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Empowering Mature Women Students in Higher Education

Abstract

In order to accommodate the large numbers of older women who are entering universities, institutions of higher education need to examine assumptions about how adults – particularly women students – learn. The distinctive life tasks of women reflect a particular need for self-fulfillment and gaining control over their lives. Inherent in the notion of control is empowerment. This study examines the concept of empowerment in the context of adult learning. A case study is used as an educational model which met the empowerment needs of a group of older women students.

Résumé

Pour accueillir les nombreuses femmes d'un certain âge qui entrent à l'université, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur doivent analyser les hypothèses qui circulent sur le processus d'apprentissage des adultes, surtout des femmes. L'autonomie fonctionnelle distinctive des femmes traduit chez elles le besoin de s'épanouir et de prendre leur vie en main. Le concept de pouvoir est inhérent à la notion de contrôle. Cette étude examine le concept de pouvoir dans le cadre de l'éducation permanente. Une étude de cas sert de modèle éducatif répondant aux besoins de pouvoir d'un groupe d'étudiantes d'un certain âge.

A significant challenge facing higher education over the past several years has been the influx into the classroom of older, or nontraditional, students. Of particular interest are the characteristics of this population and

the bearing that these characteristics have on learning needs (Cross, 1981). Since women 35 years of age and over comprise about 65% of the student population considered adult students (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979), there has been a plethora of research done on their specific characteristics, motivations for returning to school, and their support needs for entry and while they are students (Speer & Dorfman, 1986). However, there is little in the literature to substantiate women's actual learning needs while students and whether or not these needs are being addressed by higher education.

In an issue of *Convergence* devoted to "Women and Education," Margaret Gayfer (1980) points to the paucity of information concerning the assessment and evaluation of education programs for women. She urges the use of "case studies, descriptions of actual experiences, assessments of how and why women participate (or do not)" (p. 10) in order to identify knowledge gaps which assist in program planning. By using a case study to illustrate the concept of empowerment as need this article reports on an attempt to address these gaps by examining some of the characteristics of women students, 35 years and over, and their learning needs.

Although empowerment is an important concept in the context of adult learning, there is a very limited discussion of it in the higher education literature. A recent paper (Seebaran, 1989) offers an empowerment model in social service education which may be transferred to other settings. For purposes of this article, empowerment is defined as a multiphased process involving individual, group, and environmental change. Further elaboration of the meaning and implications of empowerment are discussed in more detail later. Finally, a case study is presented to illustrate the experiences of a group of older women students in a classroom setting.

Adult Education Theory

Adult learning theory informs us that learning needs flow from the characteristics of the student population. Adult educators' assumptions about learners have certainly had great impact on understandings of how the learners define themselves. Further, these self-definitions provide a general assessment of learning needs which have, to some extent, influenced classroom instruction. The response of higher education should be reflected in the approaches, strategies, and techniques employed to address these needs in the actual learning situation (Knowles, 1970, 1980). According to most adult educators, the adult learner's self-concept is that of being a doer and of being self-directed in decision-making (Brookfield, 1986; Kidd, 1973; Knowles, 1975). Probably the most salient concept is that the adult student largely defines self in terms of experience. In fact, Knowles (1980) says that experience is the person; an adult is what she or he has done. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that education for adults must be learner-centred

and learner-directed while building on their life experiences. One of the major criticisms leveled at higher education relative to adult students is the lack of credibility given to life experience and its relevance to academic study (Schlossberg, 1987).

Women as Learners

No existing typology differentiates between men and women as learners. Even the word Knowles uses to describe the process of adult learning, andragogy, has its roots in the teaching of males. Although Brookfield (1986) does not address gender differences, he points to limitations in the existing research on adult learning which can be applied to gender when he says "... we fall far too frequently into the mistake of declaring that research reveals that adults, in a generic sense, learn in a certain way" (p. 32). When the lives of women and men are examined it is evident that the contextual experience is quite different for each. Most men have been in the workforce without interruption since their late teens or early twenties while women have more fragmented careers due to childbearing and other family responsibilities.

Life cycle tasks and empowerment

In addition there has been a growing acceptance for some time that adulthood is a developmental period with its own transition points and crises (Havighurst, 1972; Knowles, 1970; Levinson, 1978). These kinds of events account for most adults seeking further education (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). The unique transition points for women which most often motivate a return to school are the "empty nest," widowhood, or divorce. More recently, Gilligan's (1982) hypothesis that relationships are of paramount importance to women, particularly in the area of decision-making, undoubtedly has implications for the education of women. Moreover, adult educators have talked at length about the process of learning and the importance of dialogue, reflection and action, and drawing on learners' experiences but have spoken solely to the needs of individuals. If the factors that shape most women's lives are unique, if their life experiences are different from those of men and if they do, as Gilligan (1982) says, speak in a different voice, it can be assumed that they also have unique learning needs which should inform the approaches, the strategies, and the methods used in the actual instructional setting.

The literature also stresses distinctive tasks which characterize the life of the returning woman student whose life course until this time has been mostly dictated by demands of family life and managing a home. She has a need to believe in her capabilities and potential as she constructs a new and separate identity (Hildreth, Dilworth-Anderson, & Rabe, 1983;

Kasworm, 1980) and establishes new social roles in family and society (Geisler & Thrush, 1975; Uhlenburg, 1979). Her changing self-perception frees and encourages her to function independently (Erdwins, Tyler, & Mellinger, 1982). At the same time, she has the need for having her previous knowledge and experience as homemaker recognized as valid and useful in the educational experience (Kelly, 1988).

The most important need articulated by many older women students is personal or self-fulfillment (Betz, 1982). Further research has shown that this cannot be separated from career goals and that personal fulfillment is often interpreted by older women students as having a life of one's own. The response of one married woman, in her late 40s, to the question of why she came back to university summarizes the recurrent theme of needing both a separate identity and a new direction which includes a career.

I felt that my life with all the children . . . was not in itself fulfilling enough One had already left the nest and I could foresee the others would leave in turn. I needed something other than looking after the house and my husband I wanted to do something that was fulfilling and also be in a position to earn my own living. (O'Brien & Poff, 1988)

Self-fulfillment means gaining control over one's own life and decisions. Inherent in the notion of control is empowerment so that by gaining control, women are empowered. Achieving more control and becoming empowered appear to be crucial and essential tasks for nontraditional women students. Learning should then be an empowering experience, particularly for women over the age of 35.

Empowerment Defined

Though questions of power and powerlessness have been a topic of research for many years (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Freire, 1985; Gaventa, 1980; Lukes, 1974; Seeman, 1966), the notion of empowerment has recently received increased attention from groups as divergent as educators, political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists. Adult educators and feminists have discussed such concepts for many years (Brookfield, 1986; Franklin, *et al.*, 1984; Freire, 1985; Lather, 1988; Stanley & Wise, 1979). Definitions of empowerment therefore vary enormously, though most regard it as a process (rather than a static state of being) involving different levels or phases from individual change to a group or collective emphasis, to an action phase involving organizational or institutional change (Cochran, 1986). For purposes of this paper, empowerment will be defined as:

...an interactive process through which less powerful people experience personal and social change, enabling them to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives and the communities in which they live.¹

In spite of the varying approaches to the discussion of empowerment, there are some common underlying assumptions. Individuals are assumed, for example, to understand their own needs better than anyone else (particularly the experts), and consequently they should have the power both to define and act upon them. A second assumption is that all people possess strengths upon which they can build. Third, the process of empowerment is assumed to be a lifelong endeavour; that is, people develop individually, socially, and politically throughout their lives. Perhaps the key assumption involves the importance of recognizing personal knowledge and experience as valid and useful in coping effectively with one's environment (Fernandes & Tandon, 1981; Freire, 1973; Hall, 1981; Participatory Research in Asia [PRIA], 1985; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Tandon, 1981).

At each level, empowerment involves certain actions or components which constitute the empowerment process. Table 1 (see page 310) summarizes the phases and specific components of that process.

At the individual level, virtually all writers refer to self-confidence, feelings of self-efficacy, or a sense of self-worth as being important to the individual empowerment process. Most also include the acquisition of knowledge and skills, or a learning process involving these. Some cite data indicating that individual productivity improves when people genuinely participate in decision making (Barr *et al.*, 1984).

Many researchers discuss the importance of "mediating structures" in the process of empowerment. These structures include family and neighbourhood ties, the community, and other group situations which serve to link individuals with the larger context (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Rappoport, 1981). Social support networks reinforce personal growth and feelings of competence and also provide supports for action. Cooperative action enhances the sense of belonging as do positive personal relationships among participants. As those involved learn to reflect critically and to give and receive feedback, mutual trust and cohesiveness are likely to be strengthened.

Certain elements which could be called empowering make up action directed towards change at levels beyond personal and group spheres. Participants may be able to exert influence on key individuals or institutions affecting their lives or change the way they understand and experience power.

Table 1***Phases and Specific Components of Empowerment***

Phase of Empowerment	Specific Component
Individual	Self-confidence, feelings of efficacy, and self-worth Learning (knowledge and skills) Productivity
Group	Reinforcement of self-confidence; efficacy Sense of belonging Interpersonal relationships Trust Group cohesiveness Collective analysis and reflection
Environmental/action	Increased resources Publicity Accountability Raised expectations Organizational growth; learning

Participant support for a program or organization increases its base of human resources. Publicity can be used to present recommendations or voice concerns about funding reductions. Accountability may be a key link between participation and use of evaluation results. If participants are in control of the process and do not then use the results to take action, they cannot blame the expert for misrepresenting the situation (Gaventa, personal communication, 1985). As people work together to change structural barriers to their mutual goals, expectations are raised about what could be accomplished. Their collective energy and interest is more difficult for administrators to ignore. Finally, as differing perspectives have a legitimate role to play in the process of decision-making, organizations will be able to develop and grow. (For an expanded discussion of the phases of empowerment, see Whitmore, 1988.)

Case Example of Empowerment of Women Learners

The authors recently structured a practicum on qualitative research for older women. One of the goals was an attempt to facilitate their empowerment. The substance of the course consisted of qualitative research methodology – design, data collection, analysis, and write-up. Eight women, ranging in age from late 30s to early 70s, met twice a week for two and one-half hours over a period of six weeks. The profiles of these women were typical of nontraditional older women students. Six of them were divorced, one was widowed, and all were in the workforce. They saw university attendance as a means of self-fulfillment as well as upgrading their skills. During the early part of the course they learned the basic theories and application of a qualitative research approach. The emphasis in class was on participation and interaction, especially in encouraging students to solve problems they encountered and to develop and value their own learning styles. This stimulated self-disclosure which aided in class team-building and engendered in students attitudes of self-respect and an increased ability to listen to others and interpret what they were saying. An effort was made at all times to allow for students' input in how to proceed and essentially to work at their pace.

One assignment in particular, given in preparation for doing data analysis, drew on the personal experiences of each woman. It was one of the means for them to gain self-awareness and a sense of personal uniqueness, while furthering understanding that there is a universality to human experience. This awareness is a strong prerequisite for doing qualitative data analysis. Students were asked to write a one-page description of a favourite play space they had in childhood, including how this place looked, why it was important to them, and what feelings they now had about this place. They then analyzed their stories for specific themes (location and size of space, others who may have shared the space, how it was used, feelings associated with the space). This exercise not only accented and affirmed for each woman the personal and contextual characteristics and needs of her use of space, but enabled her to identify similarities and differences between each person's play space description. Students later employed their skills of analysis when they thematized and described the data from interviews they conducted as part of the major class assignment.

The major assignment, that each person interview three women who had graduated from the same university after the age of 35, allowed students to pull together previous learnings and test out their application to the life situations of other women. Most importantly, it gave each woman the opportunity to contrast her own life experiences with those of the interviewee and, in many cases, affirm her personal perceptions.

Evidence of participants' empowerment

To what extent did the women in the course experience or demonstrate empowerment? At the end of the course and again two months later in a follow-up interview with the group, a series of questions related to all three phases of empowerment were asked. Table 2 summarizes their responses.

Table 2***Empowerment as Experienced by Participants in the Qualitative Research Practicum***

Phase of Empowerment	Specific Component
Individual	Self-esteem; confidence -validation of one's own experience Knowledge/skills -listening and communication -identifying pertinent information; abstraction Self-awareness Productivity
Group	Group cohesion Sense of belonging -importance of personal sharing -importance of teaching style Collective analysis and reflection
Environmental/action	Increased resources (improved skill on the job) Search for employment Reaching out to strangers

Individual: In response to the question "In what ways have you benefited individually from participating in this project?", the women indicated enhanced self-esteem and confidence, increased knowledge and skills, greater self-awareness, and a sense of productivity. For example, indicating increased feelings of self worth, one woman said, "I was in a transition stage of my life and was 'down'. This experience let me know I'm

OK; the person I used to be." In the follow-up interview, another stated, "In looking for another job, my approach is different because I feel more positive about me and the things I can do . . . I can do lots of things and just never gave myself credit." The lack of confidence which many mature women feel when entering university is captured by the statement made by one student in this group: "When I started, I was insecure. I figured others were professionals, or in school (university) longer than me. But they are just ordinary people with the same hang-ups. It takes away some of the self-doubt." The self-confidence also emerged from a question about negatives or "costs" for individual participants. "I was quite intimidated by having to do interviews . . . I had to confront my own fears. I thought I had it under control, but had to work hard to motivate myself."

When asked about knowledge or skills they felt that they acquired, all participants reported gains. Most felt that their interviewing skills had improved, for example. "I listened differently, not only to what but how they said something." They also agreed that they had learned to listen better. "I hear what people are saying, not what I want to hear." Most also learned how to identify pertinent information and to abstract ideas from discussions of concrete experience. This was summed up by one person who, when asked "what did you like best?", responded that she gained the "ability to delve into (information) and get the most out of it." This included an ability to be critical, as suggested by a group member who said, "I'm skeptical about statistics now. I realize that it's not the whole story. There is a need for more depth. I realize the importance of face to face contact." Another added, "I'll always question surveys. People's answers can change from the written to the verbal."

Greater self-awareness was evident in a variety of ways. All felt that the playspace exercise was key in this regard, for their own analysis of that memory told them a lot about themselves. The content and pace of the course offered a reflective tone. "In the course, I had time to think about myself. Now I'm not so hyper, strung out," was how one participant expressed it. Several members of the group noted their increased comfort with silence in an interview or even in daily conversation. "I'm not afraid of silence. I sit and wait. Before I used to prattle and now I don't need to fill the void."

In some instances, productivity, especially on the job, was enhanced as well. "At work when I have to read a lengthy policy statement, I can pick out the pertinent parts more easily; whereas before, I would have read the whole thing through several times (which would have taken much more time)." Others felt that the informality of the class helped them "have more input and therefore more output."

Group: It was clearly evident from both actions and words that the group became quite cohesive, in spite of the range of ages and experience. They called one another on the telephone for advice or support and, over time, have maintained contact with one another. "We cared. Something broke the ice. It was strange to share personal stuff, but I did. There was trust, no backbiting. . . ." One person suggested that "it was good to work as a group. I could share myself and felt very comfortable. No one was afraid to admit confusion," adding "I felt I belonged." She added that "the playspace exercise brought us closer, especially analyzing each other's material." Another important ingredient in this sense of belonging was the teaching style used by the professors. It was a learning experience for the professors, and each person in the group had something to contribute in terms of personal experience, knowledge, and skills. The professors also shared their own personal experience in addition to delivering the specific, substantive material of the course. One student put it this way: "The professors didn't set themselves apart. It was a mutual teaching and learning experience." Another added, "I didn't feel like a child in school. I was not conscious of learning; it just happened."

The collective analysis and reflection added to group cohesion in that they could recognize common experiences and feelings. "I feel differently about me (because I realize that) I'm not the only one (experiencing something)." Members not only enjoyed sharing their knowledge but felt that the small size of the group allowed for much more interaction and discussion. No one could remain silent and participants were pushed in their thinking; "I was not embarrassed to say I didn't know or ask questions or express my opinion. In a larger group, it would be too embarrassing."

It is important to note that the experience reported by women who were interviewed served to validate the experience of class members as mature students in a university setting. Students found that the data were applicable to their own lives, and they could readily identify with the feelings and experience of the respondents. In affirming their own experience, it reduced their sense of isolation as well as building their self-confidence and awareness.

Action: There was considerable evidence that class members made concrete use of the knowledge and skills learned in the course. When asked, "Are there ways you have used the material or this experience outside of class?" most described specific activities. Those with jobs involving interviews with people reported that they utilized their new skills and were pleased with the results. For example, one person employed as a supervisor in a nursing home stated that there was a definite difference in the types of questions she asked in interviewing staff. The questions had more depth, and she obtained more information. "I ask people how they feel about things,

their opinions. Before, my questions were much more superficial." Another added that in interviewing for a newsletter at her job, "The skills have become part of me, especially listening. Now I talk less, let the respondent talk more."

Group members were able to transfer the teaching style modeled in this class to other contexts. For example, one person indicated that she had changed her approach to staff and volunteer training (in a Palliative Care Unit at a nursing home). "I put less emphasis on the delivery of information and more on 'how do they feel (about their jobs),' and 'why are they doing this?' I look at the process of care (from the patient's point of view) vs. merely from the staff's view. (I spend more time) answering their questions, as people. I will also be more selective in (recruiting) course participants, will listen more to why people want to take the (training) course."

One woman had just moved to a new community and was seeking employment. In the follow-up interview, she stated enthusiastically, "I had five (job) interviews in one day. Before this course, I would never have done that and presented myself with confidence. The water would have been dripping off of me. My usual approach would have been to have been early and sit in the car and sweat. Then I would go in (to the interview) and be a wreck. This course was a real confidence builder. I felt really good." She added that, in her job search, she had also telephoned her MP and asked for an introduction to the MLAs from the county, something that she never would have done before.

Later, this same person talked about meeting new people in the community and described her first social event. "I feel I'm being tested in this new community. Before, I would have stayed home (from a party of younger, local women) or stayed for only a short time. This time, I stayed for a long time and really enjoyed it. Later, in a conversation with one of the women, she said, "I really 'passed the test.' This is a real change for me!"

Conclusions

This case study responds to Gayfer's call for more information about why adult women participate in educational programs and how programs can best be structured to meet their needs. It also confirms Betz's conclusions about the importance of personal fulfillment, and O'Brien and Poff's research highlighting women's need for autonomy. From the data in this case example, it is also clear that personal interaction and sharing with others is of prime importance for women in the learning context. As stated earlier, the life experience and motivations of adult women in returning to school

are quite different from men's and therefore lead to differing needs in the learning context. Students' need for empowerment, though certainly valid in all learning contexts, is manifested for adult women especially in terms of personal fulfillment and group interaction. The size of the group and the structure of the learning experience assisted participants in changing their self-perception and building a sense of competence. Many women who are returning to university are in a transition phase. A traditional university course delivers substantive knowledge, but the mature woman student needs an empowering process to make the best use of that knowledge.

Has involvement in this course empowered the women who participated? The initial assessment is yes, at all three levels, though particularly at the individual and group levels. If one assumes that self-esteem and confidence are basic building blocks for action at other levels, then the women in this group made a very important beginning. Discussions of the role of women learners in a patriarchal system set such gains in a feminist context. In terms of expanding and enriching their social support networks, the friendships made among them are strong and likely to endure. Contact with the women they interviewed not only enriched their personal experience but also enhanced their sense of belonging to a larger movement. At the environmental level, empowerment occurred primarily in terms of individual (rather than collective) action.

Some of the components in this example corroborated earlier studies (Whitmore, 1988), notably at the individual and group levels. Definitions within individual categories, such as self-esteem/confidence, are expanded to include validation of one's own experience. Similarly, the acquisition of knowledge and skills are defined more specifically as listening and communication, and being able to abstract meaning from concrete data. In terms of group empowerment, importance of personal sharing helps define "sense of belonging" more clearly. Of particular significance for educational settings is the question of teaching style and how important this is in the empowering process. At the environmental level, action primarily involved application on the job of what participants had gained. Thus, the increased confidence and knowledge/skills, developed at the individual level, translated directly into improved performance at work. It also resulted in a more assertive search for employment. Finally, one woman's increased confidence and her group experience in the course allowed her to reach out more comfortably to strangers in a new community.

In most discussions of empowerment, action at the environmental level assumes a collective exercise involving a cohesive group and a common purpose beyond the immediate task. The implication is that direct collective action is the only, or at least the most desirable, model. This may well reflect a more male model of what constitutes "real" action (Maguire,

1987). Women are likely to be more comfortable in smaller groups or taking action at a quieter, more individual level. Such a conclusion confirms an earlier finding (Whitmore, 1989) that our understanding of action at the environmental level needs to be broadened to include the value of action taken by individuals. Indeed, the great strength of the women's movement has been in its actions by individual women in their own lives and in small group interaction and consciousness raising. To be effective, of course, such actions must clearly be linked to a feminist analysis and an understanding of the context of male domination.

Questions for further research certainly involve the empowerment needs of women and men. Are they different? If so, how? As noted earlier, women have a strong need for confidence-building and relationships, and though men need these as well, the emphasis given them, especially in the learning context, is likely to be different when one talks about certain components of empowerment.

In this study, there is clear evidence that the participants felt empowered and could offer specific examples of how this occurred at all levels. This example adds more detailed information about what empowerment means and what specific components actually constitute the empowerment process. Most importantly, perhaps, new dimensions have been addressed in the discussion of empowerment at the environmental level and the definition of action. The tentative conclusions here need to be examined further in the context of other case studies.

Universities seeking to attract mature women students need to seriously consider their unique learning needs. This implies a heightened consciousness of process in the classroom and how the learning experience is structured. University teachers need to be aware of adult education principles and their application but, in addition, these same principles have to be examined in light of gender differences. With Gayfer (1980) we can conclude that "the new kind of learning for women is to create and validate their own knowledge, to rethink the concepts inherited by men, and to take on this challenge as a widely-encompassing and genuinely radical form of adult education" (p. 8).

NOTE

1. This definition is drawn primarily from Cochran's work, with some modification.

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