

MARGINALIZED NON-TRADITIONAL ADULT LEARNERS: BEYOND ECONOMICS¹

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Abstract

Changing demographics and patterns of higher education participation in many countries, including Canada, have prompted a growing interest in improving access for non-traditional adult learners. This paper focuses on the results of a research study funded by the Canadian Council on Learning that profiles 71 learners in three Canadian university-level Radical Humanities programs designed for low-income people. Four thematic areas explore the barriers and supports that impact students' ability to access post-secondary education: (1) barriers to further education, (2) concept of self as learner, (3) learning space, and (4) role of the humanities. This paper argues that while poverty limits educational participation, a greater challenge is posed for marginalized non-traditional adult learners by complex relationships among economic and non-material barriers that limit their agency. Effectively increasing post-secondary participation rates for marginalized non-traditional adult learners cannot be achieved by addressing economic issues alone but by addressing the structural nature and impact of inter-related economic and non-material barriers.

Résumé

Le changement des données démographiques et des modèles de participation à l'enseignement supérieur dans beaucoup de pays, y compris le Canada, ont éveillé un intérêt croissant en l'amélioration de l'accès pour des apprenants adultes

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non-traditionnels. Cet article se concentre sur les résultats d'une recherche, financée par le Conseil canadien de l'apprentissage, analysant les portraits de 71 apprenants au niveau universitaire canadien dans trois programmes de Sciences Humaines Radicales conçus pour les gens à faible revenu. Quatre voies thématiques explorent les barrières et les soutiens ayant un impact sur la capacité des étudiants d'avoir accès à l'enseignement post-secondaire. Ces voies comprennent a) des barrières à la formation continue, b) le concept du moi comme apprenant, c) l'étude de l'espace et d) le rôle des lettres et sciences humaines. Cet article soutient que, tandis que la pauvreté limite la participation éducative, une barrière plus grande pour les apprenants adultes marginalisés non-traditionnels est posée par des relations complexes parmi les barrières économiques et immatérielles qui limitent leur interaction. Effectivement l'augmentation du taux de participation postsecondaire pour des apprenants adultes non-traditionnels marginalisés ne peut pas être réalisée en abordant uniquement les questions économiques, mais en étudiant aussi la nature structurelle et l'impact réciproques des barrières économiques et immatérielles.

Introduction

For the first time something hit home that I have a passion for and I think, I think this class awakened that passion. It awakened the desire that you know there's more to it than what's on the surface and I want to know what there's more to. (Carolyn)

I'm starting to open, open up, and can't get enough of anything. I'm actually always, almost always smiling now, because I just, I want so much. (Susan)

For the past six years, low-income adult learners like the two women quoted above have gathered in university-level humanities programs across Canada to grapple with courses in literature, Eastern religions, and contemporary issues in ethics, and to explore topics such as assimilation, residential schools, and community development. While this subject matter is typical of university programs, for this group of learners it is far less common than the short-term basic vocational or training programs usually proscribed for low-income people (Cunningham, 1993). Yet, as evidenced by the quotes, students living below the poverty line have found studies in the humanities to be relevant and often life-changing, shifting their concepts of themselves as poor and unfit learners to active learners abundant in the riches of knowledge. Paradoxically, it is by both addressing and moving beyond economic constraints that such humanities programs are able to reduce barriers to learning for marginalized non-traditional adult learners.

This article focuses on the results of a research study funded by the Canadian Council on Learning that profiles 71 learners in three Canadian university-level Radical Humanities programs designed for low-income people. The article argues that while poverty limits educational participation, a greater challenge is posed for marginalized non-traditional adult learners by complex relationships among economic and non-material barriers that limit their agency. Effectively increasing post-secondary participation rates

for marginalized non-traditional adult learners cannot be achieved by addressing economic issues alone but by addressing the structural nature and impact of interrelated economic and non-material barriers.

Relevant Literature

Canadian humanities programs grew from an idea developed by journalist and social critic Earl Shorris (2000). After researching the face of poverty across the United States and talking to people about what they thought it would take them to get out of a life of poverty, Shorris was convinced that the study of the humanities provides a powerful pathway for disenfranchised adults to access a more civil and just society. Convinced about the connection between accessing a humanities education and repelling the effects of poverty, Shorris inaugurated the Clemente Course in downtown New York in 1995, beginning with Plato and philosophy and embracing a Great Books curriculum through the framework of Socratic dialogue. Since then, Shorris's Clemente Course has inspired similar programs across Canada, Mexico, the United States, Korea, Australia, and Sudan. While each program is unique in its design, all share a common premise, drawn from Shorris's work, on the value of the humanities: "The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you" (Shorris, 1997, p. 6).

Our experience working in the Calgary program—Tara Hyland-Russell as an instructor and working committee member and Janet Groen as a long-time working committee member—exposed us to powerful changes experienced by learners in humanities programs; often students were profoundly moved by their university learning, despite daily challenges they faced with poverty. At the time of our study (between fall 2006 and fall 2008), 10 programs were operational across Canada from Victoria to Halifax. Though the Canadian programs were based to some extent on Shorris's vision, a dialogue between Shorris, the Canadian program developers, and students² demonstrated the need to capture clearly through nomenclature the essential features of the Canadian programs that differentiate them from the Clemente model. To mark the unique elements of the Canadian programs, their rootedness in the humanities, and the radical nature (Giroux, 1992; Jackson, 1997) of their educational goals to counter marginalizing social forces, we coined the term *Radical Humanities* (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2010).

2 In October 2008, we convened *Radical Humanities: A Coast-to-Coast Symposium* in Calgary. Program planners and students from all 10 Canadian programs attended a panel discussion featuring Earl Shorris, and subsequent dialogue among the more than 70 participants revealed that there were more differences than similarities between the Canadian programs and Shorris's Clemente model. As a whole, the symposium participants decided to refer to their programs using the terminology we had chosen for the symposium: *Radical Humanities*.

Defining the Non-Traditional Adult Learner

Use of the term *non-traditional adult learner* varies widely according to context, country, institution, policy, and demographic and enrolment patterns. In the United States, traditional students into the 1970s were typically between their late teens and early 20s, entered higher education immediately following high school, attended college or university full-time, and were financially dependent on family (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). By 1999–2000, the NCES reported that, according to these criteria, a full 73% of undergraduates were in some way non-traditional. Acknowledging that “the term ‘non-traditional student’ is not a precise one,” the NCES defined non-traditional students as having at least one of the following characteristics: they delay enrolment after high school; attend school part-time; work more than 35 hours a week; are financially independent; have dependents other than a spouse; are single parents; and/or lack a high school diploma, though may have a GED or other high school equivalency.

Though this definition describes the non-traditional adult learners who have managed to navigate entry into post-secondary study and who, for the most part, complete their education, it does not capture the students who are unable to access post-secondary learning due to a range of economic and non-material barriers. The Canadian Council on Learning’s definition of the under-represented non-traditional adult learner comes closer to the learners in our study. The *Report on Learning in Canada 07: Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Strategies for Success* (2007) identified under-represented non-traditional adult learners as “students from low-income families” (p. 12), “older students, recent immigrants, people with disabilities and Aboriginal people” (p. 7). Scheutze and Slowey (2002) found that economic and social barriers are associated with non-traditional adult learners who fall into the following categories:

socially or educationally disadvantaged...working class backgrounds, particular ethnic minority groups, immigrants, and, in the past, frequently women...older or adult students with a vocational training and work experience background, or other students with unconventional educational biographies. (pp. 312–313)

Although these descriptions more closely describe the students in Radical Humanities programs, they still do not give a complete understanding of the ways in which these students are disadvantaged through a range of barriers to learning that, while connected to economic factors, are not limited to economics. Ecclestone (2007) reminds us of the close connections among identity, agency, and structure and urges researchers to pay close attention to how structural elements affect students’ ability to participate in education: “Agency cannot therefore be divorced from structural factors since key social divisions shape opportunities for access to economic, social and symbolic forms of capital, thereby framing possibilities and restricting social mobility” (p. 125).

Barriers to Learning: The Force of Surround

Earl Shorris (2000) described the restricted social mobility faced by people living in poverty as forces converging on the poor that pushed them out of the public world and into the realm of daily struggle for survival:

Perhaps no better definition can be made for poverty in contemporary America than to say it is the life of necessity, with all the violence that Greeks found in that word. To live in poverty, then, is to live according to the rules of force, which push people out of the free space of public life into the private concerns of mere survival. (p. 32)

Shorris (2000) described the forces affecting the poor as a surround, a fence circling and pressing upon them, analogous to the circling manoeuvre used by hunters to gather and isolate prey and eliminate possibility of escape. He cautioned us not to imagine this surround of force acting upon an abstract poor, however, but upon individual people with names and lives:

The forces of the surround do not affect the poor, they affect poor persons, not even families, but persons, one at a time. Everyone who lives within the force lives alone. The weight of the force separates them, splintering the bodies of the poor like glass, driving the shards of family, community, society, into feckless privacy. (p. 47)

Such force closes off any opportunity for change and growth, insists Shorris, because it cannot be reasoned with: “Unlike argument, which has a dialectical shape, involving thesis and antithesis, and lies at the heart of the political life at all levels of society, force closes off dialogue” (2000, p. 42).

The concept of the *forces of surround* is a powerful way to understand how the economic and non-economic aspects of their lives have paralyzing effects on poor people, both in terms of the systemic and structural forces that constrain them and the belief systems that reduce their capacity for agency. In addition to low income, non-traditional adult learners often face other particular barriers to ongoing learning.

Moving beyond a categorization of barriers as material and non-material, Cross (1981, p. 98) suggested a taxonomy of barriers—“*dispositional or psychological*” (fear, low self-esteem, depression, feeling too old to learn), “*situational*” (financial problems, lack of daycare resources), and “*institutional*” (inflexible timetables, location of institution, program entrance requirements)—that moves from the individual level to the social. Magro (2006–2007) noted that “while educational planners may be more successful in reducing situational or institutional barriers to learning, psychological barriers such as fear, low self-esteem, and negative attitudes toward education are the most resistant to change” (p. 71). Willans and Seary’s (2007) study supported this finding: “Many [adult learners] have been hindered by both their past and present educational, social or cultural circumstances and most doubt their ability to succeed in higher education” (p. 438). Initially, non-traditional students expressed assumptions that they were “too stupid,” “too scared,” or “too old” to learn (Willans & Seary, p. 444).

Perhaps as important as the kinds of barriers that non-traditional adult learners face is the cumulative effect of more than one barrier. Cross (1981) stressed that students’ difficulty starting or finishing educational projects increases with the number of barriers they experience, a finding also supported by Bowl (2001): “University entry is experienced as a dislocation and disjunction which is intensified if the learner is ‘non-traditional’ in more than one sense... Financial, institutional and class-based barriers impede the progress

of non-traditional students” (Bowl, p. 157). Multiple roles such as family responsibilities, career or jobs, and student life present major obstacles for women returning to education (Mohney & Anderson, 1988). However, in a comprehensive review of the literature addressing barriers to learning for adult learners, MacKeracher, Suart, and Potter (2006) noted that “a more complete understanding of participation and non-participation must be based on an examination of the *interactions* among the various types of barriers. *This type of analysis is missing from the literature*” (p. 13, italics added). More than simply a focus on the barriers is needed, however. The current study’s findings highlighted the complex interactions not only among the barriers experienced by the students but also in their interpretation of the barriers, related structural interactions, and their ability for agential response in the face of their conceptions of themselves as learners and citizens.

To capture the intensified dislocation and disjunction that occur when non-traditional adult learners experience multiple forces of surround, to emphasize the complexity of interactions between the various barriers, and to highlight the oppressive effects of the economic and social forces that push such learners to the margins of society, we have introduced the term *marginalized non-traditional adult learner*.

Methodology

Using data from our research study entitled *Radical humanities: a pathway toward transformational learning for marginalized non-traditional adult learners* (Groen and Hyland-Russell, 2010) this exploratory study profiles marginalized non-traditional adult students from three Canadian Radical Humanities programs offering free, university-level humanities courses to people living in poverty. A case study methodology was chosen because the intent was to understand the low-income non-traditional adult learner in Canadian society through close examination of three iterations of a specific program, fulfilling one of the case study’s central criteria as intensive description and analysis of a single unit or a bounded system (Smith, 1978), such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community (Merriam, 1998). We value the case study’s complexity and usefulness (Yin, 1994) and rich description and heuristic value (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). While we acknowledge that the analysis that emerges from these three programs is context-specific and cannot be generalized, we stand by the logic proposed by Rossman and Rallis that “reasoning by analogy allows the application of lessons learned in one case to another population or set of circumstances believed or assumed to be sufficiently similar to the study sample that findings apply there as well” (p. 105). Therefore, we feel this study has relevance for other marginalized non-traditional adult learners and educational institutions seeking to provide access to this category of learners.

Three programs—Storefront 101 (Storefront) in Calgary, Discovery University (Discovery) in Ottawa, and Humanities 101 (Humanities) in Thunder Bay—were purposively selected to provide a representative sample of the 10 operational Radical Humanities programs across Canada in terms of geographic location, social diversity, program composition, length of time in operation, community–university partnerships, and students served. Program directors were contacted and agreed to participate in the research project. Information on the programs was collected through a combination of

(1) personal observation of classes, tutorial sessions, and program planning meetings; (2) content analysis of program documents; (3) a demographic survey of 71 students in three Canadian Radical Humanities programs; and (4) individual semi-structured interviews of students, instructors, tutors, program planners, and working committee members. The demographic survey was designed specifically for low-income learners based on our previous experience with students in the Calgary program, and was distributed to all sections of the three programs over the two years of the study. Of the 93 registered students across the case study, 71 voluntarily completed the student survey. At the end of the survey, students were asked if they were willing to be interviewed about their experiences in the program. The stratified, selective sample of 31 participants represented the basic demographic profile of students in each of the programs, including gender, marital status, employment, housing, educational level, and race. The sample also reflected the basic profile of program participants in terms of age, family situation, program participation, and academic achievement.

Thirty-one participants subsequently participated in semi-structured interviews that explored students' learning journeys in Radical Humanities programs. We asked a series of open-ended questions that explored how they became involved in their program; their initial goals and motivations; their experience in the program; descriptions of themselves as learners; barriers and obstacles to learning; supports before and during the program; strengths and weaknesses of the program; key educational events in their lives; what they learned during the program about course content, themselves, and their world; future goals; and the program's impact. These open-ended questions allowed us to be receptive to the individual stories of participants' experiences and to "increase the intimacy and concreteness of the interview questions" (Hage, 2006, p. 85). Results from the first administration of the demographic survey in Calgary guided us to address specific aspects about the impact of certain life events on students' educational experience in subsequent interviews.

Participants were interviewed face to face by one or both members of the research team, with the researchers alternating in taking the lead in the 45-minute to two-hour interview while the other handled the equipment (digital and tape recorders) and took field notes. Interviews took place in interview rooms at the program site or at a quiet coffee shop at the participant's choosing, and were audiotaped and transcribed. The coding and analysis of the transcribed interviews occurred in several iterative steps. First, using comparative content analysis, we individually coded the transcripts according to the categories outlined in our initial research project: internal and external barriers, motivators, supports, and central program elements. We solicited feedback and corrections on the transcripts from the participants; in all cases, only minor grammatical or stylistic edits were suggested. We compared our coding for inter-coder reliability and further checked by having a doctoral student randomly validate a third of the coded transcripts. Finally, we solicited feedback on our analysis of the findings at focus sessions of a national symposium that gathered scholars, learners, program planners, instructors, and tutors from all 10 Canadian Radical Humanities programs.

We treated each participant's text as its own narrative while looking for themes and patterns that emerged across all the interviews. We examined the content of the narratives

as well as how the participants narrated their learning journeys. As we performed iterative cross-comparisons of the transcripts and the emerging meaning of the students' learning journeys, it became clear that our initial categories of internal and external barriers limited a full understanding of students' ability to overcome barriers to learning. While it was important to understand the effects of the constellated barriers, even more significant were students' interpretations of the barriers they experienced as related to social structures and their perceived identity as learners and citizens.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

Barriers and Supports Affecting Access to Education

While Cross's (1981) model provided a helpful starting point for analysis, our findings suggested that the categorization of barriers as situational, dispositional, and institutional failed to address the nature, complexity, and degree of the barriers faced by marginalized non-traditional learners and was unable to account for the learners' changes that we had witnessed. To tease out the overlapping barriers affecting students' access to ongoing learning, we coded and analyzed participants' transcribed interviews and cross-referenced the findings to the surveys and the content analysis of program documents. While we initially categorized barriers as material and non-material, analysis of the students' interviews revealed that they did not sort barriers in that fashion. They saw virtually every barrier connected somehow to their poverty. Thus, all barriers seemed to them economic in some fashion. Further, the intertwined nature of the barriers and the students' capacity for change suggested that another classification would be more useful. Following the students' lead, we examined how they conceived of themselves as learners and their potential to push back the surround of barriers constraining them. While students spoke of the importance of accessing material supports, they also spoke of the critical nature of the learning space and the opportunity for reflective learning provided by the humanities. In the following pages, we present the study's findings according to (1) barriers to further education, (2) concept of self as learner, (3) learning space, and (4) role of the humanities.

Barriers to Further Education: Economics, Living Conditions, Life History

The everyday, material, and practical aspects of students' lives dominated their conversations and headed their list of concerns. The students could not disconnect their practical concerns and barriers preventing educational access from their poverty. As one student asserted, "You don't get it. Poverty is like a rock pushing down on me 24/7. I can never get out from under it. It is always there, grinding me down." Practical concerns ranged from lack of stable income or the inadequacy of fixed incomes for the disabled to unstable or substandard housing to lack of readily available nutritious food. Interwoven with the economic barriers and in many cases caused or exacerbated by poor economic conditions were living conditions and life experiences that in less tangible but no less powerful ways impeded educational access or success. Students' life histories included experience with homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, violence, chronic illness, disability, and war.

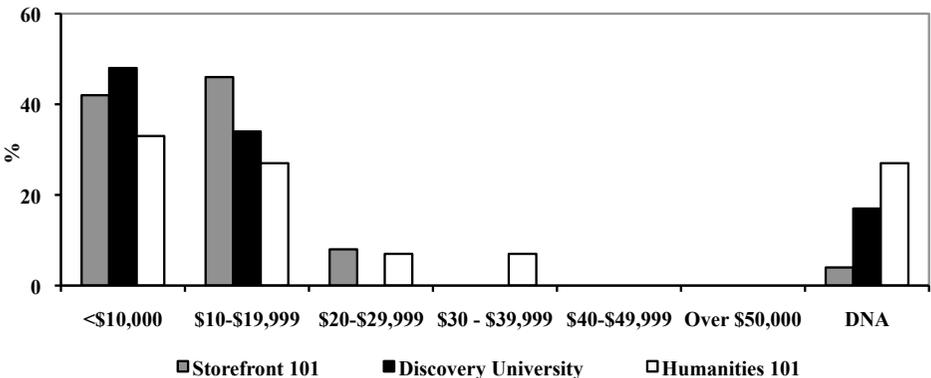
Economics. According to Statistics Canada (2007), in 2006 the low income cut-off (LICO) was \$14,562 for people living in cities ranging in population from 100,000 to 499,999, and \$17,219 in urban centres larger than 500,000 people. Almost all respondents fell below the LICO, while some subsisted deeply below the minimal LICO level. According to the Canadian Council on Social Development (2001), it is important to consider the depth of poverty, specifically the size of the gap between one’s income and the LICO. Thirty-three percent of Humanities students declared their income to fall below \$10,000, yet the LICO for Thunder Bay is almost 33% higher at \$15,000. Both Storefront and Discovery are located in communities larger than 500,000, where the LICO is over 70% higher at \$17,219 (Statistics Canada, 2006). In Ottawa, 48% of the students lived on less than \$10,000 per year, and in Calgary, 42% of the students were below this threshold (see Figure 1).

A high proportion of respondents did not answer the income question, sometimes due to a concern that the data would be turned over to government or other funding bodies or that the act of answering could in some way jeopardize their living. This telling response, which occurred frequently despite assurances from the researchers that the identities of survey respondents would be kept confidential, revealed a high level of anxiety about income and sustainability of living that was endemic to program learners.

Storefront students subsisting on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) commented on their inability to stretch the allotted \$850 monthly income to cover even basic housing expenses in an out-of-control market that saw rents double in the period of study. Calgary students who were trying to gain more stable housing could see no possibility of finding first and last months’ rent and damage deposit in an economy in which even an illegal and substandard room could not be found for under \$600 a month.

Living conditions. Students’ living conditions varied widely depending on the city and reflected the availability of affordable and stable housing. In Ottawa, 55.2% of students lived in subsidized housing, significantly higher than Calgary at 27% and Thunder Bay at 13.3%. Also notable was Storefront, where Calgary vacancy rates were at an all-time low and 30.5% of the students reported living in unstable or unhoused situations—temporary or

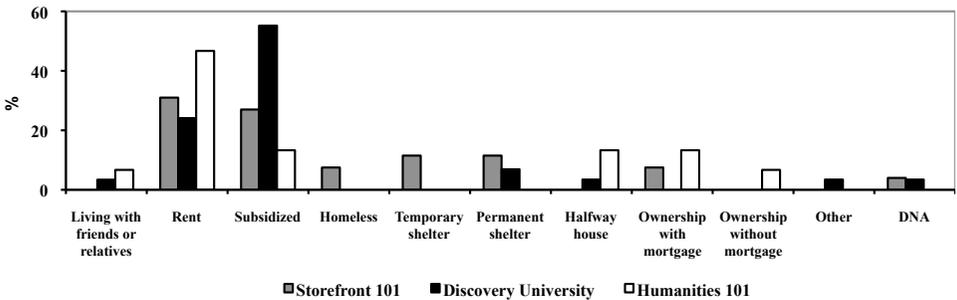
Figure 1: Annual Self Income



permanent shelters, halfway houses, or homeless (see Figure 2). The following comments illuminate what life was like for many of the Calgary students:

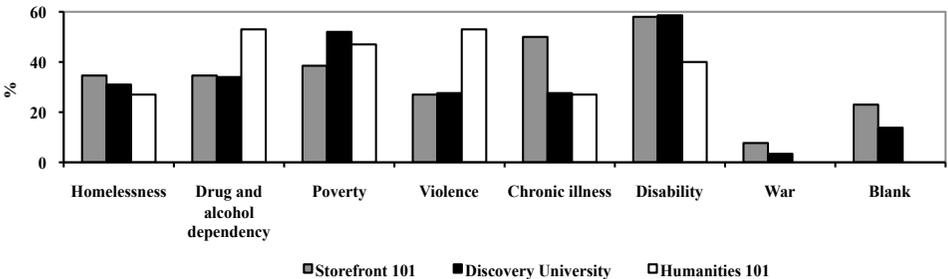
- “I am currently housed at transitional housing through the Calgary Drop-in and Rehab Centre.”
- “I live outside in a lean-to.”
- “Terrible.”

Figure 2: Living Conditions



Life history. The survey asked students to indicate which, if any, of the following life events they had experienced: homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, poverty, violence, chronic illness, disability, or war (see Figure 3). It was rare that a student checked off only one or no life event. For example, one student who checked off homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, poverty, violence, and chronic illness explained, “I have several years of addiction struggle and income problems behind me.” Each challenging life event in the questionnaire, with the exception of war, had been faced by at least 30% of the students in each program.

Figure 3: Life Events



Interview excerpts illustrate the overlapping challenges of life events and students' understanding of the economic consequences of many of their experiences:

- "I suffer from a mental illness. Although [I] am now quite stable, [I] am not able to deal with excessive amounts of stress."
- "I am an alcoholic and drug addict in recovery. I was active in my addictions for 26 years and have been in recovery for eight months. Homelessness and poverty were by-products, in my case, of my active addiction."
- "My dad drank all the time and my mother drank all the time and we were always left alone, so I've been, you know, I've been raped, we've been ... I was shot at. I've been, uh ... every, every type of violence that there was ... I was in foster homes too."
- "When I was left by my husband with no money the first month I think I spent just \$53 for groceries."
- "My whole life is a war against poverty."

As we reviewed student interview transcripts, we recognized a disparity between life events as reported by respondents in the demographic survey and in the interviews; students tended to under-report life experiences on the survey. To understand these findings, we divided the life experience results according to gender for each program, which, according to MacKeracher et al. (2006), has rarely been done in previous research on non-traditional adult learners, leaving us with the erroneous perception that barriers to education are gender neutral. In most cases, a higher percentage of male students in each of the programs reported homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, poverty, illness, and disability. In Storefront, a higher percentage of male than female students reported experience with violence (36.4% of males, 20% of females). However, a significant number of female students were missing data on this survey question. In several cases, female students used the comment section to report an unwillingness to disclose information in this category. During the semi-structured interviews, however, the same students who had previously left the life event section of the questionnaire blank gave detailed information on their lives in several of the domains, including experience with violence. The same dynamic surfaced during the interviews with female students in the Discovery program. There are two possible conclusions to be made about these results. One is that the percentage of female students who have experienced violence is much higher than is represented by the demographic survey. The second is that further research needs to be done to probe this unexpected result. Typically, demand characteristics such as fear to disclose would lead to more detailed answers in an anonymous survey than a face-to-face interview; however, the reverse was the case here. We suspect that the researchers' credentials as long-term supporters of Storefront and their empathic, semi-structured interviewing styles helped students to trust them, which in turn led to disclosure. However, these results need to be further understood through continuing research.

Concept of Self as Learner

Even as they expressed intense passion for their involvement in the Radical Humanities programs, students frequently negatively framed themselves as learners due to previous educational experiences and internal beliefs that learning was not for them. When faced with combined economic and non-material barriers, students often despaired that they could access education:

- “I remember the teachers throwing their arms up in the air and I remember them giving up on me.”
- “It was hard coming here ... I’m very nervous ... I struggle with anxiety.”
- “Education isn’t for me ... I’m too stupid.”
- “Here are all these strange people I don’t know.”
- “I just didn’t have faith in myself ... I had learned helplessness.”
- “All I wanted to do is run.”
- “You are poor and poor people don’t know about learning.”

Students also had a deep mistrust of post-secondary institutions and professors:

- “Ooh, professor, special alien.”
- “Professors [are] untouchables, unreachablees.”

Many students expressed an inability or unwillingness to ask for help:

- “Sometimes I don’t ask for help until the situation is critical and I’m ready to quit school.”

They also expressed a tendency to isolate when feeling threatened or frightened:

- “I was super-sensitive to everything. I rarely talked to anybody.”

Many students internalized messages of prohibition about education:

- “It’s the words ... It’s the self talk ... [I felt] I had no right to be there.”
- “I come from an era where your parents quite bluntly told you whether or not you had intelligence and I was always told that I didn’t ... I honestly never thought I was smart enough, never thought I could do it.”

The contexts in which students lived and studied also significantly shaped their learning experiences, both through economic pressures and through the ways that the surrounds of force actively pushed students away from learning spaces. For example, in Calgary the increasing pressure on housing and social services caused by the economic boom increased students’ difficulty in accessing stable and affordable housing and social resources. Many students spoke of the ever-present fear of eviction and/or rental rates that could double in any given month. Demand for social services outstripped supply as local shelters and agencies sought to keep up with demand, compounded by an influx of people coming to a city reputedly experiencing an economic flush. Media campaigns

portrayed homeless people as dangerous or annoying panhandlers, and waiting times for social services ranging from Employment Insurance to social assistance were drastically lengthened. Long-standing issues of lack of coordination among social resources became critical as every agency was faced with staffing shortages and over-burdened client lists. Students repeatedly spoke of being marginalized by the systemic practices surrounding them—even the social resources that were supposed to help alleviate their impoverished conditions. And in their minds, a firm connection was made between their lack of economic well-being and their unsuitability for education.

It was students' accounts of repeatedly being actively marginalized and oppressed that led us to recognize the central dynamic of marginalization in their lives. It was the students who advocated using the word *marginalized* to highlight the powerful ways in which systems and other people forced them to society's margins, experiences frequently linked with violence. Horsman (1999) points out a strong correlation between people who have experienced violence and negative experiences with education. Experiences with violence and trauma led to students in the study being easily triggered by context or content:

I've had so many unsafe places.

Previous unsafe or unhealthy experiences often led to boundary issues and lack of awareness of appropriate behaviour:

I trusted nobody but I did everything anybody told me to.

Systemic and situational barriers experienced over time were compounded through life events and negative educational history and often led to deep attitudinal barriers, beliefs that education was not for them:

I was more like a care taker at a young age because I had other younger siblings than me. I took care of them too when there was violence in the home, alcoholism. Because my mom, she was alcoholic then, and my dad left when I was a baby. I was abused by my mom too and I went to residential school so that was a big impact on me. When I was in school I remember that when I used to get good marks, if the other students knew that I got good marks ... a few girls, they were jealous; they would start cursing me, bullying me.

This student connects education with deprivation, humiliation, and violence. She experiences clinical depression and is almost entirely incapacitated by the immense effort required to enter the physical space of a classroom. She has formally completed Grade 8 schooling and wants to upgrade, but must contend with a complex array of barriers that manifest in traumatic reactions to and fear of education. She is afraid to learn.

In Thunder Bay, a city comprising 12% Aboriginal residents (Statistics Canada, 2006), students' dominant concern was the city's cultural and racial dynamics. Over 50% of the students and agency representatives we interviewed identified racism as Thunder Bay's dominant characteristic—racism experienced by native residents at the hands of non-native residents and of elementary school-based racism practised by native and non-native teachers and students. Consequently, Humanities deliberately focuses attention on enhancing cultural awareness and supporting indigenous knowledge. Several modules

address assimilation and Canada’s history of residential schools.³ Native students reported experiencing a sense of liberation when taught about colonizing practices in residential schools. The course provided specific historical information on the impact of social and governmental practices that had affected generations of their families. While some non-native students expressed resentment about the amount of time focused on native issues, others appreciated their new knowledge:

You know we learned about residential schools, we learned about history of the treaties and just Aboriginal culture and that part was very interesting and realizing how many stereotypes that I had and even some racism that I didn’t realize I had, and just lack of knowledge of the whole situation and it’s a real eye opener ... yeah.

Aboriginal learners highlighted the complex factors impacting marginalized non-traditional adult learners’ educational experience. Many Aboriginal students are affected through their contested experiences with residential schools, forced separation from family, and cultural oppression:

Although residential schools have disappeared from the Canadian landscape ... their legacy endures. For many families, negative attitudes toward schools today are grounded in their own experience, or that of parents or grandparents who attended these institutions. Others have suffered more severe consequences. Education continues to be a site of struggle. (Hare, 2004, p. 20)

Learning Space

Aboriginal students are not the only students for whom education is heavily fraught with a history of oppression and violence, however. Because of the preponderance of violence experienced by the students, they were easily flooded with profound anxiety or fear and readily froze or disassociated in learning spaces, common responses to previous experiences with violence (Horsman, 1999). These traumatic reactions, in connection with students’ past negative learning experiences, interrupted education history, and negative identities of self as learner erected profound barriers to their learning—even when they were able to access education through Radical Humanities. Students frequently articulated their need for safe spaces:

- “It takes me a little while. I have to become comfortable.”

3 Residential schools were federally run boarding schools under the jurisdiction of the Department of Indian Affairs as part of a policy of aggressive assimilation of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. Attendance at the church-run, government-funded schools was mandatory and agents were employed by the government to ensure all native children attended. Residential schools existed in Canada from the 19th century until 1996 and imposed rigorous forms of punishment against children speaking their native language or practising native customs. Students suffered emotional and physical abuse and were separated from their families and communities for periods spanning months or years.

- “It was scary [coming to campus]: I was still unsure of, okay, where am I going to go and who am I going to meet and that sort of thing.”
- “That fear of stepping on the property is like waaa!”
- “I haven’t been able to do any of the projects. It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just, like when you’re dealing with litigation and life and death situations, you know, that’s kind of more important than working on a collage, or whatever.”
- “It takes so long to heal and get into a proper head space, and we’re just starting to get into some kind of head space [by the end of the term] and then it’s almost over.”
- “Learning has never been, um, like a fun place, so you really don’t know who to trust.”

Several factors were central in creating a safe-enough learning space to enable students to begin to engage in dialogue and learning: treatment of each and every student as a person worthy of respect and capable of learning, regardless of prior experiences; positioning learning as a dialogue among equals; the deep care demonstrated by the program staff; and clear, healthy boundaries. Discovery offered women who felt unsafe in mixed discussion groups the opportunity to have a women-only tutorial group. In Humanities, the material on residential schools was taught by an Aboriginal faculty member. In Storefront, aggressive or threatening behaviour prompted by mental health or substance issues was promptly addressed and students who could not respect others’ healthy boundaries were asked to leave. Students cited a number of factors that made them feel safe enough to risk learning:

- “[Program Director]’s very welcoming and...real.”
- “In Humanities 101 I find it that everyone asks a lot of questions. You know when they’re interested.”
- “Okay the professors they’ve got degrees and they’ve learned a lot but we’re still ... we’ve still got things to learn from each other. You know it’s not just them and us kind of thing. And he even acknowledged learning from us as students. That was really good.”
- “We all come from the same space ... I know that they’ve been kicked around.”

Role of the Humanities

A safe learning space is not sufficient, however, to overcome the barriers of poverty and past negative experiences. This study suggests that the humanities provide a unique reflective opportunity that reframes students’ worldviews in ways that encourage them to reconsider their relationships to themselves, to others, and to the world around them. The humanities offer an active, engaged mode of reflecting upon self and others:

The humanities have great appeal to give people a sense of self, to see the world and themselves differently in the Greek sense of reflective

thinking, of autonomy.... People who know the humanities become good citizens, become active, not acted upon. (Shorris in Reichers, 2001, p. 29)

Study in Radical Humanities with a framework of Socratic dialogue offers opportunities for critical reflection and increased awareness of the social construction of meaning. This ability for critical analysis is often absent in adults experiencing poverty. As Fingeret and Drennon (1997) noted:

Most adults learn as children that their problems are their fault; they are told they are stupid or aren't trying hard enough.... They never develop the critical analysis of their social world in which poor schooling, poverty, discrimination, crime, family situations, or other social and structural conditions share responsibility. (p. 68)

Radical Humanities uses the Socratic maieutic method to facilitate students' ability to question the relationships between the texts they study and their historical, cultural, and experiential knowledge. The maieutic method was conceived by Socrates as midwifery of the mind for its ability to generate new awareness through dialogue between students and teacher. A Socratic question is inevitably “posed within the historical horizons of the inquirer's times. It must strike a balance between the memory of the past and the fancying of the future in order to be relevant for the time of its formulation” (Maranhão, 1986, p. 177). As in the above examples provided by Radical Humanities students, providing a protected intellectual space within which rigorous dialogue prevails helps students develop intellectual skills. Intellectual skills are necessary for civic participation, and education in the humanities provides development in these skills. The dialogue, whether focused on texts drawn from philosophy, art, literature, or history, provides multiple perspectives on the storied nature of human experience, past and present, and offers marginalized learners horizons of hope and possibility as they connect their personal experiences with structural and systemic contexts and discourses.

For example, one student, a former Sudanese child soldier with no formal education past the age of 11, recognized the value of the humanities in contextualizing his violent and negative experiences and reframing his story beyond the personal:

They [the humanities] make you think about your own life, your ideas, your vision and how you can move forward. That's important and it gives people hope and the ability to move forward in their lives.

Another student responded to her classes about Plato and Descartes:

When you get one question right out of the whole thing, or you understand one line of a paragraph in something like philosophy and you say, ‘Wow, it's such a big big doctrine and yet I'm understanding it. And by God I can even form an imaginative thought to it of my own,’ it makes you feel wonderful. Makes you feel like you are contributing.

Conclusion

In various ways, students demonstrated their ability to push back against the forces of surround and to own a sense of personal agency directly connected to their participation in the Radical Humanities. One student applied what she learned about sustainable food by asking the grocer for locally grown food while another began cooking classes. Afraid all her life to set foot on the privileged space of the university campus, one student took her granddaughter to the university library after the program to research a school assignment. A number of students have begun college or university studies; three have graduated with bachelor degrees. One student recognized her learning deficits and was tested for learning disabilities; unwilling to let her daughter suffer humiliating school experiences as she did, she has begun to advocate for her daughter at school. Students are joining anti-poverty groups and working toward social change. Yet moving from a place where they believe themselves impoverished and unfit for learning to a place of agency and engaged learning is not straightforward for these students.

It is clear from this study's findings that a complex interplay of barriers exists and must be understood and addressed. MacKeracher et al. (2006) pointed out the importance for "responsive educational systems" that recognize the unique needs of adult learners and are "supportive of adult learners by helping them to ameliorate barriers to learning" (p. 22). However, they also pointed out major gaps in knowledge about perceived and actual barriers, about the potential role of formal educational institutions, and about the interaction among various types of barriers. This study responds to the call for "ongoing studies to examine the interactions among various types of barriers for different groups of adult learners" (MacKeracher et al., p. 25) and provides concrete findings that illustrate the importance of understanding the specifics of students' experiences with barriers and how those barriers interact. We argue that in order to address the very real needs of marginalized non-traditional adult learners and to widen their access to learning, we need to look beyond the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to education and focus on the complex interactions among self and other, particularly within the context of specific learning spaces. Particularly important to understand, in the light of this study's findings, are the relationships among students' historical and cultural life stories, their experience with violence, and their current concepts of self as learner. These concepts dramatically shape learners' interpretations of and responses to the material and non-material barriers they face.

Furthermore, this study highlights that complex and interrelated barriers need to be addressed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. Such barriers include those that are economic but also those that are beyond the economic. Institutional and financial exclusionary policies and practices, including attitudes that regard marginalized non-traditional adult learners as difficult or inferior, need to be addressed and changed. Program development needs to be specifically targeted to meet the needs of marginalized non-traditional adult learners, and requires the following attributes to be successful: clear and transparent partnership agreements; valuing of all participants and their perspectives and contributions; supports to address material and non-economic barriers to learning; sustained funding that provides for paid support staff; trained staff to address concepts of self as learner and students' prior experiences with violence that impact learning; and

assessment tools to identify academic deficits and/or learning disabilities. Development of a healthy and supportive learning community is pivotal. Nutritious community meals should precede every class, detailed and consistent attention must be paid to developing and maintaining safe space and healthy boundaries, and positive interaction based on best practices should be fostered among all members of the teaching and administrative team. Instructors need to be mature, grounded, authentic, humble, and able to teach through respectful dialogic methods. Radical Humanities provide a unique reflective space in which students can begin to renegotiate their beliefs about themselves in relation to the rest of the world—particularly in terms of structures and systems—and then to apply new ideas to inspire and catalyze agential responses.

Central to realizing their potential for agency is students’ growing awareness of the impact of ideas, structures, and systems upon individuals. The humanities offer a range of storied experiences about human life. While Radical Humanities programs are not the whole answer to helping marginalized adult learners re-engage with learning, they are a vital part.

By now we are well aware of the benefits to society that accrue with greater educational participation, especially among under-represented groups. These benefits are often quantified through economic measures and the supports required for increased participation viewed in economic terms. Yet the requirements to push back the forces of surround that have kept marginalized learners away from education far exceed solely economic measures. Applying the knowledge we have gained from this and other studies in a concerted and coordinated manner, together with even a small amount of the tenacity shown by the students who are determinedly resolved to move in from the margins, will assuredly result in increased educational participation and subsequent rewards for our society.

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