

## Refereed Articles

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# *Voices of Their Own: A Story of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers*

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### Abstract

Pennsylvania can proudly boast of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers which provides an excellent example of the use of adult education as a vehicle for social change. Although once a highly-visible account of the field, its significance has faded for a variety of reasons. This research reviews some of the causes of the marginalization of women's contributions to the field and brings the story back into focus with a new emphasis by listening to the voices of the women who participated in the school. The methodology combines ethnography and historical analysis with current feminist interpretations of "voice."

History is not simply the recording of the past but a way of defining that past. Those who write history weave their stories by making deliberate choices about the past they wish to portray. In the field of adult education, this selective process has led to an image of a field established and practiced almost exclusively by white, middle class males. Women are ignored in some historical accounts while marginalized in others (Hugo, 1990). Although some significant women continue to emerge in the literature, there is little discussion of the ordinary women who triumphed as both educators and students. Current histories, for the most part, represent a male perspective which is colored by the belief of what women should do and ought to be (Bullough, Shelton, & Slavin, 1988). Consequently, factors that are crucial to the lives of women have been ignored in most historical accounts (Anderson & Zinsser, 1988).

The purpose of this research was to explore an historical account of women involved in adult education as recorded through their own experiences. The story of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers provides a strong example which supports the thesis that women have made significant contributions to adult education as a field of practice and a vehicle for social change. Although it is necessary to discuss the marginalization of women, the emphasis is on their success

and the insistence that their story must be included as a significant chapter in adult education history. As historian Mary Beard writes, "what is important about women is not that they were an oppressed group but that they have made a continuous and impressive contribution to society" (Lerner, 1976, p. 350).

This article begins by exploring the fading of women's contributions to adult education and lays the groundwork for the importance of the story of the summer school. Although there are many ways of recounting history, this version is presented through the voices of the participants. A discussion of the significance to adult education concludes the article with a promise for future research and questions yet to be asked.

### A Fading History

Rachal (1989) writes that adult education programs have historically arisen to meet the needs of society in settings that are sociological, economic, demographic, and political. As grassroots programs evolved to meet the needs of adults, leaders of adult education de-emphasized formal instruction and stressed learning for personal empowerment and civic improvement (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Women were heavily involved in these public service ventures, which were frequently supported by their voluntary organizations. In *Frontiers of American Culture* (1944), Adams writes, "The real beginning of the idea of adult education must be credited to the women . . . rather than high brow and dignified educational institutions" (p. 138).

Although women should have been highly visible in the historical accounts, their contributions began to disappear as the field became involved in the process of professionalization. Hugo (1990) writes, "Against the backdrop of institutionalization and professionalization of the adult education enterprise, women either were not positioned well vis-a-vis the institutions or caught in the undertow of receding social priorities, faded out of the historian's view" (p. 8).

A serious consequence of this marginalization of women is described by Schuster and Van Dyne (1984) as the "invisible paradigm." Organized around the power and values of the dominant group, the paradigm is an infrastructure of internalized assumptions and unspoken agreements that have "worked so effectively that we no longer see it, notice its presence . . . or name it for the determining force that it is" (p. 417). The result is that women's invisibility is not noticed and the conclusion drawn is that women did not contribute to the field or that their contributions were not significant. Even women themselves come

to accept their own invisibility. Anderson and Zinsser (1988) quote German feminist Louise Otto who wrote, "The history of all times and of today especially, teaches us that women will be forgotten if they forget to think about themselves" (p. xix). She wrote these words in 1849.

The combined effects of the professionalization of the field and the invisible paradigm have marginalized the contributions of women. However, Schuster and Van Dyne (1985) believe that it is this marginalization that has given women strength and "resulted in a vitality of a critical stance" (p. 6). This strength has moved women into an intellectual stimulation of studying women on their own terms and developing new paradigms based on the women's own experiences. There is new excitement as researchers explore the stories of ordinary women and try to "understand what history would be like if it were seen through their eyes and ordered by the values they define" (Anderson & Zinsser, 1988, p. xiv). The anger and the disappointment of oppression are replaced by new perspectives valuing the way in which women lived (Schuster & Van Dyne, 1984).

The story of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers has become a brief mention in current texts on adult education, but its value extends beyond one facet of workers' education. It represents an account of women making changes for women, of the triumph of ordinary women, and of a unique opportunity to hear the past through the women's voices. In *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule found that "voice" was more than an academic shorthand for a person's point of view. They became aware that it applies to many aspects of women's experiences and that the "development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined" (p. 18). Gilligan (1982) writes that "the way people talk about their lives is of significance and the connections they make reveal the world that they see and in which they act" (p.2). The following story represents more than an historical account of adult education practice. It reveals the lives, thoughts, and feelings of the people who made the summer school happen.

### The Story

When I was told I could go to college . . . it was the happiest moment of my life. I just threw myself on the bed and was in complete bliss.

Through the vision of M. Carey Thomas, the president of Bryn Mawr College, the dream of workers' education for women became a

reality in 1921. She had seen the empowerment of workers in Europe and decided that the classrooms of her college that remained empty in the summer could be filled with working women to improve their lives through education. She felt that perhaps the very women who were being educated at Bryn Mawr could be excellent teachers for their sisters of the working class (Altenbaugh, 1990). She wrote, "The sympathy that binds women together seems to come only to those who have not been free. It belongs at the present to all women because of their age-long struggle which is not yet over, for human rights, and personal and civil liberty" (Filmmaker's Library, 1985).

Although there were other workers' education programs, three aspects of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers made it unique: (a) it was strictly for women, (b) it was a collaborative effort by women for women, and (c) it was offered at an exclusive women's college. Giving working women such an educational opportunity was a bold move in the 1920s. Working class women had to deal with several oppressive roles: a woman in a man's world, a worker in an industrial society, and, often, an immigrant in an American culture. As women came together at Bryn Mawr, they were able to find strength in their sisterhood and confidence in their ability. The sisterhood extended to educated women, social reformers, feminists, alumni, and union representatives who had joined forces to develop a program for working women. They reflected an optimism that women "could rid society of social evils, bring democracy into the workplace, and contribute to the social issues of the communities" (Kornbluh & Goldfarb, 1981, p. 16). The idyllic setting of the Bryn Mawr campus added to the "dream come true" for these women who knew little more than the conditions of poverty. "Working women in a privilege environment. Nobody knew where it would lead" (Filmmaker's Library, 1985).

Thomas appointed Hilda Worthington Smith to be dean of the school. (In her autobiography, Smith (1978) wrote that the students had made her ashamed of her indifference and boredom, and this had given her life new meaning.) Despite doubts, concerns, and warnings from the unions and skeptical alumni, the school opened in the summer of 1921. Eighty women stepped through Rockefeller Arch to a world they had never known. Cramped work stations and the whirring din of factory machinery were replaced with green lawns and graystone buildings. "I knew I couldn't get too used to this," said one young woman. "When I had to stop school and go into the factory, I felt a door had been slammed in my face. Now I see it is a crack open and there is a beautiful country out there" (Filmmaker's Library, 1985). Other students feared that they were going to be exploited and believed that the school was capitalistic propaganda (Wertheimer, 1981).

The women, unaccustomed to any voice in the affairs of industry, had to be encouraged to speak at first. As workers they had been told what to do by the foremen, and "dared not to act for themselves" (Smith, 1978, p. 120). The curriculum and the practices developed by the faculty were intended to help these women gain confidence and trust in their own ability and knowledge. The teachers, using Dewey's style, began classes with the experiences of their students and helped them see the practical use of their new knowledge (Maddalena, 1978).

There were two core courses: Economics and English. "Economic illiteracy was considered worse than not being able to read. Ignorance blocks efforts to deal with labor issues, new laws, and civic affairs" (Smith, 1941, p. 185). Economics was considered the most valuable course because it applied to each student and helped her understand how her role as a worker fit into the broader scope of society and economic structures. "When we learned that the laundry was like a factory in that we were selling our labor, we got our first inkling of the link between economy and social problems" (Filmmaker's Library, 1985).

The students were excited about learning and starved for more knowledge. They challenged the faculty for more and more information. Eleanor Roosevelt said of the students: "I was impressed with the quality of eagerness which comes to minds which are denied the opportunity of studying certain things and when they find that opportunity within their grasp they respond with great eagerness" (Kornbluh, 1987). They gained new appreciation for their world as they explored history, literature, hygiene, music appreciation, and astronomy. "We learned to see the stars. Looking at the stars, we could forget the meanness of mankind" (Filmmaker's Library, 1985). Under the trees the small groups talked, laughed, and argued over current issues. But, most important, they learned.

As the women progressed, they began to realize the strength of their own abilities. They started to take responsibility for developing their own interests and gradually demanded a share of the school decision making. They developed their own governing body and insisted that their representatives take an active role in the school decisions. Their collective power resulted in the inclusion of black women in the program, and recommendations that women from all over the country be admitted (Fairchild & Hemley, 1939). Although some of the women continued as factory workers, all gained a sense of self-esteem and a love of learning. Hilda Smith (1941) wrote: "They wanted to learn more about the world outside their immediate sphere and to have some part in its control and destiny" (p. 182). In this they did succeed.

## The Significance

Merriam (1984) writes, "Exposure to, and study of, what others have thought about the purpose of adult education in our society and the nature of the activity leads to an examination of one's own values and how they might affect practice" (p. v.). For this reason, it is essential that adult educators, new to the field or experienced veterans, see the rich and varied history that truly represents the field.

A well-chronicled history not only establishes a heritage but acts as a foundation for future decisions. As historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1946) wrote, "It is not a dead past. By understanding it historically, we incorporate it into our present thought . . . and use that heritage for our own advancement" (p. 230).

The Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers provides rich examples to support the theories of instruction, curriculum, policy, and purposes of adult education. The women students were given the opportunity to share in the decisions affecting the curriculum, their life experiences were used as a basis for incorporating new learning, and the teachers were not only facilitators but co-learners in the process. The use of adult education as a vehicle for social change is well expressed in the story of these women, who were recruited "not with the idea of personal advancement but to acquire knowledge so that they may help their fellow women to a higher place" (Maddalena, 1978, p. 205).

Particularly unique about this story is the focus on women as adult students. Too often, success stories are about the leaders who teach, develop programs, or direct policy. A basic tenet of adult education is that the educators are facilitators who learn along with their students. If it is true that primary concern in adult education is for the interests and needs of learners, then there should be more stories that place the learners in the limelight and show their successes as contributions to the field. When we listen to their voices, these individuals become valued in their own right. How much we might learn if our history held the accounts of the students, not just the teachers. As Woloch (1984) writes, "The stage revolves and history has a different script. A new cast of characters appear . . . and exploring their experience brings into view a new spectrum of concerns" (p.5). These new concerns lead to new questions, and should encourage adult educators to critically scrutinize their own practice and attitudes.

Including the voices of ordinary people enriches our history. Anderson and Zinsser (1988) propose that history will become a true history of humanity which will benefit both men and women. They

write: "History can never be the same again" (p. xix). The Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers is not the only story that can be explored from a new perspective; it is essential that historical research become more than the compensatory filling in of a timeline. Researchers must use a critical approach to the history of adult education to ask new questions that explore socially constructed and maintained gender roles. As Collingwood (1946) writes: "Truth is to be had not by swallowing what our authorities tell us, but by criticizing it" (p. 243).

### Conclusion

The history of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers demonstrates that women played a key role as both students and educators, and contributed to adult education as a field of practice and a vehicle for social change. There are many stories of adult education that have yet to be told, however. Although compensatory historical research can provide a starting point for uncovering lost accounts, it can do little more than fill in gaps; critical historical research is essential to uncover the complex interrelationships of gender, race, and class.

We must ask new questions about the relationship between gender issues and the purposes of adult education. Gilligan (1982) writes, "As we have listened for centuries to the voices of men . . . so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak" (p. 173). How would the field of adult education be redefined by valuing new histories of women and minorities? How can we make our history reflect its culturally diverse past? What examples from the past can help us in our present-day decision making? Has adult education helped or restricted the advancement of women, minorities, and workers in society? Listening to the voices of women will open new perspectives on our heritage as adult educators.

Collingwood (1946) writes that "every new generation must re-write history in its own way; every historian, not content with giving new answers to old questions, must revise the questions themselves" (p. 248). That is now the challenge for adult educators.

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