

WHOSE LIFELONG LEARNING?

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ABSTRACT

The construction of what is perceived as merit within Western society is largely determined by male values. Women's skills are not being given the same value as men's. For women, education can enhance acknowledgment of their capabilities, even though these capabilities are constrained by the male culture. Through an examination of the English program offered by the Women into Science and Technology (WIST) course we will reveal how the experiences of women can be correlated with this masculine system of values, thus making their skills marketable and attuned to the meritorious systems of lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

While the roles that men and women adopt within society have changed historically and continue to change, the skills that women acquire within the domestic sphere are still not given any value in the commercial world. This is due primarily to the way merit is determined within Western society, because the basic premise of merit has not shifted. Merit is still based on productivity and marketability within the public sphere. The result is that women do not recognize, nor are they being given credit for, the skills that they acquire in their roles as mothers and home managers. We would argue that such skills can be correlated with the skills that are given value in our society, and that lifelong learning for women should be directed towards acquiring educational credibility for those skills.

For women to have access to both the job market and educational facilities, they are forced to adapt to the values of the systems of merit that, we will argue, are predominantly masculine. While this disadvantages women and disregards their different knowledge, it does allow them agency and access to economic security.

Our focus will be on the Women into Science and Technology (WIST) enabling course that prepares women for entry into tertiary education. The English program, *Communication Pathways into University*, which, though primarily designed to instruct on the concepts and principles of essay writing, also raises women's awareness of the abilities they have, and changes their perception of the skills that they have acquired in their domestic roles. The English program provides evidence of these changes through student's responses taken from questions on feedback sheets.

Firstly, an examination and critique of the current systems of merit is undertaken to explore the question of gender neutrality. Questions need to be raised about the evaluation of life experiences and whose life experiences are valued. Can a housewife or domestic manager enter into non-traditional programs such as mathematics, science, computing, and engineering? Are her skills, skills gained in the domestic or private sphere, enough to give her access? What value system is operating here? Secondly, the value of women's skills, gained in the private sector, will be situated within the current systems of merit.

MERIT SYSTEM

Women's knowledge is perceived to be derived from the "'private' domestic, intimate, and personal lived experience" (Edwards, & Ribbens, 1998, p 1). Despite affirmative action rhetoric, this is still mainly the case because, as Sargent (1994, p 105) argues, women are still seen as primarily responsible for child care and domestic responsibilities. This view is shared by Birke (1986, p 186), who places those responsibilities within the private domain, an area that is not given any value in today's society. The distinction between the public and the private domains is by no means rigid. Edwards & Ribbens (1998) discovered that "people's perceptions of what constitutes public and private shift" (p 88). Nevertheless, as these two researchers found, there is a constant tension between "the differing socially constructed value basis of 'family' (for women) and 'education,' and what constitutes 'knowledge' and 'being' in each sphere" (p 7).

If the concept of 'lifelong learning' is gender neutral then women's knowledge should be included and given equal value with that of men's. Yet according to Edwards & Ribbens (1998) this knowledge is not really understood nor is it

"accorded significance within the mainstream" (p 5) and "pushed out to the edge of public concern" (p 2). 'Academic research', on the other hand, is "theoretical, conceptual and formal [and is] located ... predominantly [in the] 'public' and malestream" (p 1). Women's ways of knowing are therefore ignored within systems of merit which are determined largely by patriarchal discourses.

According to Harding (1998) neoclassical economics are driving the system of meritocracy within educational institutions and are the "predominant paradigm in the West" (p 114). Under this system, although workers are led to believe that talent and hard work will gain them promotion, what really happens is that the workers become part of the production and are controlled and manipulated. Harding (1998) suggests that what is promoted is a marriage between individualism and the idea of meritocracy (p 114). If the individual performs well, they will be awarded and their learned skills will acquire merit. This works on the assumption that everyone is equal, and ignores differences such as gender, class, ethnicity, and race. The marginalisation of these disadvantaged voices within both the workplace and the education sector is well documented (see Harding, 1998; Standing, 1998).

As Harding (1998) argues, "our universities aggregate around a particular prospective ... the application of the concept of merit to drive recruitment" (p 113). The concept of merit that is employed currently is quite narrow as it is based on neoclassical economics that drives a merit-based solution (Harding, 1998, p 113). This view is shared by Clifford, et al (1998) who state; "most disciplines have developed within male dominated institutions" (p 479), which in turn allots merit or value. "Curricula define and form what is important for students to know. Implicit within curricula are assumptions about what knowledge or skills are important" (Clifford et al., 1998, p 478). Women, therefore, are placed in a disadvantaged position because their life experiences are outside the current merit system.

The adoption of 'lifelong learning', then, is still really only promoting masculine skills and abilities and could be seen as an "institutional validation of dominant constructions of knowledge" (Clifford, et al., 1998, p 478). Women and girls, in increasing numbers, are being wooed by the three levels of the education system to venture or at least consider the non-traditional areas of study – things like mathematics, science, computing, and engineering, but no real cultural change has occurred in these disciplines (Wooller, & Warner, 1999, p 37). Any attempt therefore, to "creat[e] an education relevant

to the personal lives and concerns of students" (Clifford, et al., 1998, p 477) needs to extend to include abilities and skills that are acquired within the private sector to level the 'playing field'.

EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Educational facilities have adopted the catch phrase 'lifelong learning' as a form of recruitment. Life experiences and skills can now be used to gain access to degree courses. Previously, entry was determined by educational qualifications which excluded a large number of the population. Among the disadvantaged groups were women, many of who had not done year twelve or senior. Yet, in many cases, women's skills and life experiences are not seen as useful in terms of entry into further education.

The utilization of lifelong learning in this way, it could be argued, is an extension of the old Protestant work ethic. This ethic, according to Max Weber, was encouraged and supported by the emergence of capitalism (Robertson, 1977, p 406). The principals of capitalism are firstly, "acquisitiveness, an orientation in which persons seek continuously to possess more material things" (Waters & Crook, 1994, p 538). People, therefore, sell their labour to acquire these material things. Weber, according to Waters & Crook (1994, p 537), was seeking to explain why people continually sought wealth. The sociologists Waters & Crook (1994, p 539) argue that Weber linked capitalism and the Protestant work ethic. The capitalists, or the owners of the means of production, required a large labour force to run their production lines. The Protestant work ethic promoted through the churches guaranteed this. With the swing away from industrialisation by the advanced technologies, the impetus has swung towards education.

The promotion of 'lifelong learning', then, helps to ensure that people are on a continual learning curve. Experience alone will not necessarily gain material wealth or positions in the job market. In many cases, certificates and degrees have become the indicators for the work force. In fact, the appropriation of the concept of 'lifelong learning' by educational and training agencies thus ensures, particularly for universities, an ever-increasing clientele as individuals are on a treadmill chasing knowledge. The current promotion of diversity in the workplace also ensures a never-ending search for skills that can only be acquired at the above institutions.

'Lifelong learning' became the catchcry of the late 20th century and will continue to be promoted in

the 21st, but whose life long learning are we talking about here? Women's lifelong learning experiences are still not seen, particularly in the non-traditional areas of science and technology, as valuable enough to gain them entry in university degree courses. Viewed, however, from different perspectives, their skills can be equated with those promoted by the current merit system

WOMEN INTO SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The Women into Science and Technology (WIST) program, funded by Central Queensland University, was developed specifically to raise women's awareness that the skills that they acquired in the private sphere have credibility within the masculine merit system. Resource material was selected which focused on the social construction of the gender roles and the devaluing of their role within society and disciplinary areas. Students in this course are encouraged to realise the value of their skills – skills, that when looked at from different perspectives, are equivalent to those that are given value within the public sphere and universities.

The flagship of the WIST program, *Communication Pathways into University*, was also designed deliberately to address a number of barriers that women face when returning to study (Warner, 1993, pp 86-87). Among those identified by the Director of the WIST program, are attitudinal problems associated with the social construction of the gender roles. These include negative attitudes associated with women returning to study, traditional role expectations, and conservative values. These barriers may not all be recognised as such. Parr (1998, p 97) believes that women just see them as part of returning to study.

The negative attitudes come not only from society, but also from women themselves, and not only in relation to women returning to study (Lucardie, (1994, p 111). Despite much legislation, social beliefs have not really changed. Women's abilities are still seen as inferior to men's, resulting in extremely low self-esteem. Because women are seen to be operating primarily in the domestic sector, despite a large increase in the numbers of women in the workforce, their skills and abilities acquired in the private sphere are still not given any real value. This attitude is also evident when 'lifelong learning' is examined.

Responses, taken from feedback sheets sent in by students studying *Communication Pathways into University*, reveal a change in attitudes by the women undergoing this course. One student stated,

"It is about giving value to the skills we possess in a way that is seen of merit by society."

Many women believe, although they are raising children and managing households, that they are unintelligent. As one student stated, "I have always been led to believe that I was not overly intelligent or academically gifted." Another, who started a Bachelor of Secondary Teaching some years ago and did not finish, commented, "I didn't feel clever enough to finish the course." Many, after they actually take that first big step to enrol in the WIST course make comments like, "Never feeling (sic) intelligent enough to go back to study as a mature age student ... wanting to do study but not the confidence to start."

Social attitudes that are still prevalent see the further education of women as a waste of both time and money. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, at times, family and friends are not supportive or encouraging. Many students comment on the question that is invariably asked, "What so you want to study for? You won't be able to handle the work or get a job at the end of it. You are too old." Remarks like this are evidence that women are still locked into the private sector. and not accorded the abilities and skills that are seen as valuable by the merit system. As Lucardie (1994, p 111) comments, "Women attempting to study found that lack of encouragement by family and friends, and a lack of community and social support, left them isolated."

This applies as well in rural and regional areas where values are still very conservative: where the women's place is in the private realm. At the same time, the women's skills and abilities are being utilised on the farm, with women taking on more and more of the actual farm labour. This is supported by the comment made in an article in the *Weekend Australian* where Matthews (1999) states, "we have lost respect ... for non-vocational learning and qualifications" (p 20).

Communication Pathways into University helps women to realise that the non-vocational skills they have are of value and can be utilised when they seek further education or apply for jobs. With encouragement and support they can build on and reassess their potential. As one woman stated, "the skills I have learnt – cooking, sewing, organising a muster even though I do them automatically are actually skills to be a little bit proud of."

The course encourages women to think positively about their lives and the tasks that they perform everyday, to assess the strategies that they use in order to do these tasks, and to use them in order to study. Many discover that these mundane tasks

require a large number of skills, skills which are perceived as valuable within the meritorious system. Time management, organisational skills, logic and rational thought, budgeting, team work, and lateral thinking are all utilised when managing a household, but because society gives no value to skills acquired in the private sphere they are seen to have no merit. These mundane 'life experiences' are outside mainstream public credibility. As one woman stated, "I didn't realise how much I already use this (sic) techniques."

The skills are there, and through self-analysis and a different perspective, women can be made aware of their abilities, and realise they are not unintelligent. "I realised that I am a whole lot smarter than I thought I was," said one woman. For some women this is a revelation. Comments such as, "My life turned upside down"; "Studying Communication Pathways has been a wonderful experience for me"; "I had no idea what an impact this would make on my life"; are all very gratifying. Certainly, some women's self esteem increased, which helped them to study.

CONCLUSION

In practical and economic terms it is beneficial for women to realise that the skills acquired through their domestic roles have value, and can be equated with those skills within the masculine meritorious system. By encouraging women to fit into the traditional male-oriented system, however, are we not perpetuating the way we give credence to life experiences? Should we disregard those other ways of knowing; thereby subjugating diversity, making everything and everyone fit into a value system that marginalises those that do not conform? While, it could be argued, these are grounds for resistance to the system, in practical terms, for economic survival, women are forced to conform.

While the division between the public and private domains is fraught with problems, and shifts depending on locality and circumstances, at the moment, the public is still very much controlled by masculine values. The curricula within the education sector, which give value to ways of knowing, still relies on masculine discourses. To fit into this system means that valuable knowledge is being ignored because it is outside the barriers set by neoclassic economics of merit. Under these conditions the promotion of 'lifelong learning' ignores the value of the life experiences of a large section of society.

The WIST program, by raising women's awareness of the value of the skills that they have acquired in the domestic sphere, gives them access to educational areas traditionally denied them. With

this knowledge, pressure can be put on the system for change.

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LEARNING, TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION SERVICE DELIVERY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The challenges facing the higher education sector are directly impacting on services provided by libraries. This paper examines CQU Library's response to the challenges by developing a sustainable information literacy program and review services to clients

INTRODUCTION

"To teach a man how he may learn to grow independently, and for himself, is perhaps the greatest service that one man can do another." (Benjamin Jowett, quoted in Borenstein, 1997)

This quotation from Jowett perhaps best sums up the approach Central Queensland University Library has adopted in relation to lifelong learning. Assisting our users to become independent learners during and beyond university. The library is one of the major proponents of lifelong learning and information literacy within the university.

Central Queensland University is a multi-campus, distance education provider, with commercial operations in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane for international students living in Australia. The university also has a campus in Fiji as well as operations in parts of Asia. Courses are taught in the traditional face-to-face mode, by interactive videoconferencing, by print-based distance education, and online. Students can study by one or all of these modes during the course of their student life.

An obvious challenge for the library is to promote lifelong learning through the development of information literacy skills and concepts in students regardless of mode of study, location, time zone, or technology. The other major challenge for the library is providing an equitable library and information service to our students. Meeting these challenges in the modern higher education environment is no easy task.

The modern university environment is vastly different to the days of old. Ellingsen (1999 p 31) comments that universities are "trapped between tradition and turning education into a paying business. In an era when government funds just half the \$8.5 billion cost of tertiary education, vice-chancellors have become obsessed with efficiency". Duderstadt (1999), although

commenting on the United States higher education system, observes,

"To meet growing societal demand for higher education at a time when costs are increasing and public support is declining, most institutions have been forced to sharply increase tuition fees, triggering public concern about the costs and availability of a college education. As a result most colleges and universities are now looking for ways to control costs and increase productivity..." (p 3).

Not only is there a financial imperative for universities, but there is also a financial imperative for individuals. As increasingly more students are now paying fees to study, and universities are fiercely competing for their custom, their rights and power as consumers increases. Global Alliance Limited (1997, p 11) in their commissioned report for the West Review, see a power shift to consumers that will be expressed in a number of ways including price competition, a wider range of choices, and greater flexibility in delivery.

As an integral component of a university, the library is faced with the need to become more productive and to lower unit costs. A number of universities have outsourced technical service functions entirely, while others have developed 'partnerships' with commercial suppliers. While libraries, such as my own, have limited opportunities for obtaining external revenue, the focus is constantly on cost control. The rights and demands of students as consumers are also experienced by CQU Library in relation to the availability of material, the quality of service they receive, and library policies and practice.

Societal need for learning and training is one of the core drivers of lifelong learning. Blustein et al, (1999) refer to this aspect of educating people as retooling people for new careers as they suggest