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Cindy Hanson
University of Regina

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Recommended Citation

Hanson, Cindy (2012). "Education as a Political Act: Community-based Participatory Research with Union Women," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/papers/21>

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Education as a Political Act: Community-based Participatory Research with Union Women

Cindy Hanson
University of Regina, Canada

Introduction to the Study

The Prairie School for Union Women (PSUW), now celebrating its fifteenth year of operation, is unique in its popular education approach while remaining the only labour school in Canada specifically for women. During the annual school, held in a retreat-like setting in Saskatchewan, groups of 60-160 women engage in a non-formal education experience that emphasizes adult learning principles of facilitation and mentoring, and support for activist practices. The embodiment and development of feminist popular education² curricula and methodologies in the School's operation is central to this experience. The study, *Innovations, Opportunities and Challenges: The Story of the Prairie School for Union Women* for which I was a researcher working closely with the School's Steering Committee, is the first empirical study to explore how well the goals of the school "to develop women's personal and leadership skills, to build solidarity among women workers, and to increase knowledge about the labour movement" are being met.

The study intended to provide a clear understanding of non-formal, feminist labour education and add to the dearth of scholarship on the ways that equity issues can be mobilized within labour movements (Kainer, 2006; Kirton & Healy, 2004). This knowledge is important because, as Kainer writes, the absence of scholarship on gender in unions impairs efforts for union renewal. Gender bias in the union movement in Canada, for example, is widely documented (Yates, 2006; Acker, 1995; CLC, 1997), and although important strategies to address gender bias include organizing women's committees or women's conferences, such efforts have not always included an analysis of how gender intersects with other forms of oppression in a larger context (Kainer, 2006). Feminist popular education uses processes grounded in personal experience to develop consciousness about such intersecting issues. For example, while still addressing inequities and unequal power structures, feminist popular education emphasizes the need for reflexivity to better understand how identities of difference are lived and structured locally, culturally, and politically – in short, how gender is implicated in other forms of inequality (Manicom & Walters, 2012).

Core courses offered at the Prairie School, such as *Union Women on Turtle Island* (on Aboriginal³ identity), or *Inside and Out* (on homophobia) investigate intersecting issues of identity and inequality. The school's scholarship program which supports women from equity-seeking groups and non-union women who want to attend the School, is designed to increase

² Feminist popular education is broadly considered a feminist approach to popular education; a form of transformative education with theories and practices borrowed from Freire (1970). The universalisms proposed in Freire's pedagogy are however challenged by feminists (c.f. Weiler 1991). Simply put, it involves sharing personal experiences: then working together to find solutions to real world problems.

³ Recognizing that the terms used to describe people of Indigenous ancestry are contested, Aboriginal is used here to refer to people in Canada of First Nations, Inuit or Métis descent.

diversity at the School and address biases that may favour able-bodied, heterosexual women's privilege. Such efforts work to enhance goals of union justice, while presenting a broader vision of transformation aimed at improving women's social and economic status within the union and beyond (Kainer, 2006; Yates, 2006). Broadly, the study serves to document the role that non-formal, gender-based education plays in reducing inequities within the union movement and in empowering women and equity-seeking groups to work toward a broader social justice agenda.

Research Approach and Methods

Using community-based participatory methods and applying feminist critical theory, the researcher worked with the Steering Committee of the School to design the research, to collect the data, and to create ownership over the results and knowledge mobilization. Such a participatory approach ensures that the participants' concerns, interests and preferences are guided by the participants themselves (Bishop, 2008). By actively engaging with the Steering Committee throughout the process, the researcher ensured that the research knowledge was created by and for the community it served (Israel, Eng & Shultz 2005). The story of the research process as follows, demonstrates the value of using community-based participatory research as a method of inquiry for creating knowledge *with not about* a specific community of practice.

The Steering Committee of the Prairie School met before the research proposal was written in order to discuss what kind of inquiry was important to engage in with a university partner. The inclusion of the committee members' opinions and the continuous sharing and adapting of the data collection methods throughout the research ensured that the results were more accessible and understood by all. Data collection methods included document analysis, key informant interviews, a focus group at the School, and multiple meetings and dialogues with the Steering Committee. The document analysis included an analysis of former program brochures and participant evaluations. Additionally, to ensure that participants had a common understanding of community-based participatory research, the researcher was invited to attend the opening panel at the School and provide information and address questions from the School's assembly. Once preliminary findings were extracted from the data, the steering committee met with the researcher. By using a participatory process consisting of group discussion and individual and collective ranking of ideas to prioritize the recommendations from the preliminary findings, the group was able to reach a consensus on the next steps. This process gave ownership of the results to the PSUW itself and set the stage for further research and collaborations.

Critical feminist theoretical framing allowed the researcher to recognize the subjective way that knowledge was constructed about the School. Accordingly, the methodologies were designed to give voice to a diversity of experiences. For example, the data was collected from women aged 24-65 years, from participants and facilitators, from women representing a range of unions, class backgrounds, geographies, and races. Of the twenty study participants, two self-identified as being Aboriginal, two as differently-abled, two as lesbian and one as a youth. Study participants, similar to Prairie School's Steering Committee itself, represented professional as well as rank-and-file union members. Some worked as facilitators for the school; others were attending for their first time in 2011, and others had been participants in the past (dating back to 1997 when the School started). At least one study participant mentioned attending the School

through the scholarship program.

As a new scholar, I was familiar with feminist popular education and non-formal adult learning from academic study and community-based work. Although I had never before attended the Prairie School, I knew women who had attended as facilitators and as participants. The School itself advocates feminism as a way of seeing the world – that is, special attention is paid to how women and men (along with class, race, etc.) frame experience (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). For example, women’s work roles are recognized as central to how the School structures programs – it prioritizes not only course-time, but recreation and wellness as well. Feminist critical theory fits well with participatory research (PR) and the purpose of the research because PR emphasizes the political nature of knowledge production, and it allows for flexibility and reflexivity in creating and understanding research questions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

Study Findings

The data was sorted thematically and the findings and draft recommendations were discussed with the Steering Committee before being disseminated. The findings were divided into five categories, as follows. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of study participants.

Achieving the goals of the school

The experiences of the study participants confirmed that the school is successful in achieving its goals of developing women’s personal and leadership skills and solidarity among women workers. One example was provided by a study participant who reported that she went on after the School to sit on her union’s provincial executive and to work on a policy for the International Labour Organization on AIDS and HIV. She said,

It was the door that opened, that gave me the confidence to explore more about what my union does, what it meant to be a union member, what it meant to be part of the labour movement, and I would never be doing what I'm doing today had I not got my very first experience and taste of it through the Prairie School. ... It was the first environment ever that as a lesbian, I felt safe (Arnica).

Personal growth and empowerment

For most study participants, the School was an experience in their lives that could be described as bringing about “increased confidence and personal empowerment.” Women spoke about feeling hopeful, inspired, and rejuvenated as a result of their participation in the School. The participant discussions explored many aspects of personal growth: “It really opened up an inner part of me that I didn’t realize was locked up” (Mani). Discussions of personal transformation as a result of the experience were noteworthy. Every year there were multiple examples of participants saying in the evaluations, “I learned I was a feminist.” For some participants this realization referred to being politicized about their identity. Another study participant said, “[It’s] beneficial to me to learn more about my Aboriginal culture and heritage.”

Developing personal confidence was related to feeling safe and supported. Many participants spoke about how they felt safe in an all-woman environment. This feeling of safety appeared to be a basis for solidarity among women in the labour movement: at the school and in

unions, as well as in other aspects of their lives. Here is one example:

I've never been to anything like this in my life and it's just opened my eyes hugely to not only women's issues, but the history of the union. I'm embarrassed to say I've been a union member for 30 years, but taking night school, got married, had two babies all the while working full time ... Just the environment has been (*contented sigh*) I just feel so safe and loved and validated, and what I'm learning is transforming conflict, is just something I can use in my whole life." (Janet)

This expression of safety and support, such as the example cited above from Janet, is acknowledged as an indicator of learning for adults (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000). This was also reiterated aptly in the words of former facilitator and program committee member, Loretta (as quoted in Banks, 2000), when she explained,

Women feel like there's more room for them to participate in an entirely different context because it's much more caring and sharing – but sometimes you see some healing that needs to take place by women who come from unions that are male-dominated. You can tell, because the words just rush out: they have so much to say, but they've been silenced for so long (p. 39).

Education as a Political Act: Participant and Facilitator Factors

Feminist popular education is identified by the study participants as a key factor in the School's success. The feminist popular education courses are not just taught at the Prairie School; the School also creates its own popular education courses to train facilitators in popular education methodologies. Facilitation is thus learned by women from all ranks and not assumed to be within the domain of a selected few. The emphasis on “speaking up” and facilitating change, not just learning technical union processes, is powerful for many at the School. Knowledge is shared and taken back to the locals and union conventions. The sustained benefits of this are noteworthy. Concerns about how such increased knowledge and activism are nurtured and supported after the School remain.

Carrying the torch forward: Prairie School Operations

Although the Prairie School faces many of the same challenges that the labour movement faces – “energy, human, and financial resources”—it is distinct in many ways. This uniqueness is important for the study participants who, for example, commend the way that the Prairie School builds equity into access and practice, and how it balances approaches to programming. The Prairie School offers financial support (in the form of scholarships) to women who represent equity-seeking groups or youth, and it makes sure that these women feel welcome through inclusive school programming. It also carries forward a feminist analysis in that it recognizes women's work is not just in the workplace: women frequently have a triple work role – in the household, the community and the workplace. Building in wellness and childcare into programming at the Prairie School is one way the Steering Committee acknowledges and

validates the dual and triple roles played by women. Childcare is provided on-site during all programs and considered part of the feminist analysis that makes the School a success.

Making a good thing even better

The study participants stated that the Prairie School attendees gain many new skills and sometimes had profoundly personal experiences during the workshops. They found they wanted some kind of follow-up: “I think that you know that this is such a tremendous safe platform to crack that shell open then you know we get out in the real world and you get squashed so why don't we have other programs?” (Mani). Study participants felt more publicity about the School was required to raise its profile. They suggested presentations and information tables at conventions, slide shows, photos, and on websites. Many asked for a social marketing format to share emotions and information before and after the School experience.

From Recommendations to Next Steps

The participatory workshop with the steering committee to analyze preliminary recommendations and priorities from the study was an opportunity to discuss directions for the future. After individual reflections and small group exercises, the committee achieved consensus. The top priorities for the group were as follows: 1) to strengthen the emphasis on a feminist analysis in all that the School does, especially in terms of course content; 2) to strengthen the facilitation and co-facilitation training practices among and for the mutual benefit of the participants and the facilitators; 3) to continue attention to diversity in course content and the School's operations; and 4) to enhance the School's communication and marketing.

Conclusions and Implications for Adult Learning and Further Study

By using a feminist ideology to guide the School's practices, PSUW is not only building the confidence and personal identities of the School's participants but also politicizing them and developing their potential for union activism beyond the school – an idea supported in other contexts by Kainer (2006), and Kirton and Healy (2004). The latter also discuss how opportunities for finding voice and understanding identity politics politicize the workplace and bring about a new consciousness and enrichment to the social and personal spaces that women occupy. The discussion about recommendations and priorities with the steering committee further revealed the importance the organizers place on emphasizing feminist ideas and practices.

Study participants acknowledge the importance of linking union issues and union activism to broader forms of social activism and feminism. Given how current forces of globalization and economic restructuring have an impact on the union movement (as well as on other progressive movements), leadership and activist training designed to resist and construct alternatives is necessary. PSUW provides one example. Further, leadership at the school is considered different from traditional union leadership, and as Yates (2004) contends, understanding how women might organize and work differently are the invisible things to requiring attention. The School's organizers and study participants spoke about possibilities for organizing and leadership to be orchestrated differently; ways synchronous with work in the wider union movement:

In response to this growing recognition, women activists across the industrialized world have actively campaigned to make unions more structurally and culturally inclusive. These initiatives have sought to increase participation, democratize organizational

structures, and strengthen the capacity of unions to represent workers of all genders, races, and backgrounds.” (Burke, Deschamps, Jackson, Martin & Paavo, 2002, p. 292)

Noteworthy in this regard is the innovative way the School trains and develops facilitators with diverse groups of women through its core courses in popular education. Issues around literacy are further dealt with by using a popular education approach that focuses on the learner’s experiences and on instructional methodologies that are not literacy dependent (Paavo, 2001). While the work of getting rank-and-file members active in facilitation, for example is commendable, additional attention to the ways that privileges are articulated structurally may further enhance the consciousness-raising process (McKenzie, 2010).

The Prairie School offers an example of non-formal learning using an approach that is gendered and intersectional. Labour education, like other forms of social justice education, is increasingly looking for examples of such approaches. The way that union democracy or activism intersects with gender, race, ability, or sexual orientation, for example, is not widely found in the literature. This kind of analysis moves beyond just looking at women or gender as a variable of oppression and addresses how other forms of inequity or oppression – race, class, age, ability and so on – position people into hierarchies of power and exclusion (Fleras, 2010). The School’s scholarships for women of equity-seeking groups, indicates an effort to dismantle some of those invisible politics and privileges; the scholarships are worthy of additional study.

While the extent to which the Prairie School creates transformation in union culture or practices remains a topic for further study, the stories expressed by study participants do indicate that transformation is experienced in personal perspectives and in confidence-building among individual women. Arnica’s story also demonstrates that this is leading to the construction of a more inclusive union leadership. Kainer (2006) points out that gendered activism and women’s labour organizing encompasses important strategies that challenge traditional unionism while building commitments to social justice. Addressing how the school can transform the energy and commitment of its participants into supported and respected union activists requires additional efforts. A qualitative study that tracks a group of the School’s participants might yield important data about challenges and opportunities for engaging in union activism.

The literature that reflects the increase in union memberships by women and the role played by women’s committees and conferences in politicizing union women is quite widespread, although it is seldom explicitly feminist (Kainer, 2006) and this is further complicated when unions amalgamate all issues into a social justice focus. This can detract from issues particular to women and in some cases, de-politicize them (Briskin, 2002). It is perhaps fair to say, therefore, that the School’s efforts toward including a feminist perspective provides an important role in ensuring that union members engage in gendered consciousness raising – a narrative often absent from discourse on union activism (Kainer, 2006).

As early as 1997, a task force of the Canadian Labour Congress concluded that the union culture has racist and patriarchal elements that require changing; changes this study demonstrates are within reach. Many of the stepping stones toward capacity and character-building – integral components for the participation of women in union politics and leadership (Kirton & Healy,

2004) – are demonstrated in the stories of the women from the Prairie School, for example, in the participants' references to learning about themselves as feminists or as Aboriginal women.

The collaborative approach between the researcher and the Steering Committee to disseminating the research results opened up mutually beneficial channels for knowledge mobilization. It led to a presentation at a provincial labour convention, to two co-facilitated presentations to the university community, and to the release of the study and its posting on the web-site of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour notably on International Women's Day, 2012. These collaborations demonstrate the ways that developing and sustaining the research and learning relationships can open new possibilities for knowledge generation on multiple levels and in more popular formats. The benefits of such an approach are reciprocal and heartfelt, and provide a basis for further collaborations.

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