

WOMEN'S TRANSITIONS FROM WELFARE: "WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US? EMPLOYABLE OR IN THE PIT?"¹

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Abstract

In a globalized market training, education, and credentials are important as individuals compete for spaces in the workplace. For some, like single mothers on welfare, acquisition of training and credentials becomes a long, arduous, circuitous "walk" as they attempt to enter the labour force. This article examines how government policies and labour market demands influence women's transitions from welfare, explores the experiences of women in a case study, and analyzes the role that using brainstorming, popular education techniques, and content in a pre-employment upgrading program had on women's educational and employment needs as they attempted to leave welfare.

Résumé

Dans un marché de formation désormais mondial, l'éducation et les références d'emploi sont essentielles lorsqu'on est en compétition pour une place dans le marché du travail. Pour certains, comme les mères célibataires vivant de l'aide sociale, acquérir de la formation et avoir des références devient un processus long, ardu, voire circulaire, lorsqu'ils cherchent à s'intégrer au marché du travail. À travers une étude de cas, cet article examine comment les politiques gouvernementales et les exigences du marché de l'emploi influencent l'issue de la démarche des femmes qui tentent de sortir de l'aide sociale. Il explore des expériences de femmes et analyse le rôle de l'utilisation du remue-méninge et des techniques et des contenus d'éducation populaire dans un programme de pré-emploi visant à combler les besoins éducatifs de ces femmes à mesure qu'elles tentent de quitter l'aide sociale.

¹ The quotation in the title is from a participant in the study. A section of this paper was presented at the Adult Education Research Conference at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, May 15-16, 1998.

Federal and provincial governments in Canada seek to increase economic performance by eliminating deficits, cutting unemployment rates, and reducing welfare roles. At the same time, spurred by technological innovations and globalization, today's businesses demand an educated, well-trained, well-skilled, flexible workforce. This has placed increasing importance on educational qualifications for screening in the hiring process, even for jobs requiring little training or low level skills. Individuals on the peripheries, such as women on welfare, scramble for credentials as the credentialing gap escalates. However, even completing pre-employment training programs recommended by government does not guarantee women will not be forced to take low-wage or dead-end jobs that relegate them to a life of the working poor. This situation leaves adult educators, such as me, wondering how to or even if to encourage individuals, especially women on social assistance, to pursue their goals for education and training as a way to leave the oppression of welfare.

In this article, I examine the influence of these training programs on two levels. Firstly, at the macro level, I illustrate how government policies and labour market demands influence women's transitions from welfare. Secondly, on the micro level, I examine the experiences of women in a pilot study and explore the role upgrading² education techniques in a pre-employment program had on women's educational and employment needs as they attempted to leave welfare.

The Influence of Government Policies

Governments often see training programs as a panacea—a “quick fix” for women striving to make life transitions. In reality, these programs are only initial—but often important—steps in a long, arduous, circuitous, “walk” from welfare.

Who Gets Training and Employment and How?

Generally, Canadians believe they have access to training and education leading to employment. However, this may not be the case, for some factors influence access to and participation in training. Often, tension exists between government policies and outcomes, program intentions and goals, and individuals' needs (especially women's) and their ultimate employment

² Upgrading is sometimes seen as a pejorative term; nevertheless, I use it in this article because that is the term used by those in the program I report on here. This term is also used and accepted in the local community colleges.

opportunities. Women may "choose" not to participate. However, this may be due to programs not meeting women's needs, less training support for juggling family and child care responsibilities, or the time just may not be right. According to Mincer (1989), the percentage of people who receive training

- a) increases with education; b) declines with age and with length of seniority; c) is greater for married than for single men; d) is smaller for women, especially married women, than for men; and e) is greater in large firms and where machinery is more costly. (p. 28)

Furthermore, according to the OECD (1997), those with higher levels of education tend to participate more in education and training. The OECD explains, "the long arm of the family ... [is] reflected in the relationship between social background, educational attainment and participation in adult education" (p. 95). Moreover, according to the OECD, in larger firms, "the long arm of the job" (p. 98) supports adult education and training opportunities.

In an attempt to provide access, the Canadian federal government spends approximately \$1 billion per year on training initiatives. In comparison, employers allocate only \$1.4 billion to employee training (Shields, 1996, p. 61). Despite this, during 1991, only 36% of all Canadian workers received training. Then, during 1996, the federal government reduced spending on employment programs by 30% (British Columbia Ministry, 1997, p. 22). Shields points out that under-investment is influenced by Canadian labour market instability, reduced job security, fear trained employees will take new skills to competitors, increases in non-standard work, more women workers, smaller workplaces, and higher unemployment. Plus, the federal government's restructuring initiatives for unemployment, employment insurance, and social assistance tie benefits to learnfare or workfare. According to Shields, through learnfare and workfare, "Mandatory training can be used either as a disciplinary tool to make the *unemployed and* social assistance recipients market-ready and hungry for work, or else to disenfranchise them from social support" (p. 69). Thus, training may be punitive or a way to improve workers' skills and employment opportunities.

In 1992, British Columbia Premier Michael Harcourt attempted to provide greater opportunities for the employed, unemployed, and marginalized through a Summit on Trade and Economic Opportunity, Education and Training (see British Columbia Institute, 1993). His goal was to identify key challenges for British Columbia's economy. He believed the

province needed “to train more and train better [in a fiscally responsible way] to better equip British Columbians [unemployed, welfare recipients, or aging workers] with the skills they will require to succeed” (pp. 5-6) by integrating education and training structures to provide seamless, lifelong learning, and training of all types to everyone. By 1994, Harcourt’s initiatives resulted in the Skills Now training plan (British Columbia Ministry, 1994) to provide real skills to British Columbians for the “real” world. Government sought (a) to link high school to the workplace; (b) to open “more doors and the right doors to college and university”; (c) to train workers closer to home; and (d) to move “the unemployed from welfare to the workforce, by building on people’s strengths and abilities” (p. 1).

Moving welfare recipients into the workforce is important. The Skills Now (British Columbia Ministry, 1994) program provided assistance for welfare recipients through counselling and training to help them take advantage of “job opportunities that match their abilities” and through creating individual training plans to “build on the strengths and abilities of unemployed people” (p. 7). Furthermore, government implemented the Workplace Training for Jobs program to assist 4,500 individuals earn a living while learning real skills and funded and supported an additional 20,000 people for specific vocational college and university programs.

Although government initiatives encouraged more people to seek training, problems emerged. Some are similar to those found in training programs in the United States (Grubb, 1996). For example, a proliferation of government supported programs by private agencies and educational institutions caused duplication, redundancy, and competition for funding and work opportunities within communities. Additionally, training programs are very short—3 to 27 weeks or even one day. Frequently, because these programs are initial steps, individuals with personal problems, little education, or few or outdated skills find it difficult to make radical changes in their employment status in these timeframes.

Often program providers impose rigid selection criteria on women on social assistance. For example, women on welfare are discouraged from enrolling in employment, training, or education programs until they have been collecting welfare for seven months. Another problem occurs when private providers “take the money and run” while encouraging individuals to incur enormous student loan debts for computer and clerical courses that do not ensure job placement. Moreover, women are expected to make dramatic, sudden changes to become fully employable despite personal and structural

barriers as well as past problems with becoming employed. Additionally, many job training programs have not helped individuals gain skills necessary to acquire more training, employment, or intellectual pursuits (Grubb, 1996). Most importantly, job training programs do not teach people to *keep* jobs. In some instances, training programs actually stigmatize workers by signalling that they have been welfare recipients, making it even more difficult for them to stay in the workplace and advance to higher paying positions (Riemer, 1997). However, a few examples of training programs do exist where welfare recipients are assisted in receiving paid training on-the-job to remain employed.

Surprisingly, women selected into training programs may be worse off after leaving programs designed to funnel them from welfare into the workforce. Frequently, women find themselves encouraged into a quick fix by taking a low paying or dead-end job that leaves them worse off as working poor (Edin & Lein, 1997; Riemer, 1997). Due to high unemployment caused by economic and government bureaucratic structures, women may find no jobs at all, so they return to welfare or attend another program. Furthermore, if women on welfare do manage to get a job, they compete for advancement with more-educated and better-skilled individuals. Thus, they find themselves relegated to vying for non-existent or insecure low-paying jobs. Moreover, they are often limited in their opportunities to advance despite beliefs of policy makers or program staff that a low paying job will help the women get a "foot in the door." Women seeking education often enrol in costly or lengthy educational programs. Then, they are encouraged to take out student loans to shift them from welfare roles. However, when they find no job awaits them, they discover they are now saddled with a large student loan debt. Thus, they are now finding themselves among a growing number of women shifted from the welfare roles to student loan debt. Consequently, the "revolving door" back to welfare often begins.

Whose Needs?

Government policy makers and program and agency staff maintain that they are continually trying to address the needs of women on welfare to help them enter the labour force. Despite these attempts, there remains a persistent disjuncture between women's actual needs and those as perceived by policy makers and training and agency staff. Perhaps these discrepancies could be addressed if more women on assistance helped design programs and

curriculum for employment training programs to balance perceived and actual needs and structural power imbalances.

Radical adult educators such as Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) claim that oppression takes many forms in everyday life: banking education, structural forces, government dictating requirements for social benefits, or power structures used to exclude individuals from enjoying access to the quality of life for full citizenship. According to Fraser (1989), "The welfare system does not deal with women on women's terms. ... On the contrary, it has its own characteristic ways of interpreting women's needs and positioning women as subjects" (p. 149). Talking about and determining women's needs on welfare becomes a very political act asserts Fraser.

Tension exists between the needs of women on welfare and government's needs as dictated by "experts," including government policy makers, welfare administrators, social workers, and training staff (Fraser, 1989, p. 157). Government appears to be aware of the "mismatch between the skills of current workers [and potential workers] and those required to obtain better jobs [or even a job] in the changing economy" (British Columbia Ministry, 1997, p. 18). Experts maintain women on welfare need a job to fix their problem of being dependent on welfare. Although government provides monies for some training programs to assist women to leave welfare, it expects that they are fixed quickly by brushing up their job skills, teaching them to dress properly for jobs, and encouraging them to leave their worries at home with their children so that they arrive at work on time to perform well and effectively. Ultimately, if women's expressed needs are not costly or time consuming, experts take them into consideration.

Government anticipates women will exit training programs with necessary skills to become employed taxpayers and skilled, competitive, flexible workers. In addition to academic, technical, and thinking skills, women should be polite and effective communicators (Holzer, 1996). Furthermore, some employment programs daily emphasize the Conference Board of Canada's (McLaughlin, 1992) employability skills, which include personal management, responsibility, adaptability, teamwork, academic skills, critical thinking, and commitment to lifelong learning.

Often job training program personnel walk a fine line between adhering to the experts' perception of women's needs (as mandated by government in administering the programs) and advocating for the women. When supporting women, program personnel perform the role of an "oppositional movement" (Fraser, 1989) by advocating against mandated government

policies that ignore women's daily struggles. Frequently, oppositions are displayed as circumventing rigid attendance rules, attempting to secure resources for the women, encouraging women to enrol in academic or training programs leading to credentials, and other activities meant to address women's needs in overcoming structural inhibitions to exit welfare. However, program personnel cannot fully support women on welfare, for staff are caught in a bind of advocating for the women yet ensuring that they as personnel do not jeopardize the survival of the program to help women and, in turn, their own jobs. Thus, program staff are threatened continually by government funding cuts and their attempts to help women find their ways on the walk from welfare.

Another source of an oppositional movement is the women on welfare who are within employment programs (Fraser, 1989). Some begin to question the "experts'" knowledge of program staff regarding women's needs—for example, requirements that the women must let staff revise their resumes for marketability. In principle, this seems like a good idea, for program staff seemingly have much more experience writing resumes than women on welfare. However, Fraser (1989) explains that some women are refusing to change their resumes based on staff's suggestions because they have found that staff do not accurately revise their skills for potential employers. In fact, in my study, several women confirmed Fraser's finding by recounting the following to me. They said that when women on welfare in their program cohort revised their resumes, they obtained jobs. However, this was not the case with resumes prepared by program staff. Women find resume writing seminars redundant, for they are continually required to attend them. Thus, they wonder just how many times they must listen to people saying the same things about resumes.

Furthermore, others question why they need a seminar on healthy nutrition when they already know how to prepare nutritious meals on a tight budget. In fact, according to one woman, "many could provide the middle class experts with a few tips about how to eat well on a non-existent food budget" (personal conversation). Thus, women's real need is often for greater funds to supplement the inadequate government food allowance. Some women have told me during informal conversations that they forgo their own portions of food to ensure that their children are fed so that they may stay alert to learn and think in school. Women wonder why they too cannot receive a cost of living allowance, just like politicians, to meet their needs as costs rise. Although some grumble about improper identification of

their real needs, others simply drop out of programs, in part because their needs are not being met or because they choose not to buy into how their needs are identified. Others are refusing as political and oppositional acts not even to participate in government training programs. Some women wonder why they are penalized with wage clawbacks and loss of medical, dental, and childcare benefits as they attempt to leave welfare by taking low paying jobs. However, some are willing to "play the game" and are thankful for access to education through pathways some programs offer. Generally, women feel that experts need to become realistic about women's real needs and not drag them further into a bottomless pit of welfare.

Despite these realities, many pre-employment programs have helped women with improved self-esteem, some new skills, and alternative viewpoints about work and education. Perhaps the programs, design, curriculum, staff, and educators from the training programs need to be examined in relation to how they perpetuate forms of oppression through education as Freire (1970) suggests. Additionally, oppositional acts of women need to be examined in relationship to training programs and experts teaching women to discover their actual needs. Moreover, many single mothers desire programs longer than 6 months. To build on programs' strengths, I wonder how else we might draw on women's perceptions of their needs to assist them in their journey from welfare. To illustrate how we adult educators might learn from women's knowledge, I present my observations and findings from a pilot project I implemented while I was working with women in the upgrading portion of one pre-employment program.

Women's Experiences in One Program

Commencing in 1988, one program in British Columbia attempted to help women on welfare with a history of abusive relationships seeking to enter the labour market. In 1998, this 10-year-old pre-employment program was the focus of my pilot study for exploring women's educational upgrading needs as they attempted to make transitions from welfare. This 6-month program usually has enrolled 15 women at a time for three overlapping phases. Phase 1 emphasizes personal life skills development, computer literacy, and educational upgrading for 4 months. During the overlapping 2-month Phase 2, women continue working on personal development; plus, they research career and employment preparation possibilities. During Phase 3, women participate in work experiences for 2 months with the hopes of employment. However, this program, like others,

does not guarantee a job. When the program concludes, women are encouraged to keep in touch through coffee parties or visits with staff.

In spite of the best intentions of the program staff and the women, not all go on to get a job or enter educational programs resulting in jobs. For some, the training programs are a first step, for they have many personal issues they are attempting to resolve in conjunction with becoming job ready. Also, many are trying to quickly acquire employment skills and training. However, some women may, in fact, fall between the cracks of policy, programs, and training and educational opportunities due to eligibility and hidden entry selection criteria, such as age, that a bureaucrat or program staff may have implemented unbeknownst to others. An important first step has been engaging the women in identifying their own needs.

Engaging the Women in Identifying their Needs

While working at the pre-employment program, I taught a total of 105 women over 4 years one day a week during 4-month sessions. These infrequent meetings always made me feel like I was on the peripheries of the pre-employment program. However, this allowed me to hear women voice their insights about some of their real needs that were not being addressed in the program. As a result, I wondered what the women and I could do collaboratively to identify their needs, as experts seem to forget that women on welfare still possess insights to identify skills and potentialities that they may need to make a transition from welfare. Thus, I asked myself: What is the relationship among the upgrading content I teach, women's needs, women's transitions from welfare to work and education, government policy, and employment? I explored this question with three different groups of women (22 women in all) through a pilot project case study of the upgrading section of the program (which assisted women on welfare with histories of abuse by providing them with new skills that could help them enter the job market). I wanted to guide the women in discovering how they might solve problems and engender action to meet their needs in overcoming some frustrations they felt. Therefore, I used comments from other women I had worked with as a starting point to explore some of these needs with the women.

At first glance, the purpose of upgrading in a pre-employment program might seem obvious: women learn content skills for jobs or education. However, Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social practice offers an alternative explanation. Bourdieu contends that individuals possess symbolic, cultural,

and social capital acquired from family background that is accrued throughout the individual's life trajectory and positioning within dynamic fields of social forces. Individuals possess dispositions or strategies (*habitus*) for entering, maintaining, and navigating social fields. They strategize means and ways to acquire and accrue forms of capital to maintain influence and power over structures within fields that inhibit or assist them in making shifts to new fields throughout their life trajectories. Fields (such as pre-employment programs) are dynamic sites of culture and catalysts, wherein women learn new knowledge and strategies for making shifts in meaning and understanding. Through embodied skills, practices, and dispositions (*habitus*), individuals gain a "tacit understanding and a sensibility about how to act in practice" (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997, p. 60). Thus, as related to fields, *habitus* actually feels different with regard to practices, and they "operate their own mix of formalities and informalities, so that one has to become accustomed to particular styles of work in order to understand what is really happening to one" (p. 61). Consequently, as women attempt to make a transition from welfare, they often feel different when they endeavour to enter new social spaces or fields; thus, they tend to "pick up" what is foreign to them from their own experiences and processes. This foreignness represents embodied skills incorporated into one's being and demeanour so that they become part of an unconscious "system of affective, cognitive and bodily orientations" (p. 60). As creative agents, women can learn to identify these embodied skills or pick them up if they are in the milieu of particular social fields. Thus, they may begin to acquire, consciously or unconsciously, *habitus* necessary to move from the peripheries. Additionally, they learn to recognize cultural, social, and symbolic capitals and *habitus* they already possess.

To further draw on Bourdieu's theory, I sought to engage the women in identifying what they noticed or felt they needed to enter fields, such as particular workplaces, educational groups, or new friendships, or how they felt different from other individuals within the fields they were attempting to enter. I began this study with the belief that women can be and are creative agents despite structural impediments that they may have to navigate during their transitions. Furthermore, I anticipated that a tension exists in the definition between the skills and employability skills the experts, programs, and the Conference Board of Canada (McLaughlin, 1992) deem necessary for employment and those the women identify.

Working collaboratively and using novel techniques with the women, I encouraged them to identify their perceived needs and to strategize ways to fulfil them during our time together. The next subsection highlights the methodology for our exploration together.

The Case Study Methodology

For this pilot project, the case study approach allowed me to explore the relationship between the upgrading content I taught in the pre-employment program, women's needs, and women's transitions from welfare to paid work and education. According to Merriam (1991), "a case study is an examination of a specific phenomenon, such as a program, an event, a person, a process, and institution, or a social group" (p. 9). It is a bounded system that has a "common sense obviousness," such as an innovative program, one teacher, or a single educational institution, and is "a single phenomenon or entity" (p. 10).

Furthermore, the case study approach has four essential characteristics: it is "particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive" (Merriam, 1991, p. 11). Firstly, this pilot project is particularistic in that I explore a particular component of a pre-employment training program: the upgrading portion. Moreover, I was examining how a group of women on welfare utilized the content of the upgrading program to assist them in meeting their needs to begin the long walk from welfare to paid work and education. Secondly, the project is descriptive, for I have kept copious, detailed field notes of each session of the study. Additionally, I have copies of our brainstorming sessions, writing, handouts made for the women from our discussions, and other documents that informed our explorations. This study spanned three groups of women over a year and a half. Thirdly, the study is heuristic, for one of the goals was to deepen my understanding of women's perceptions of what they need to make a transition from welfare. Furthermore, it led to greater understanding of the women's experience for me and for them. Lastly, the study is inductive, for "generalizations, concepts, or hypotheses emerge from an examination of data—data grounded in the context itself" (Merriam, p. 13).

The upgrading component consisted of informal, focus group type discussions and individualized work on particular skills. The 105 women I worked with were from seven cohort groups. The one day a week I taught them, I offered two 3-hour sessions: one session in the morning and one in the afternoon. Approximately 6 to 9 women attended either session,

depending upon the similarity of their needs with the rest of the group. Aside from the individualized program for each woman, I attempted to group women according to similar needs. The purpose of the upgrading was to assist women in brushing up on skills they needed to enter the job market, a course, the local college, or to write the GED (General Equivalency Diploma). Based on an assessment test and the women's input, an individualized learning program of study was set up to support each woman in improving her particular skills.

As an instructor, I assessed the women's educational levels and skills; set up individual study plans; prepared them for the GED, college assessment tests, essay writing, math, and for entering local educational institutions; taught them study strategies for education and the workplace; and helped them with anything we decided upon as a group to study. As a researcher, I took on the role of participant observer, for my primary task was to help the women with upgrading. During the sessions, I took notes but ensured confidentiality of participants. Afterwards, I expanded upon these and turned them into detailed descriptions and observations. As a participant observer, I was able to follow Merriam's (1991) advice, "to see things firsthand and to use [my] knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed, rather than relying upon once-removed accounts from interviewers" (p. 88). I analyzed all field notes, writing, brainstorming, and documents to uncover the findings.

My research concentrated on 22 women between the ages of 20 and 55. I selected them from three separate in-take groups that totalled 40 women (15, 13, 12 respectively). The three intake groups were later divided into six smaller groups consisting of six to nine women depending upon group numbers based on their past education, the Canadian Adult Achievement Test, and interpersonal dynamics. Using criterion-based sampling (purposive), I selected one cohort group from a morning or afternoon session of 9, 7, and 6 women respectively from each of the six month groups for a total of 22 women for my study. All the women happened to possess a Grade 12 diploma or a GED certificate although, in some cases, the grade level may not have been reflected in their academic skill levels. The majority had at least one child; some had children under age 7. All had been on welfare for at least 10 months, and some had been on assistance for over 2 years. Not all women had found formal schooling a pleasant learning experience. However, by the end of our time together, all had taken at least one continuing education course at the local college. These courses included

cashier training, first aid, and computers. Some even had enrolled in certificate programs, such as early childhood education and resident care aide attendant; others had taken academic courses, such as English, reading and study skills, and human services. Still others had enrolled in upgrading courses. When the sessions concluded, only a few had decided not to continue with education for a variety of reasons. Some obtained jobs not requiring education; others were not able to access student loans; or some were not ready to make an educational commitment.

Four underlying goals guided our sessions. One was to bridge into formal education and to portray learning through education as fun and relevant. Another was to illustrate to the women how much experience, knowledge, and skills they already possessed. The third goal was to encourage the women to problem-solve and practice reflexivity. The fourth goal was to show how content may be used in the workplace and academia. To accomplish these goals, we used three techniques: brainstorming, popular theatre as games, and content determined by the women. To clarify the context, I describe my use of each technique.

Brainstorming was used as a pre-writing technique for generating ideas for writing. However, it was also used as medium for eliciting perceptions the participants held about different topics, issues, or problems. For brainstorming, a circle was drawn either on a blackboard, flipchart, or some other means so that the group could see the text. The next step for the group was to generate all the points about a particular subject that came to mind. The key here was to leave ideas unedited. The recorder simply wrote down what was called out to her verbatim. Once generated, ideas were used for essays, for discussions, or for course content selection.

Popular theatre may have numerous definitions depending upon the interpreter; however, I combined ideas from Freire (1970) and Boal (1979). Freire devised an educational methodology whereby through conscientization (critical dialogue, critical reflection, problem-posing, and action about a community's socio-cultural realities) communities of individuals could instigate social transformation. Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal incorporated Freire's concept of conscientization into popular theatre: Boal encouraged oppressed people to become active observers through participation within the theatre to explore alternative solutions to issues important to the community for social transformation. Boal's process of popular theatre included exercises promoting awareness of the body, expression through the body, communication with the body, and problem-

solving with the body. His theory was complemented by my own use, experience, and continued involvement with a popular theatre group in my area. This all served to influence my use of popular theatre during the upgrading sessions.

The third technique I used was to have the women assist me in determining content (curriculum) for our time together based on the needs they expressed during our brainstorming. Because most had a Grade 12 or GED, giving them busy work or concocting irrelevant exercises seemed a definite way to create frustration and aversion to academia. Thus, using brainstorming techniques and Freire's theory of conscientization, we set out to determine what they felt was relevant and what they needed for their transitions.

What Did We Discover?

Five themes emerged from the data analysis. These were (a) content as strategy, (b) strategize use of content, (c) content reveals new perspectives, (d) content reminds of forgotten skills, and (e) content as skill. Furthermore, I discovered that brainstorming, popular theatre as games, and determining content techniques influenced women dramatically.

The first theme to emerge from the data was content as strategy. To meet their own needs, the women tended to use content we discussed in the sessions as strategies to begin moving from welfare into a new field, such as student or employee. For example, in one session, we began discussing grammar and language use in various settings after one woman said, "I notice that when I go in for a job interview that the people on the job speak differently than me." Others agreed that they noticed individuals talked differently in some workplaces. One woman stated, "I want to know more about how to write business letters because I'm unsure of the language to use, and I want to make sure my spelling is proper." Someone else wrote in a comment sheet to me: "For myself, however, learning better grammar and spelling can help me when seeking a job in the clerical field." Another woman said, "One day I would like to own my own business and, as a business woman, proper writing skills would greatly enhance my interaction with staff and clients." Yet another wrote in her comment sheet: "I feel by strengthening my English and writing, spelling will give me the confidants that I need. I can't believe I've allowed these obstacle to hold me back for so many years."

After reviewing the women's oral and written comments, we discussed how language (according to Bourdieu, 1977) is an unwritten code signalling an individual's education, background, and knowledge. Then, we brainstormed common grammatical errors, such as the use of being as the main verb in a sentence, improper pronoun use, and very informal language. We strategized how to overcome overuse of informal language that employers use as signals that women lack communication skills. Collectively, we counted when people said "being," "ain't," and improper pronouns.

Despite what the women were learning, they did not criticize each other for their improper language use. For instance, one day a woman came into our group during coffee break and began to speak, breaking all the rules we had noted. Later, we discussed her grammar; however, at the time, the women did not correct her or make her feel inferior. As they corrected each other, the women found that the practice and awareness of how they spoke was helpful. One woman wrote in her comment sheet: "Picking out people's flaws doesn't overly impress me, but I have learnt that it is not actually picking them apart it's helping them." Another stated, "I am starting to realize that I do make mistakes when I'm talking. I'm going to start listening to myself while I'm talking so I can correct this problem." One woman wrote: "I also have become aware of when I am speaking to become grammatically correct."

Overall, through the women's initial queries and our conscious intention to practice the content (grammar usage) they were learning, the women began to strategize (as Bourdieu, 1977 might say) ways to enter into a new social field by using content so that they would blend in. The cultural capital of language, as the women noticed, was very important to them if they hoped to enter into the workplace as well as education. Thus, I began to see the women taking control to meet their perceived needs to accomplish their long term goals.

The second theme I discovered was how women were adept at strategizing ways to use new content to meet their needs. For example, when the small groups were initially allocated, the women were quite concerned about the group they had been assigned to. They tried to figure out if one group was supposed to be smarter than another. A number of women articulated this thought: "Was I assigned to this group because it is the dumb group?" "How did you decide to put us in this group?" Many were quite sensitive, for they had had unpleasant experiences in school because they

had been considered problems or slow learners. To allay their concerns, I had them engage in an introductory exercise where each woman partnered with a woman she did not know very well. Then, I gave them a series of questions so they could discover the person's strengths, potential contributions, life roles, and expectations. In addition to interviewing, the partners drew each other. Although they showed initial reluctance, the women drew some stunning pictures of each other reflecting the strengths of each woman from her responses to the interview questions.

At the end of this exercise, the women indicated it had helped them think about strategies for interviewing individuals for their upcoming information sessions. One woman corroborated this by writing in her daily comment sheet: "I had alot of fun & found the 'picture' exercise interesting. It helps with the skills we will need interviewing people related to our career goals." Also, the exercise allowed them to think about how to respond to questions in a job interview. Neither outcome had been my intention. It had been to create a collaborative community, promote teamwork, and recognize attributes or skills they possessed. One participant substantiated this when she wrote: "I thought the drawing was something to really make you think about. It made others realize things about you they never knew before. I enjoyed sharing things about myself and my partener." Another woman pointed out in her written comments: "Drawing my partner was interesting, I found out alot more about her, then I actually knew, or thought I knew. It was neat to see evryone so down to earth & let down their barriers!" Furthermore, the exercise encouraged women to speak extemporaneously. One woman wrote: "I enjoyed the drawing and talking about myself. I'm very shy and negative so it's good practice."

These findings support Bourdieu's contention that individuals strategize ways to use types of cultural capital, such as language and speaking, to gain future entry into new social spaces. For example, as creative agents, women chose to use what could be categorized by some as a childlike exercise as a means to overcome barriers of reluctance to speak, not knowing questions to ask to gain information in situations such as a job interview, and self-confidence. As one woman wrote: "This exercise helped me see I CAN!" Additionally, it helped women address needs for speaking with others, interviewing for jobs, sharing their strengths, and learning to build community.

Through the third theme, I discovered that the content we worked with revealed new perspectives to the women. Our popular theatre games assisted

the women in looking at the world differently through more than just verbal communication. For example, in most exercises, we "talked" with the body. In one instance, I asked the women to portray happiness and relief with their bodies. Each individual chose her own body position and then was asked to show it to a partner. Then, partners had to mirror the positions their counterparts portrayed. They could not believe the six different body interpretations they discovered around these concepts. As one woman wrote at the end of the session:

I found this game lots of fun. It was very stimulating, both physically & mentally. Having your mind thinking and your body moving all the same time, takes some coordination and then to have to stop & listen only topped the cake! It should me how you really do have to focus & concenrate when apply these skills the way they should be. It also showed me that everyone communicates differently and my or their responses vary according to how, I or they, are thinking.

This enhanced knowledge about communication indicated for the women that this exercise could help them listen and communicate differently with others. One woman wrote, "My thoughts about this game at first was confusing but as we went along I found it alot of fun. There was alot of laughter and it also teachers about how well we listen to instructions." Another woman stated in writing: "I found this game alot of fun. It had to do with listinening skills and focusing on what the other person is saying and doing. If you wern't listening, you couldn't hear what they were saying. It also brought me out of my comfort zone, since I am a bit shy." The women reported the games cracked stereotypes about their abilities.

Furthermore, the games assisted the women in exploring their need for improved communication skills. For example, when they were asked to engage in the "Both Talking at Once" game, it helped them highlight how they communicate under pressure, how they tend to communicate with others, knowledge of different subjects, and influences of past learned ways of communication as well as differences in communication with diverse individuals and their strengths. As one participant said in her written comments: "I quite enjoyed the 'talking' exercise. It will be great if we can do more! I find they are helpful for breaking the ice and to point out some strong points we didn't know we had and the weak points that we can improve on!"

These exercises were educational, and they were not what Freire (1970) calls "banking education" whereby knowledge is poured into individuals.

Furthermore, these exercises served as a way for individuals to problem-
pose, through games and popular theatre, about some of their perceived
needs in communication, self-confidence, and handling unknown situations.
Overall, the women perceived these new perceptions and discoveries as ways
to help them through alternative ways of looking at the world and people
within it.

The fourth theme reminded many women about content as forgotten
skills they had already learned. For example, some women out of school for
10 years or more were convinced they could not remember anything until
knowledge suddenly returned as they practised forgotten skills. One woman
pointed out in writing: "I am started to remember bits and pieces of the
things I learned in English in high school." Another pointed out: "I remembr
some of the math formulas which I thought I had forgotten." In one exercise
after the women indicated they could not remember how to perform math
calculations, they were pleasantly surprised to see how many math concepts
they practised daily through complicated budgeting, shopping with minimal
finances, and cooking with fractions. One woman stated: "I never really
thought about how much math I use when I try to make my food budget
stretch or how many fractions I use when I use a recipe." They
acknowledged that they might have more useful skills for the workplace and
education than they had thought. "Maybe I do have some skills. I just never
thought about what I do everyday as relating to a job," wrote one woman.

Through brainstorming women discovered, to their surprise, how much
critical thinking and complicated problem solving they performed daily. One
woman explained, "I enjoy it when we brainstorm, so many thoughts and
ideas just seem to flow." "I always thought my life was boring, but I see
from our discussions that I juggle my time and manage my time well to help
my children," stated another woman. Overall, the women were amazed at
how much they had learned in school. Also, they had not thought about the
complexity of the problems they solved daily to meet their needs and their
children's through budgeting or crises they encountered as single mothers.
Similarly, Fraser (1989) points out that the welfare system positions "women
as subjects" (p. 149) and fails to acknowledge them as critical thinkers able
to meet their own needs. Bureaucrats stereotype women as dependent.

Finally, the data revealed content as a skill. This was illustrated when
the women began practising essay writing and learning how to solve ratios
and proportions and fractions. Many women had either never worked with or
knew very little about these concepts or those such as procrastination. One

woman pointed out in her written comments: "Now that I know the steps to overcome procrastinating, I'll have to apply them. that's good for me. It will make my future brighter." Another said: "I learned about how to break the cycle of procrastination, now I intend to start implementing these techniques."

Many discovered that through explanation and working through problems that they could practise a skill until they became adept at performing it. One said, "I never thought I'd be able to do fractions, but suddenly it just clicked, and I can do them." Much of this was a result of their willingness to practise the activity to master the skill. Many acknowledged that content as skill would help them both in the workplace, in returning to education, writing the GED, or in entering other training programs. One woman was extremely pleased with herself for writing the GED: "I had always been afraid to get the GED because I didn't think I could it. I'm proud I did it just one step at a time and practice, practice, practice." Despite their frustrations, many women persevered and accomplished their goals, whether small or large. Some practised writing until they were confident to take college placement tests or the GED. Others practised skills, such as math, to help their children. Overall, women learned to problem-solve, problem-pose, and practise their skills to meet their needs and goals.

The Role of the Exploratory Techniques

From my analysis of our explorations, I discovered that brainstorming, popular theatre as games, and determining content fulfilled a number of roles for the women. Firstly, we were fortunate to be in a program where we could use the upgrading content to problem-solve different needs. Secondly, upgrading became more than banking education. Thirdly, women could take control of content to help meet their needs.

First of all, through our group explorations, the women and I were able "to deal with women on women's terms" (Fraser, 1989, p. 149). This allowed the women to get to know each other; work collaboratively; share ideas, information, and new knowledge; and break stereotyping and isolation they had encountered on welfare. Through brainstorming, we examined intersections between women's everyday experiences as care givers and providers; women as active, skilled, and creative agents, navigating systems, juggling everyday life as single parents; and their needs, such as finding safe, reliable day care.

Furthermore, the women discussed difficulties finding and keeping work if they did not have a car, for local bus transportation did not and still does not coincide with odd or long working hours. Additionally, women must take their children to childcare, if they have it, before they go to work and pick the children up after work on the bus. They said that in addition to poor bus service, bus passes are not available for women attempting to leave welfare by working. Thus, they pointed out that some of the most important needs even in initiating a move from welfare must be met. Often policy makers, government, and program staff gloss over these needs as too costly and claim that such needs are the women's responsibilities. We discussed ways to ask for help as well as strategies that some women had used to resolve these issues. Most importantly, the women discovered that they were not alone. Before they often had thought: "It's just me who has all these problems." Our discussions brought greater awareness; in some cases, women began to lobby for more help in meeting their needs. Our discussions helped women affirm how important these needs were before they could make transitions from welfare.

Our brainstorming sessions provided an avenue for the women to gain voice, re-evaluate themselves, and become a supportive, learning community. The sessions helped the women see what active, skilled, and creative problem-solving agents they really were, for they had been led to feel and believe that they were not capable due to stereotyping by society and different agencies. Often, the women said that they had lost self-confidence because they had been made to feel incapable. However, when they saw their activities in meeting their basic needs and those of their children they were almost surprised. Some had not realized how capable they were in managing time, budgeting, and organizational skills.

Through popular theatre, upgrading became more than banking education. In addition to furnishing relief from academic work, popular theatre (games, as the women called them) provided a novel means for meeting some of their needs. For example, the games illustrated to women their communication strengths. The shyest and quietest women were convinced that they could not speak as fluently in front of others as the talkative women. Often the games provided quiet women with a vehicle for discovering their fluency and facility in speaking. In fact, they seemed to be able to think better under pressure than some who chatted constantly. To the chatterers, the games illustrated how they might improve their communication skills by paying more attention to content and focusing. This

information can help them all in job interviews or speaking up in groups. Thus, the games encouraged the women to reflect critically on established patterns of communication.

The popular theatre games were helpful in creating a sense of community, collaboration, willingness to work in a group, and confidence building. The games encouraged the women to try new challenges while in a group. They told me that the games allowed them to participate in fun, safe, and playful ways whereas normally they would not have attempted any of these silly games, especially in a group. Furthermore, the group work of the games helped the women develop body awareness and positioning in groups. Many were extremely self-conscious; however, the games helped them gain more confidence about body movements because we had been working to "talk" with our bodies. One group became so attached to popular theatre that they demanded we not miss our game, for the games challenged their attitudes and encouraged them to take responsibility for going beyond their comfort zones. The women reported the games increased their flexibility.

Many women discussed how much they were learning about themselves through the games. They discovered that learning comes through various means, whereas before they believed that learning only comes through schooling or having it "poured in." After our games, we discussed the learning process and our insights. These conversations provided us with material for brainstorming, problem-solving, and implementing new strategies.

Determining content provided the women with a sense of control over what they felt they needed and deemed important to learn for their transitions from welfare. Often, women felt they had no control, for bureaucracies and agencies tended to make decisions for them based on policies, rules, and experts' perceptions of the woman's situation. Furthermore, by determining content, women learned they could identify their needs and strategies to acquire what Bourdieu (1977) calls different capitals. Some trainers view women on welfare as not knowing what they need. However, the women were aware that cultural capital, such as language and education, is necessary for entering the workforce or social spaces to fit in. Thus, they were cognizant that hidden rules exist for different socio-economic groups. Moreover, they had an intuitive sense of not belonging to those groups, for they had noticed particular ways of dressing, specific recreational activities, or even the ability to go for lunch or coffee with co-workers.

I surmise that the women chose to use determining the content as a means to practice their strategies for moving into new social spaces. Moreover, they used groups to verify strategies, capitals, and problem-solving abilities that they needed in order to leave welfare.

Single Mothers' Employability

As illustrated in this case study, learning and skill acquisition are situated in social contexts where individuals learn to transform their social realities (see Jarvis, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1996). These women on welfare identified and began meeting their needs by altering their social realities through novel techniques in the upgrading sessions. Often employability traits displayed by women are hard to measure, so employers rely on academic credentials to measure trainability (Blaug, 1976; Rubenson, 1992). However, single mothers on welfare often possess few credentials and, thus, are eliminated from accessing higher paying jobs unless they are able to find ways to demonstrate their human capital. Some attempt the long walk from welfare by attending pre-employment, training, and employment programs as well as acquiring certificates and diplomas and taking courses. However, as my pilot project illustrates, women are often left out, for they may not use the "right" language and grammar, dress similar to the other employees, or "act" like their co-workers. Consequently, they feel foreign as they feel they do not belong, for they possess different dispositions or habitus and disparate forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Usher, Bryant, & Johnson, 1997). These types of issues are too complicated to be resolved through short-term programs. Many need more time and support to make a habitus type life transition.

If we adult educators truly want to see women make a long term transition from welfare to work and education, maybe we could consider a few ideas that this case study has suggested to me. Firstly, programs should be made longer. We could model them on the Swedish programs, which are at least a year long. Secondly, prior learning assessment could be used in educational settings to translate skills women have into credits. Rather than gearing most upgrading programs to Grade 12 or GED certification, assessing prior learning in life roles can provide evidence of employability or trainability readiness. Thirdly, perhaps, some sort of prior learning assessment could be used in the workplace too to level the credentialing game and to illustrate that these women do, in fact, possess the employability skills required for "good" workers. Fourthly, a mentoring system could be

put into place whereby professional women, particularly single mothers who made a transition from welfare, could act as mentors and role models for women attempting to leave social assistance. Finally, government should be prepared to provide long term subsidies in addition to medical and dental benefits to single mothers on welfare as they attempt to enter the labour market. These subsidies could aid women in avoiding the revolving door back to welfare because they find it too costly and unhealthy for them to work. If put in economic terms, governments must look at all the human capital in these women that is going to waste. However, if put in human terms, is society prepared to relegate single mothers to the bottomless pit of welfare by continuing in the current trend?

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