

# The examined life: women's liberatory learning within a locked-in society

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Using Freirian methods a humanities model programme of education was conducted for women incarcerated in prison. This paper reports the findings of the project, indicating how the women assumed ownership of their learning, engaged in critical thought and became liberated whilst still in prison. It offers highlights of the way women learned and indicates how some continued to engage in formal learning.

## Introduction

Within a scholarly, philosophical context, Cornel West writes of author, academic colleague and friend bell hooks, 'for bell hooks the unexamined life is not worth living, yet the examined life is full of yearnings, hurts, and hope (hooks 1994).' So, too, for groups of incarcerated women who used a humanities model to learn to examine their lives-in-crisis. Within the confines of a women's prison community, such an exercise is often considered frivolous. Separated from society by steel bars and gates, guards and guns, these women are expected to make retribution for their offences. The concept and encouragement of lifelong learning for personal growth and/or career advancement are not realities. On 'the inside', the women's basic learning need is how to conform, to survive; on 'the outside' this does not change significantly. Within a relatively short period of time following release from prison, they are expected to find 'socially acceptable' employment; otherwise, the prison door becomes a revolving one. Given this mandate, the prison where this study took place offers traditional adult basic education as the presumed antidote for a perceived-illiterate population. Consideration is not given to the fact that these are "incomplete human beings"; within the prison community they are identified by numbers, defined as an alarming statistic and subjected to rigid and often punitive regimentation.

There is limited research on the learning ability, experiences and meanings of marginalized women, let alone the incarcerated, to support the prison's assumption and decision to prescribe literacy classes for employment (Gowen 1992, Luttrell 1993, Baird 1994b). Prison studies that focus on rehabilitation argue that the essential first learning step is a process of self-examination that leads to self-awareness (Newman, Lewis, Beverstock 1993). Reflecting on the limitations and the concept of the examined life, therefore, this study used a humanities model to promote a 'culture of learning'. It was designed as the medium for the women to construct practical knowledge about

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themselves and their worlds; as a liberatory experience, the essential first step towards 'completeness', with the potential for initiating a lifelong learning process including effective job preparation. Women's literature served as the link. The methodology was viewed from three perspectives: prison rehabilitative education, Freirian liberation methodology and women's/feminist studies.

### Methodology

A pilot project in 1992 sparked the interest and served as the starting point for this ongoing research on learning among groups of marginalized women. Using a humanities-oriented model, homeless women engaged in an eight week process of self-examination through the writings of established female authors of similar race, class and experience. The one and one-half hour weekly sessions replaced the mandated 'life skills' training designed as job readiness preparation. As an introduction, the women were told that although they were mandated to attend, they were not mandated to participate. There was no pre- or post-testing. Instead of measurement of learning skills, the intent was to introduce them to women's literature with themes relevant to their own lives, to initiate reflection and dialogue for meaning and as a problem-solving process, for making the link to their own situation. Creative self-expression, in a form of their choice, further reinforced this process. A publication including examples of their writing reflected not only the effectiveness of such a method for the self-search but also indicated a heightened sense of self. This was termed a paradox in learning since it successfully engaged the learners in a process contrary to how society defined and addressed their learning needs (Baird 1994a).

Since 1994, the model has been implemented with incarcerated women, parolees and probationers. Four cycles, each lasting ten weeks for one and one-half hours each week, take place at both the prison site and at a programme for female offenders. The incarcerated women volunteer to participate; as with the homeless women, this project is incorporated into a structured rehabilitative program for the parolees. The basic model of reading, reflecting and writing prevails at both sites. Although the topics and related reading change according to the learners' preferences, Maya Angelou's short poem on failed relationships engages them in reflection and discussion immediately. Its relevance to their lives crosses all racial, ethnic and class barriers. Their success in relating to female authors who also serve as role models is reflected in their assessment of the writing and, through their own writing, its connection to their personal lives. Their adaptation to this learning medium is also illustrated by comparing, from the early stages of this process, the anguish, despair and hostility evidenced in these words:

And another crisis I when I was about 8 or 9 years old my mother used to beat me and smother me with a pillow she used to make me take off all my clothes and make me stand on the back porch. She was very abusive. Sometimes when I think about it it makes me fill like just killing here.

with, at the end of ten weeks, the self-acceptance and optimism in the following excerpt:

Being a part of this creative writing has given me a sense of self worth. It is important to me that I've been able to gain such a thing because I haven't felt worth ever. I grew up feeling worthless, never feeling good enough to be first, to

go far, to achieve today by going through this class, with these wonderful women. I know that I'm worthy, can become anything I want in life, no matter what bad choices I've made I can feel worthy of another chance!! Just do it!! '97'

### **Prison Rehabilitative Education**

Prison studies address issues such as the causes for incarceration; the dramatic increase in numbers of prison inmates, especially among females; recidivism and its relationship to low literacy levels. With few exceptions, such as Askins and Young (1994), studies on the learning style preference and brain hemispheric dominance among incarcerated females, most studies focus on the incarcerated male. The underlying theme of Newman, Lewis and Beverstock's work (1993), however, is the importance of providing the 'right' kind of education for the incarcerated, the rehabilitative rather than punitive approaches that save human capital and tax dollars. This kind of education must maintain a socializing perspective by developing critical thinking about one's self and one's relationship both to the community and to society at large. Although they do not present a specific model, they recommend humanities-oriented programmes as a process of self-examination for self-awareness. To further enhance the rehabilitative process, corrections practitioners are urged to adhere to adult education principles; to develop programmes responsive to learner's needs, with hands-on learning, the researchers find, as the preferred style.

Given the focus on a humanities-oriented rehabilitative approach to learning and the fact that the female prison population has increased by over 300% during the past decade, it is unfortunate that these studies devote minimal space to incarcerated women. The research findings on behavioural patterns are helpful in understanding classroom interaction; however, this limited treatment of the women's learning experiences and perspectives highlights the void in adult education research relating to marginalized, oppressed women. The development and implementation of a humanities model, having served about 275 women to date, reaffirms the effectiveness of learning through this medium and provides the literature with a learning model for oppressed women.

### **Freirian Liberation Model**

Freire's philosophy and methodology for liberating, initially, illiterate peasants from oppression through reading and writing in their own words has a political orientation: the prescription for social action to conscientize both the oppressed and the oppressor. The humanities-based model for marginalized women shares a similar philosophy about learning but focuses on individual, personal liberation from the many layers of internal crises that serve as imprisonment and oppression. In Freire's methodology, the praxis is designed as problem-solving education for the oppressed, the mechanism for them to look at their limiting situation, their reality and to find and define their own word. Succinctly, the imperative is for learners to look critically at where they find themselves, to dialogue and to take action.

The same holds true for the humanities model with its liberating potential. Although its development was influenced by the meaning-making aspects of the humanities, the similarities between the two methodologies are remarkable. Learners using these

methodologies, to quote Shaul in his Foreword to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 'come to a new awareness of self hood and begin to look critically at the social interaction in which they find themselves'. The differences are in the objective of the process. Freirian learners, with their self-constructed vocabulary, 'often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation' (Freire 1992: 9). Marginalized women, using the writing of established female authors of similar race, class and experience, take action on themselves, on their liberation through critical reflection and creative self-expression. Both methods, ultimately, help the learners find a 'voice', shattering what Freire describes as the 'culture of silence' of the oppressed.

Well, in here I've learned that starting to write and letting your unconscious take over, you learn about yourself. Things that you may have forgotten a long time ago. You go back over and its like, who was this person, and when did this happen, you know, was this me? And when did I write this. There's a whole you, you never thought or knew was there before. (reflections of an incarcerated woman)

### **Women's/Feminist Studies Perspectives**

As has been noted, there is a significant void in research on the learning perspectives and experiences of marginalized women, the incarcerated being the most notable (Gowen 1992, Luttrell 1993, Baird 1994). Ross-Gordon (1991) focuses on the necessity for inclusivity in adult education research and practice given that earlier studies on how women acquired knowledge and voice involved predominantly middle class, educated, Anglo-American women (Gilligan 1982, Belenky *et al.* 1986). Other studies highlight learning within specific areas: some examples are Fingeret's (1983, 1984) work on basic adult literacy; Baird (1994b), Gowen (1992) and Sheard (1993) studies on workplace preparation and Luttrell's (1989, 1993) attention to working women's learning perspectives, contrasting African- and Anglo-American women. Although Luttrell (1993) does not single out female learners, she underscores under-representation in the literature of low income adult learners, their programmes, class sites, resistance or compliance to 'school'.

Liberation learning is the theme for Shauna Butterwick's comparative analysis of Freirian conscientization and feminist consciousness raising (n.d.). She provides the historical evolution of both philosophies and practices, noting the difference in 'voice'. Freire objectifies the process and feminists write as subjects of the process (n.d.: 3). Noting that there is diversity among women in their movement and their experiences of oppression, she highlights that the nature and causes of their oppression must be identified, analysed and changed, that 'feminists are not aware of different things than other people; they are aware of the same things differently' (30). Although she finds similarities in the process of liberation, of finding a 'voice' for both feminists and Freire's learners, she feels the women's process must be grounded in their every day realities. This philosophy supports the purpose of the humanities learning model, of finding a 'voice' through dialogue and reflection based on daily, lived experiences, in order to deal with oppression. Where she differs significantly is in her contention that feminist consciousness raising, just as conscientization, should be a process of social action, a 'liberating social movement' rather than as an adult education technique for behavioural change at the personal level.

## Findings

Results of the implementation of the humanities model, group interviews and written evaluations show that

- Incarcerated women are not categorically illiterate. Even non-readers and non-writers engage in the learning process by listening, discussing and using their own voices, by dictating their reactions;
- Incarcerated women are capable of sophisticated analysis of the reading. Since they are not threatened by the process, they are comfortable in using the reading to examine their own life situations because of its relevance to their own interests, beliefs and problems;
- Incarcerated women do establish parameters on what they will share in the dialogue process. They are more explicit in their writing and use that component as a means of 'freeing their minds'.
- In spite of the site incarcerated women feel ownership in the process and participate on a regular basis. Currently there is a waiting list for the programme.

Counsellors at the prison share the view that because the women continued their involvement in the process in their cell blocks, they were far less hostile. Their basic education scores improved and two released women are attending a local community college. One woman received recognition from a national poetry organization for work she submitted. At the practice level, therefore, this process provides another approach for engaging women in a non-threatening, challenging learning format, especially useful for those in crisis. It demystifies literature and confirms it as a learning tool since this methodology is grounded in the women's daily lives. Reflecting on the experiences narrated by known, successful authors such as Maya Angelou and bell hooks seems to validate those women who learn to see things differently.

On the theoretical level, this study contributes to adult education literature by offering some perspectives on marginalized women's learning. It provides insight into how they conceive and frame learning, in how they are able to engage in critical thinking as a process for liberating themselves even though societally excluded. Once developed, this problem-solving technique also serves them as they engage in the precarious transition to 'the outside'. Reflecting on the humanities model through the prison, Freirian and women's/feminist studies lenses, the following themes emerged:

- The significance of self-exploration replete with 'yearnings, hurts and hope';
- The importance of dialogue for generating critical thinking;
- The engagement in some form of action, with critical reflection considered applicable to this process;
- Getting in touch with one's reality and finding a 'voice' as a liberatory, learning process.

The women's written evaluations affirmed the themes as well as the feminist perspective that even within their limiting situation, they are not aware of different things than other women but rather, as transformation, they have become aware of the same things differently. To use the learner's words ' [the program] has aloud [allowed] me to open up some things in my life I thought that I wouldn't have to think about for nothing at all.' Another wrote, ' this... has made me take a good look at myself and my family... I never new how much I needed any of them until I went away ... because I had forgotten [them] just as much as they forgotten me ... thank you for taking me back to reality.'

Finally, 'Since I've been coming here ... I have written down a lot of pain, happiness and hope for the future. I got out a lot of emotions through my writing ... It would also give me hope to read other women's struggles with life who made it and succeeded.

Given their circumstances, incarcerated women do not achieve 'completeness' in ten weeks. The women in this study indicated, however, that previously they had not examined their lives so closely nor had they faced the revealed 'yearnings, hurts and hope' (hooks 1994). A fifteen-year old's newly acquired voice best illustrates the process and her learned realities within the context of her locked-in society:

You tell me "**line up**", so of course  
     I get in line  
 You punch in, you punch out, but me?  
     I'm doing time  
 You push the buttons to open  
     the doors I'm behind  
 but one thing you can't change is  
     my freedom of mind  
  
 You stand on your self-made  
     altar of lies  
 you look down at me with  
     contempt in your eyes  
 You represent everything I despise  
 yet your hate for yourself  
     easily justifies  
  
 I may be locked in like a dog  
     in a cage,  
 might be one in a series of numbers  
     on a page  
 but one thing that I've learned even  
     at this young age  
 is to never surrender to hatred  
     and rage  
  
 You look down your nose like you're  
     better than me,  
 like because you're not numbered you  
     see things I can't see  
 but I'm willing to bet ten thousand  
     to three  
 that you don't have half  
     of my serenity  
  
 So, yes, while I'm here I'll stand  
     in your line  
 I'll follow your rules while I'm  
     doing my time  
 But I look in at you from these  
     bars I'm behind  
 because, locked in or not, I have  
     freedom of mind.

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