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland Cleveland State University, USA

Abstract: *This study examines how the Education Office of the Oficina Jurídica Para la Mujer [Women's Legal Office] (OJM), a community-based popular education organization in Cochabamba, Bolivia, works with women to address personal, legal and policy issues through local leadership training and popular education methodology, demonstrating a powerful model for achieving individual, family, community and societal change.*

Introduction

In the face of poverty and long-term political instability in Bolivia, many adult educators are striving to help their learners achieve justice in the form of economic opportunity and the freedom to maintain their culture with dignity. Cunningham (1988) and other have argued that adult education helps learners acquire the necessary skills and knowledge that will allow them to work towards justice. Education may provide an avenue for people to view themselves and their world differently – thus opening the possibilities of promoting social justice. However, the educational process is complex and often compounded by the sociocultural context in which the learning and the social change are taking place, particularly when exploring educational and justice programs for women and minorities in Bolivia. However, when popular educational models are implemented that take into account the daily lives within local cultures, true learning and change can be seen. In particular, when women are an integral part of these programs and projects, individuals, organizations, and national groups can be transformed (Fink, 1992).

The Education Department of the Oficina Jurídica Para la Mujer [*Women's Legal Office*] (OJM), a community-based popular education organization in Cochabamba, Bolivia, works with women in a *Legal Promoter's Course* to address personal, legal and policy issues through local leadership training and popular education methodology. Women who participate in these workshops have often faced domestic violence in their personal lives and historical marginalization in the traditionally male sphere of social action. The OJM has developed creative initiatives, such as the *Legal Promoter's Course*, to reach out to women and community members. Through examining this course, the unique and powerful dimensions that women's perspectives lend to popular educational programs provide insight concerning the real-world applications of current educational theories. In addition, it demonstrates a powerful model for achieving individual, community, and societal change and transformation.

This study describes the *Legal Promoter's Course* as a model for women's popular education and a program which prepares participants to be educators in the realms of family, workplace, and community. The purpose of our research is to examine the methods and practices of this popular education program in Bolivia and the critical role women within this program have played in its development and implementation. To do so, we employed qualitative methodology in order to further understand how the *Legal Promoters' Course* impacted and transformed the lives of its participants. We explored the challenges these women have faced in the traditionally male sphere of social action, including discrimination and exclusion, in addition to the creative initiatives the women participants developed to reach out to their fellow women and community members. Our interests in the program were to understand how popular education programs can

facilitate transformation of participants that may help them challenge existing status quo social norms in order to change their lives. Specifically, the research question we addressed was: How does the *Legal Promoter's Course* impact and transform the lives of participants on an individual, family, community, and societal level?

Review of Relevant Literature

Transformational Learning: Transformational learning is taken to an active, political level when individuals understand past experiences within the context of critical theory (Mezirow, 2000; Baumgartner, 2001). Cunningham (1988) argues that when teachers make the decisions of what knowledge is necessary and valuable, education becomes no more than a mechanism for enforcing hegemonic values and social control. On the other hand, knowledge can be viewed as socially constructed, spanning formal educational skills like literacy, practical abilities such as street smarts, and emancipatory awareness (Kilgore, 2001). Herein, the acquisition of knowledge is no longer simply a mastering of tasks, but it is a multifaceted entity that each learner plays an active role in creating. Mezirow (2000) has described this process as transformational learning. As learners become aware of their abilities to participate in the creation of knowledge, their perspectives of themselves and their worlds change. Freire (1970) contends that if learning takes place within the context of real life problems and concerns, and if the learning process is a shared practice between students and teacher, students develop a "critical consciousness." The burden of past failure shifts away from the learner, allowing him or her to challenge existing power structures. In this context, education is explicitly political (Freire, 1970).

Feminist Theory and Pedagogy: When examining the experiences of women in education, the concepts of transformational learning and critical consciousness become slightly more complex. In response to feelings of disempowerment, some women have developed strategies of resistance that reveal benefits of a more intimate form of adult education for women (Ross-Gordon, 1999). Additionally, awareness of women's developmental differences has led to the development of feminist pedagogies that utilize open communication as a means of ensuring freedom and equality in the educational and hopefully larger social context. Flannery and Hayes (2001) draw on feminist theory to challenge traditional conceptions of adult learning in three areas: "identity, authority in knowledge creation, and agency within social structures" (p. 33), paying attention to and planning for and with women participants as they move among these areas. Tisdell (2001) explains feminist theory and pedagogy as really being about leveling the playing field. The result of trying to level this playing field has been that women have developed methods of pursuing agency both within and without educational organizations and social structures. This agency may take the form of pedagogical action through popular education, as described in this study of the women in the Legal Promoter's Course.

Women and the Legal Promoter's Course in Bolivia: In Latin America, formal models of education have largely given way to popular education, often combined with skills training in which two levels of knowledge are valued: (1) the traditions, knowledge, abilities, and experiences of participant; and (2) the transmission of new technical skills and information (Fink, 1992). The concept of popular education relies upon assumptions that unofficial, community knowledge is more valuable than outside "expert" knowledge as a resource for problem-solving on an individual and societal level. The OJM's *Legal Promoter's Course* focuses on teaching skills while at the same time promoting social change and justice through its course methodology. The *Oficina Jurídica para la Mujer* (OJM), the site chosen for this project,

is an innovative non-governmental organization (NGO) that was conceived in 1984 as an option for poor women who needed training in the defense of their rights and in protection from family and societal violence. The mission of the organization is threefold: to change power relations in Bolivian society in order to eliminate social, economic, political and cultural injustice; to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the women of Bolivia and the world; and to construct a truly democratic society that respects life, peace, liberty and diversity (Montano, 2000). Currently, the OJM participates actively in educational programs and in the modification of discriminatory laws, maintaining its strong position in the defense of the rights of women and the elimination of gender discrimination. The principal function of the Education Department is training women from marginalized and rural areas of Cochabamba and other Bolivian states in the knowledge, use and defense of their rights (Montano, 2000). The goal of this combination of access to services, information and training is to provide women with the tools they need to begin to take more control of their lives and education. . The work of the Education Department is guided by the principle that if women are aware of their rights and are taught within the context of their experience, they will be motivated to exercise their rights.

The people who participated in this case study were students in the Legal Promoter's Course, which was developed in 1990 and has been an important aspect of the Education Department of the OJM. The OJM formed the program in response to the urgent need to advance the knowledge of the law and legal rights among women leaders. The general project objective is to increase the effective exercise of human rights from the perspective of gender, class, ethnicity and age, deconstructing patriarchal power mechanisms through leadership and sustained action.

Methodology

In the Legal Promoter's Course, participants are trained to provide legal assistance to women, particularly those with limited resources, and to refer them to the OJM for further free legal assistance. The development of the Legal Promoter's Course includes both legal and educational training, preparing participants to be educators in the realms of family, workplace and community (Montano, 2000). The format of the course consists of weekly programs that take place from February through October each year with a larger number of participants each session. Through researcher's observations of the program and from discussions with the facilitator, the methodology of the program is "participatory and living," making use of role-plays, small group work, storytelling, presentations, field visits and research homework. A primary method of learning is through reflection and discussion (Gutierrez, 2002).

Because of the popular education characteristics of the program, the *Legal Promoter's Course* and its participants were deliberately chosen as the subject for this study. We employed qualitative case study methodology since the program and its participants were a "bounded system" (Merriam, 2002, p. 178), and case study methodology was the most effective research technique in order to reflect the richness of the program participants' individual experiences. The researchers' interests in the program were to understand how popular education programs can facilitate transformation of participants that may help them challenge existing status quo social norms in order to change their lives. One of the researchers participated in intensive field study at the Legal Promoter's Course in Bolivia for three months as an observer and assistant to program leaders. As a full participant in the workshop, this researcher was able to become immersed in the program and develop relationships with participants before beginning a series of interviews. Data for this study consisted of three months of field notes and observations of

classrooms, interviews with participants and facilitators, and published documents related to the program.

The interviews were conducted with three current program participants (Nereida, Valentina and Walter), one graduated Promoter (Aide), and the program facilitator (Irma). The study participants' stories that emerged from their interviews illuminate the strengths and the challenges of the program and of the participants, revealing a direct connection to the concepts of transformational learning, women's learning and critical consciousness through popular education.

Findings

All participants interviewed had differing perspectives on why popular education was important and what aspects of the methodology made it work. The failure of the traditional education system in the lives of the participants and the importance of a sense of community in an educational setting were emergent principal themes. The use of native languages was also a key factor in the experiences of participants. Additionally, gender dynamics played an important role in the development of the program. Although program facilitators and participants face economic, organizational and societal challenges in sustaining the program, demand for the program among community members kept the program alive and continuing efforts among graduated participants disseminates the internal workings of the program to the larger community.

Impact on the individual: Personal Transformation. According to the OJM Annual Report (2000), the greatest impact of the program on an individual level is an improvement in self-esteem as participants learn their rights. They often adapt their personal behavior within their home lives and undertake leadership positions in their community organizations (Montano, 2000). Interview subjects reflected upon their shift in attitude and self-image. For example, Aide, a graduated promoter, told her story:

I have changed. Two years ago I was a shy, fearful person. Now I am not afraid of anything. I know that I can confront things. Becoming a Legal Promoter has given me a lot of courage. It has taught me to honor myself. Now my husband doesn't mistreat me and I don't mistreat him. He respects my decisions and I respect his. When I started to value myself, he started to value me.

For Walter, a male program participant, the Legal Promoter's Course served not only as a source of self-confidence, but also as an outlet for his curiosity, his motivation to learn and to teach, and his sense of personal efficacy. Throughout the program he continually researched new topics and explored new concepts with his peers. With his newfound knowledge and the shared experience with his fellow participants, he began to feel a personal sense of efficacy. He shared his perspective, saying "I am never satisfied with what I know. I like to learn so that I can teach. Now, I am always learning and I am always teaching."

Impact on the Family. On a family level, many Legal Promoters were able to redesign their gender roles and relationships. Several times this included a redistribution of family responsibilities to relieve the often overwhelming work of the women. Even though many husbands initially resisted these changes, it has been seen that the participation of women in these programs eventually improves the communication within the family, particularly in relation to the children (Montano, 2000). Irma, the program facilitator, explained further, "Very often the women's relationships with their husbands and their children improve as they learn to make decisions to resolve their problems."

Sometimes family situations were not possible to resolve; the Legal Promoter's Course often gave women the courage to make changes in their lives. Considering and following through with divorce is a difficult move to make, particularly in a culture where single and divorced women are often perceived of as failures, However, with the support of the OJM and an understanding of the legal process, women have been able to make difficult but necessary changes in their lives and to come to terms with them.

Impact on the Community. The community impact of the Legal Promoters is evident as program graduates become defenders of human rights in their communities, contributing to the strengthening and democratization of the organizations to which they belong. The practical implementation of the program is both a source of pride for the participants and a true force of change within their communities. Once they have achieved this level of critical consciousness, current participants set goals for what they will do when they have finished the program. Irma elaborated on her perceptions of the power of community outreach:

There are some who join the course as leaders. But after the course, they go to their organization and they are more powerful. They move higher up in the leadership. This integration of Legal Promoters in leadership positions in organizations, institutions, school boards, women's groups, and so forth motivates other people's reflection and critical consciousness about the situation of women in Cochabamba, in Bolivia and in the rest of the world.

Societal Impact. The final step of the philosophy of popular education is to attempt to change the way the world works. As our discussion has indicated, we saw concrete effects from the program within the individuals, their families and their communities. However, for many of the participants, the program helped them develop a vision of large scale social change. While social changes are the most difficult changes to measure, each person had a dream of the impact they had and can make. Nereida's dream goes beyond the classroom, into the workforce and beyond the traditional sphere of women's participation:

It would be interesting to start a small business between all of us, managed through the OJM. We could work at the OJM and the other organizations that deal with women's rights. My goal is that not only do we learn and use our new skills but that we are truly productive. Through a business like this we could create consciousness among the women and within the community about rights and about business that could be very efficient for the whole country.

Discussion

The implications of this study in terms of popular and adult education are wide-ranging. There are many programs throughout the world that seek to end domestic violence, teach human rights and facilitate gender equality. The *Legal Promoter's Course*, by operating within the larger category of popular education, was not only able to address the immediate needs of the participants but at the same time to train a force of critically conscious educators. The process utilized by the program was strengthened because the women were not held in the domestic sphere, but instead participated in a space in which men and women could work together in a process where there is a balance of power between teachers and students. Through their involvement in this process, societal structures can be challenged and shifted as participants become critically aware of the societal forces that shape their personal and political experiences, and further, realize that they themselves are creating constantly changing "knowledge."

There is great need for future research in the area of transformational learning and critical consciousness, particularly its application in the lives of women. It would be valuable to expand future studies beyond Bolivia, comparing the way such organizations work across different cultures. Additionally, it would be interesting to compare the *Legal Promoter's Course* structure to more traditional women's educational programs in order to understand the differing outcomes and the advantages and disadvantages of varying models. Ideally, with continued academic study in this area and with the expansion and refinement of successful programs, the individual and societal impacts of a program like the *Legal Promoter's Course* at the Oficina Jurídica Para la Mujer in Bolivia can have an even broader impact in the fight for gender equality and an end to violence against women.

References

- Baumgartner, L. M. (2001). An update on transformational learning. In S.B. Merriam (Ed.), *The new update on adult learning theory* (pp.15-24). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Cunningham, P. M. (1988). The adult educator and social responsibility. In R. G. Brockett (Ed.) *Ethical issues in adult education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fink, M. (1992). Women and popular education in Latin America. In N. P. Stromquist (Ed.), *Women and education in Latin America: Knowledge, power, and change* (pp. 171-194). London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Flannery, D., & Hayes, E. (2001). Challenging adult learning: A feminist perspective. In V. Sheared & P. Sissel (Eds.), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education* (pp. 29-41). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gutierrez, I. (2002). [Education department report]. Unpublished raw data.
- Kilgore, D. W. (2001). Critical and postmodern perspectives on adult learning. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *The new update on adult learning theory* (pp. 53-61). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Merriam, S. B & Associates. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Mezirow, J. & Associates. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Montano, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Annual report*. (Available from the Oficina Jurídica Para la Mujer, Cochabamba, Bolivia.)
- Ross-Gordon, J. M. (1999). Gender development and gendered adult development. In M. C. Clark & R. S. Caffarella (Eds.), *An update on adult development theory: New ways of thinking about the life course* (pp. 25-34). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Tisdell, E. (2001). Feminist perspectives on adult education: Constantly shifting identities in constantly changing times. In V. Sheared & P. Sissel (Eds.), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education* (pp. 271-285). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.