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“I LEARNED I AM A FEMINIST”: LESSONS FOR ADULT LEARNING FROM PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH UNION WOMEN

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Abstract

For almost two decades, the Prairie School for Union Women (PSUW) has operated in Saskatchewan, Canada. Its use of feminist popular education, adult learning principles in facilitation, and mentoring and support for activist practices make it unique from other labour schools in many respects. This paper focuses on a community-based participatory action research study that explored how well the PSUW is meeting its goals to “develop women’s personal and leadership skills, to build solidarity among women workers, and to increase knowledge about the labour movement.” The article documents how the school achieves its goals and how it offers lessons in labour education, activism, non-formal adult learning, intersectional approaches, feminist popular education, university–community relationships, and transformative education.

Résumé

Depuis près de deux décennies, l'École des femmes syndiquées des provinces des Prairies (Prairie School for Union Women/PSUW) fonctionne en Saskatchewan au Canada. Utilisation de l'éducation populaire féministe, des principes de l'apprentissage des adultes dans la facilitation et le mentorat ainsi que la mise en œuvre du soutien aux pratiques militantes la différencient des autres écoles du travail à beaucoup d'égards. Centré sur une étude de recherche-action participative communautaire, cette article explore comment l'École des femmes syndiquées des provinces des Prairies (PSUW) atteint ses objectifs pour « développer les compétences personnelles et les qualités de leader des femmes, pour créer des liens de solidarité entre les travailleuses, et pour répandre les connaissances sur le mouvement travailliste ». L'article décrit comment cette école atteint ses objectifs et comment elle offre des leçons dans l'éducation du travail, dans l'activisme, dans l'apprentissage non-formel des adultes, dans les approches intersectionnelles, dans l'éducation populaire féministe, dans les rapports entre l'université et la communauté ainsi que dans l'éducation transformatrice.

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Relevance of the Study

The Prairie School for Union Women (PSUW) is the oldest annual labour school for women in Canada, but this is only one aspect of its uniqueness. The embodiment and development of feminist popular education¹ curricula and methodologies in the school's operation are central to its goals, which are "to develop women's personal and leadership skills, to build solidarity among women workers, and to increase knowledge about the labour movement" (Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, 2013). The study, *Innovations, Opportunities and Challenges: The Story of the Prairie School for Union Women*, (Hanson, 2012) was the first empirical inquiry to explore and document how well the goals of the school are being met and the challenges it continues to face. The findings of the study expand and challenge notions about gender and labour education.

Key to the study was the choice of participatory action research (PAR) as a research methodology. PAR provided the school's steering committee and the researcher a more equitable process for sharing control and power over the research process. PAR as a study methodology merges well with popular education because both are aimed at exploring inequities and working toward naming and eliminating hierarchical power dynamics. It also suggests a method for research and collaboration between adult educators and the labour movement that fits well with socially transformative learning theory and practice. Particularly, the school's feminist, intersectional, and inclusive practices, operations, and approaches offer possibilities and lessons for adult educators involved in non-formal, transformative learning. First, however, the unique practice of feminist popular education and feminist approaches to structuring learning at the school demand a greater understanding.

Understanding the School Itself

Carter and Martin (2013) stated that "the job of labour education is to deepen and broaden the learning that is part and parcel of participating in the labour movement, so that workers' actions are effective, and so that lives, workplaces and communities can be transformed" (p. 270). Labour education at the PSUW aims to fulfill such a mandate through its goals, but, importantly, acknowledges that women in the union movement need more resources and to learn a feminist approach (Banks, 2000). The content of the courses, the reach for diversity (i.e., through scholarships), and the feminist approach set the PSUW apart from other labour schools. Although the PSUW was created to break gendered access to labour schools, which until recently often had more male participation, it is the content of the courses and the feminist popular approach that are noteworthy to the research.

During the annual school, started by the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) in 1997 and held annually in a retreat-like setting in Saskatchewan, groups of 60 to 160 women engage in a non-formal, five-day education experience that emphasizes adult learning principles of facilitation and mentoring and support for activist practices (Paavo, 2001).

1 Feminist popular education is broadly considered a feminist approach to popular education, a form of social transformative education with theories and practices borrowed from Freire (1970). The universalisms proposed in Freire's pedagogy are challenged by feminists (Doerge, 1992; Weiler, 1991). Simply put, transformative learning, in this sense, involves sharing and analyzing personal experiences, then working together to find solutions to real-world problems.

Courses provide over 20 hours of instruction in various union- and social justice-related topics, including feminism and trade unionism, Aboriginal issues, collective bargaining, homophobia, dis/abilities, popular education skills, advocacy and protest, and gender dimensions of the workplace. Course names such as *Well-behaved Women Seldom Make History*, *Inside and Out*, *Women Speaking Out*, and *What Colour Is a Union?* were developed when the steering committee noticed that enrolment in certain courses increased when course names were more dynamic.

All courses are designed to have a feminist analysis and investigate intersecting issues of identity and inequality. By taking an intersectional approach, the organizers state that courses can look at different forms of discrimination and privilege based on gender, race, class, age, ability, and so on so that women are not treated as one homogeneous group. For example, the school's scholarship program is set up to support women from equity-seeking groups and non-union women who want to attend the school. The scholarships are designed to increase diversity at the school and address biases that may favour able-bodied, heterosexual women's privilege (Paavo, 2001).

The emphasis on using feminist approaches is especially sought-after and missing from the literature on labour education and union renewal (Briskin, 2006; Kainer, 2006). According to Paavo (2001), the school also works to provide a learning experience that removes inequitable power structures by having two facilitators instead of one for each course and by ensuring facilitators are trained and committed to using feminist analysis and a popular education approach; for those not familiar with these methods, the school offers two courses in popular education.

The school's steering committee, which partnered with the researcher in this study, includes staff from the SFL and a voluntary group of past participants and facilitators who meet to plan the annual non-formal learning event. The steering committee meets regularly to plan the annual event and to ensure that the courses and approach to learning and operations remain feminist-centred.²

A Transformative, Feminist Approach to Labour Education

Depending on the source, labour education can be divided into various streams or tendencies (Cooper, 1998; Slott, 2002). For the purpose of this study, two types are noteworthy: instrumental and transformative. Instrumental labour education teaches technical and content aspects of learning necessary for union business—for example, increasing shop steward capacity to enforce policy. Larger political and social issues are avoided in this kind of labour education (Slott). The second type, transformative education, is influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970). Freire's version of transformative education suggests that educators and learners engage collectively in dialogue and use a problem-posing approach to solve social issues. Within union education, Burke, Deschamps, Jackson, Martin, and Paavo (2002) suggested this means helping workers find a process to move past previous prejudices and build critical consciousness about how their workplace struggles are linked to movements for social justice.

According to adult educators such as Butterwick and Selman (2003) or O'Sullivan (2002), transformative learning draws attention to the complexities of lived identities and

2 The definition of *feminism* used by the school is not explicit and remains open to differing opinions.

forms of oppression, and it works to change them. O'Sullivan described such change in the following excerpt:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and actions ... Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body-awareness; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. 11)

Discussions of gendered or feminist applications of transformative learning are not, however, adequately addressed in the literature (Lange, 2013), and even less attention is paid to feminist labour education (Briskin, 2006). Carter and Martin (2013) asserted that labour educators advocate using popular education principles and techniques to deepen consciousness-building among workers in order that an awareness of individual and collective circumstances and oppressions can be understood. Shifts in understanding social situations can transform perspectives; therefore, a transformative potential is central to feminism and labour activism (Hanson, 2009). According to Carter and Martin, labour education provides adult education with clear examples of transformative education for social change. Bleakney and Choudry (2013), however, questioned how effective the popular education approaches adopted by unions are in building social movements; they asserted that labour education tends to avoid risk and conflict, both of which are part of a process of critical reflection and deeper learning. Attention to popular education practices used in labour education and to feminist organizing used at the school may offer adult educators and labour educators a much-needed understanding of socially transformative learning.

Feminist Popular Education and Labour Activism

Popular education is a form of transformative education in practice, originally delineated by a class analysis. Examples in adult education come from the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee, the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia or, more recently, the Coady International Institute and the Catalyst Centre. Feminists influenced the development of popular education by inserting feminist perspectives and concerns into it, all the while acknowledging that multiple forms of oppression—such as gender, race, class, and ability—increasingly require attention (Doerge, 1992; Hanson, 2009; Weiler, 1991). Initially viewed as suspect, the engendering and politicizing of popular education are now supported (Crowther, Galloway, & Martin, 2005; Manicom & Walters, 2012). Therefore, while the PSUW uses popular education rooted in Freirian theory and methods, it adds a feminist lens to the learning. Kirton and Healy (2004) explained why a gender or feminist lens is particularly important to women's labour education:

Our assertion is that women's trade union courses, as a form of women's separate organizing, are one such location of gendered consciousness raising (although not the only one). Issues are framed both by tutors and participants to raise awareness of inequality and, guiding on a sense of injustice, to encourage the belief that collectivism is the means to conflict

resolution ... The education setting is especially important for women because “women’s issues” might not be articulated at the workplace (particularly if the local union leaders are men). (p. 306)

In critically examining the way labour unions are adapting institutionalized ideas of diversity and hegemonic neo-liberal discourse, Briskin (2013) wrote that there is a need for “pro-active politicised union education against these deep-rooted value structures” (pp. 139–140). The emphasis on feminist analysis at PSUW possibly fills a gap between women and labour union renewal and revitalization in that it, at least in theory, addresses broader goals of transformation and makes visible the experiences of women.

This study begins to fill a void of scholarship on the ways that equity issues can be mobilized within labour movements (Bleakney & Choudry, 2013; CUPE, 2005; Kainer, 2006; Kirton & Healy, 2004). Gender bias in the union movement is widely documented (Briskin, 2006; Kaminski & Yakura, 2008; Kirton, 2014; Yates, 2006), and although important strategies to address gender bias include organizing women’s committees or women’s conferences, such efforts seldom include an analysis of how gender intersects with other forms of oppression (Kainer; Kirton). The goals of and courses offered by the PSUW speak to efforts at dismantling some of the invisible politics affecting diverse groups of women. These views are not common in the literature, although some authors argue that the health and viability of the trade union movement itself rests on its ability to re-envision its decision-making processes and organization of power in favour of such values (Briskin, 2006). In fact, as Briskin (2002) argued, “the women’s committees have utilized more inclusive, flexible and responsive structures and developed vocal constitutions which have challenged leaderships to be accountable, and unions to be more democratic and participatory” (p. 35). She added that this has opened discussions on racism and homophobia within the labour movement. Heery and Adler (2004) concurred, saying it was feminist interactions with the women’s movement that placed emphasis on collective actions and activism beyond the union itself.

Studies also demonstrate that women-only courses increase union activism and participation because women learn confidence and skills to articulate opinions, develop gendered identities along with trade union identity, and develop friendships and solidarity (supports) within the labour movement (Kirton & Healy, 2004). Kainer (2006) noted, however, that the contributions of women-only courses or feminist analyses frequently go unnoticed. This is further complicated when unions amalgamate issues into a social justice focus; this can detract or depoliticize issues of particular concern to women (Briskin, 2002). The PSUW experiences of including feminist politics in organizing provides an important example in the union movement. The absence of literature referring to the school, however, is notable. Likewise, literature about social change in adult education often lacks a gender lens or feminist theoretical analysis (English, Kennedy, Irving, & Davidson, 2006).

Kirton’s (2014) discussion of gender and union structures in Britain further suggests that when gender strategies are deliberately built into union movements, women’s participation is enhanced. Opening spaces where a politicized, representational identities (for example, references to immigrant workers, Aboriginal women, and young leaders) are recognized as valuable components of union education serve as stepping stones for women and equity-seeking groups to build capacity and increase participation in union politics and leadership (Bleakney & Choudry, 2013; Kirton & Healy, 2004). Such an experience was highlighted in

the words of former PSUW facilitator and steering committee member Loretta Gerlach (as quoted in Banks, 2000):

Women feel like there's more room for them to participate in an entirely different context—because it's much more caring and sharing—but sometimes you see some healing that needs to take place by women who come from unions that are male-dominated. You can tell, because the words just rush out: they have so much to say, but they've been silenced for so long. (p. 39)

To understand whether such opinions were commonplace, the researcher and community counterpart, the school's steering committee, decided to develop the research methodology using feminist and participatory approaches.

Study Approach and Methodology

Feminist- and community-based participatory action research is central to this research. The community-based research collaboration between the university-based academic and the steering committee of the school recognized that the study participants lived multiple constructed realities that are framed by their identities as women foremost and as members of diverse unions, and by race, class, age, and other forms of diversity. Such diverse constructions of experience alter perceptions of knowledge, and accordingly the research is acknowledged as subjective. The school itself advocates feminism as a way of seeing the world through a gendered lens—that is, the lives of diverse women frame experience in different ways, and a reflexive position on the part of the researcher assists in realizing the complexities of such experience (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). For example, women's work roles are recognized as central to how the school structures programs; the school prioritizes not only course time, but also recreation and wellness. Feminist research questions what counts as knowledge, how issues are political, and how power is understood in the process. Feminist research demands attention to the perspectives in the research as well as the interpretation of the data (Reinharz & Chase, 2002). Feminist theory fits well with participatory action research (PAR) and the purpose of the research because PAR emphasizes the political nature of knowledge production and allows for flexibility and reflexivity in creating and understanding the research questions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Reid & Frisby, 2007). PAR ensures that the participants' concerns, interests, and preferences are guided by the participants themselves (Bishop, 2008). According to Elliot (2011), it "places researchers in the service of the community members" (p. 11); therefore, traditional dimensions of power and privilege present in academic research are challenged. Through active engagement with the steering committee throughout the process, research knowledge was created by and for the community it served (Israel, Eng, Schultz, & Parker, 2005). The story of the research process, as follows, demonstrates the value of using community-based participatory research as a method of inquiry for creating knowledge *with*, not *about*, a specific community of practice.

Collaborative Research Methods

The researcher knew several members of the PSUW steering committee before the study began and was familiar with several stories about the school. Prior to developing

the research, the researcher met with the steering committee to determine the kind of inquiry the committee wanted to engage in with a university partner. The university-based researcher then led the process of obtaining funding for the research and achieving behavioural ethics approval from the university. The inclusion of the committee members' opinions and the continuous sharing and adapting of data collection methods throughout the research ensured that the results were more accessible and understood by all.

Data collection methods included document analysis, key informant interviews, and a focus group at the school. Multiple meetings and dialogues with the steering committee also invited a feedback loop into the research process.

The document analysis involved former program brochures and participant evaluations—particularly those of the last five years—which were combed for details. Twenty study participants were also interviewed or participated in focus groups. Six of these study participants contributed through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The recorded (and later transcribed) interviews averaged one hour each. To ensure that participants at the school had a common understanding of what community-based participatory research entailed, the researcher presented information about the study at the school's opening assembly. Important for the study process was the acknowledgement that the researcher was familiar with feminist popular education and non-formal adult learning from her academic study and community-based work. During the research process, members of the PSUW steering committee and the researcher presented at a labour convention and at a community–university forum about the research.

After the data were analyzed, the researcher met with the steering committee to review the findings. By using a participatory process consisting of group discussion and individual and collective ranking of ideas (previously categorized by the researcher), the steering committee prioritized the recommendations from the study and reached consensus on next steps.

Feminist theoretical framing allowed the researcher to recognize the subjective ways that knowledge was represented and constructed about the school. Accordingly, the methodologies were designed to represent and give voice to a diversity of experiences. For example, the data were collected from women aged 24 to 65, from participants and facilitators, and from women representing a range of unions, class backgrounds, sexualities, geographies, and races. Of the 20 study participants, several self-identified as belonging to an equity-seeking group, in this case Aboriginal, differently abled, lesbian, and youth. Study participants, similar to the PSUW steering committee itself, represented professional as well as rank-and-file union members. At least one study participant mentioned attending the school through the scholarship program. Some worked as facilitators and were attending for the first time, and others had been participants in the past (dating back to the first school in 1997).

Prior to the workshop to discuss the findings, the research process often positioned the researcher in a power position. When the researcher facilitated the priority-setting and ranking exercise with the steering committee, the process shifted ownership of the results to the PSUW itself and set the stage for actions and further research collaborations.

Lessons Learned

The data gathered were read multiple times and then categorized into themes. This section reports on the findings using pseudonyms to protect the identity of study participants. "FG" following a pseudonym is used to indicate that the quotation comes from the focus group; other quotations are from interviews. The quotes from the document analysis of the participant evaluations are displayed without any names because they were recorded anonymously. The themes in the findings speak to the question of whether the school is achieving its goals and, in doing so, offer stories of hope and of challenges constructed by the school itself. They offer lessons for non-formal, labour, and transformative education and, perhaps centrally, the importance of applying a gender and intersectional lens to adult education for social justice.

Achieving the Goals of the School

Overwhelmingly, the results demonstrate that the school is meeting its goals. Additionally, women spoke about feeling hopeful, inspired and rejuvenated as a result of their participation in the school. It is perhaps fair to say that the PSUW experience of including feminist politics and a gender analysis fills a much-needed role in the union movement.

The stories from study participants suggest that the school strengthens the role and gendered identities of the participants, leading them into broader social movement. If, as the literature suggests, such perspectives are frequently ignored and absent from much of the discourse on union activism, then attention to how they are exercised at the school and beyond is timely (Briskin, 2013; Kainer, 2006). One example that demonstrates this was reported by a study participant, Arnica, who said that after attending the school she went on to her union's provincial executive and to work on a policy for the International Labour Organization on HIV and AIDS. She said,

It was the door that opened, that gave me the confidence to explore more about what my union does, what it meant to be a union member, what it meant to be part of the labour movement, and I would never be doing what I'm doing today had I not got my very first experience and taste of it through the Prairie School ... It was the first environment ever that as a lesbian, I felt safe.

Although women at the school acknowledged it was important for the school to be women only, they realized that it was not always easy to explain this outside of the school. Several participants equated this with male-dominated leadership. For example, Brenda (FG) said, "[There are] very inflexible structures within a union movement sometimes and I think you're talking about the old boys and I think I've mentioned these old boys one or two times before, or maybe twelve." Male-dominated structures of power continue to be viewed as an obstacle for sustained transformation as experienced by women at the school.

Personal Growth and Transformation

For most study participants, the school was an experience in their lives that could be described as bringing about increased confidence and personal empowerment. Women spoke about feeling hopeful, inspired, and rejuvenated as a result of their participation in the school. The participant discussions explored many aspects of personal growth: "It really

opened up an inner part of me that I didn't realize was locked up" (Mani). Discussions of personal transformation as a result of the experience were noteworthy. Every year there were multiple examples of participants saying in the evaluations, "I learned I was a feminist." At the same time, one study participant said in an interview, "[It's] inaccurate to say that every facilitator is a feminist" (Emma), thus demonstrating that not all lived experiences are equal and that contradictions in transformative education exist.

For some participants, a politicized identity was part of the personal transformation. In a few words, one woman summed up the transformation many women experienced at PSUW: "[Prairie School] helped me to find out whom [*sic*] I am becoming" (evaluations, 2007). Another evaluation stated, "[It's] beneficial to me to learn more about my Aboriginal culture and heritage."

The expressions of shifts in identity perceptions demonstrate an important contribution in the work of the PSUW. An acceptance of diverse identities, for example, in expressions such as "it was okay to be lesbian," illustrates this shift. Kirton and Healy (2004) demonstrated that awareness and politicization of identity enriches women's personal lives and increases efficacy in the workplace. Further, leadership at the school was considered different from traditional union leadership, and as Yates (2006) contended, understanding how women organize and work differently are the invisible aspects of equality requiring attention. The school's organizers and study participants suggested that the organization and leadership of the school might provide models for the union movement more widely.

Developing personal confidence was related to feeling supported. Many participants spoke about feeling safer in an all-woman environment. This feeling of safety appeared to be a basis for solidarity among women in the labour movement, at the school, and in other aspects of their lives. Here is one example:

I've never been to anything like this in my life and it's just opened my eyes hugely to not only women's issues, but the history of the union. I'm embarrassed to say I've been a union member for 30 years, but taking night school, got married, had two babies all the while working full time ... Just the environment has been [*contented sigh*]. I just feel so safe and loved and validated, and what I'm learning is transforming conflict, it is just something I can use in my whole life. (Janet, FG)

The creation of an environment in which learning and sharing create conditions that build confidence as a marker toward personal and political change is supported in the literature (Kirton & Healy 2004). The supports were also equated with solidarity. Study participants said the school enabled networking and camaraderie through the learning process, and one concluded, "We are a team. United we stand—divided we fall" (evaluation, 2007).

Education as a Political Act

Feminist popular education was identified by the study participants as a key factor in the school's success. Feminist popular education methodologies are not just integrated into courses at the PSUW; the school also creates its own popular education modules to train facilitators in popular education methodologies. Facilitation is thus learned by women from all ranks and not assumed to be within the domain of a selected few. One facilitator explained,

We talk a lot about the intersections of oppression like that you can be a woman and then you can have ... additional levels of oppression based on orientation, ability, or race. I think it's really important that we provide women with that kind of information because it's empowering and it helps them understand and define their own experiences. What I've observed is once women actually understand their own experience, they are able to do something about it. (Judy, FG)

The way that union democracy or activism intersect and interrogate representations of gender, race, ability, or sexual orientation is an area of practice suggesting additional inquiry. This kind of analysis moves beyond just looking at women or gender as a variable of oppression and addresses how other forms of inequity or oppression—race, class, age, ability, and so on—position people into hierarchies of power and exclusion (Fleras, 2010). The steering committee is aware that coordination and facilitation of the school is still largely implemented by white, able-bodied women and that this may be symptomatic of deeper inequities (Paavo, 2001). The school's scholarships for women of equity-seeking groups indicates an effort to dismantle some of the invisible politics and privileges; while only briefly mentioned by study participants, the scholarships are worthy of additional study. The PSUW goals of developing women's leadership and the process of using a feminist popular education approach suggest potential to challenge dominant neo-liberal and hegemonic patterns from creeping into unions (Briskin, 2013) and other forms of lifelong learning.

The emphasis on "speaking up" and facilitating change, not just learning technical union processes—a form of instrumental education—was a change in emphasis for many at the school. Although the sustained benefits of this are noteworthy, concerns linger about how such increased knowledge and activism can be nurtured and sustained after the school.

The discovery of a feminist identity was frequently described as liberating; for example, one evaluation from 2007 read, "I discovered I am a feminist and gained the confidence to become involved and no longer be just one of the boys." Although expressions of confidence and personal transformation are key indications that the school is meeting its goals, additional queries into how the school deconstructs or enforces dominant ideologies around individualism and neo-liberalism (Briskin, 2013) remain outstanding.

The school offers a course in basic and advanced popular education training as part of its stated ongoing commitment to ensuring that people from all walks of life can become facilitators. According to a steering committee member, the PSUW has fostered a new generation of union educators from within the working population itself:

I think it was important for us philosophically to be able to say facilitating union learning is not the preserve of a privileged few ... to find a way to make the process transparent and accessible, and to say this is one of the ways you can become a facilitator. (Anna)

The facilitator training and supports are unique ways that the PSUW balances activism, programming, and the promotion of Freire's (1970) idea of education as a political act.

Paving the Way: PSUW Operations

Although the PSUW faces many of the same resource challenges that the labour movement faces, it is distinct in many ways. Study participants, for example, commended the way that

the PSUW builds equity into access and practice and balances approaches to programming. At least one young study participant, who attended the school on a scholarship, said that the offer of financial support to women who represent equity-seeking groups or youth makes it more likely that these women will feel welcome.

Building wellness and childcare into programming is another way that the school acknowledges and validates the dual and triple roles played by women. Childcare is provided on-site during all programs and considered part of the feminist analysis that makes the school successful. For example, participants like Amanda and Shawna (FG) pointed out that the provision of childcare, which is accessible all day and in the evening, and offers of food so that women can focus on learning instead of cooking, cleaning, and minding children, are valuable to participants. Arnica said it is important to make people aware that the school not only has high-quality childcare, but also includes children in the activities of the school. She said, “[Childcare] is pretty standard in lots of labour schools, but at Prairie School they’re in the forefront. They have a very important role.” Such efforts speak to a feminist praxis—a theory that recognizes that women’s work is not just paid work. Women frequently have a triple work role—in the household, the community, and the workplace—and structuring learning in this way acknowledges the importance of the triple role for feminist praxis. This is potentially different from other social justice union education because, at the PSUW, economic, social, and unpaid work are all overtly recognized and programming is developed to include wellness, recreation, and childcare. The school’s efforts toward including a feminist perspective provides an impetus to ensure that union members engage in gendered consciousness-raising—a narrative all-too-often absent from discourse on union activism (Briskin, 2006, 2013; Kainer, 2006).

Study participants also provided ideas for additional follow-up and for shifting attention to related issues, as Mani suggested: “I think that you know that this is such a tremendously safe platform to crack that shell open. Then, you know, we get out in the real world and you get squashed so why don’t we have other programs?” Supports for sustaining the learning, the mentoring, and the transformation were suggested. Additionally, the steering committee sought to pursue more visibility about the school beyond the school, as explained in the following discussion.

Discussion of Results

Personal Growth and Transformation

Study participants acknowledged the importance of linking union issues and union activism to broader forms of social activism and feminism in local and global contexts. Within the current context of government economic restructuring, which is impacting the union movement (as well as other progressive social movements), it is clear that leadership and activist training to resist and construct alternatives is necessary. The extent to which the PSUW contributes to transformation in union culture or practice remains a topic for further study; however, the stories expressed by study participants indicate that transformation is experienced in personal perspectives and in confidence-building, including the construction of a more inclusive union leadership. The literature on union activism and union renewal supports efforts toward building new models of leadership (Kainer, 2006; Kaminski & Yakura, 2008). There are two ways, in particular, that PSUW

presents examples of different forms of leadership: (1) a commitment to diverse and intersectional perspectives and (2) acknowledgment that practices of leadership are based on lived experiences. The fact that the school has produced leaders like Arnica, leading in the wider world and within the school itself, is a unique example of a self-sustaining educational practice worthy of additional attention in the field of transformative learning and movement-building.

Challenges Remain

The study demonstrates that while the school provides benefits to its participants on personal and political levels, challenges remain. In particular, several study participants mentioned that after they left the school they frequently found a context of work or union politics that did not comprehend or was even hostile to their new ideas. Addressing how the school can transform the energy and commitment of its participants into supported and respected union activists still requires attention. As Kainer (2006) suggested, "In the current era of labour struggle in which unions are losing ground as a force of political opposition to capital, women's organizing continues to hold out possibilities for reinvigorating labour movements, and need[s] to be considered in debates on the future of unions" (p. 30).

Additional challenges raised in the study include the ability of the school to sustain itself without assistance from SFL; continuity in leadership of the school, and the ability of the school to find sustained interest in its work from other constituencies, such as academics. Study participants' suggestions for additional marketing, publicity, and networking are noteworthy in this regard. Networking outside of the labour movement was not suggested, yet in the context of neo-liberal restructuring, such linking of alliance might be worthwhile (Bleakney & Choudry, 2013).

Feminist Politics, the PSUW, and Adult Learning

By using feminist ideologies to guide the school's practices, PSUW seems to be not only building the confidence and personal identities of the school's participants, but politicizing them and developing their potential for union activism beyond the school—an idea widely supported in gender and labour literature (Briskin, 2013; Kainer, 2006; Kirton & Healy, 2004). The literature also discusses how opportunities for finding voice and understanding identity politics are important in the workplace and beyond, because they bring a new consciousness to the social and personal spaces that women occupy. Kirton (2014) and Briskin (2002) pointed out that gendered activism and women's labour organizing encompass important strategies that challenge traditional unionism while building commitments to union gender democracy. The feminist approach to labour education at the school is exemplary of this and synchronous with work in the wider union movement: "In response to this growing recognition, women activists across the industrialized world have actively campaigned to make unions more structurally and culturally inclusive. These initiatives have sought to increase participation, democratize organizational structures, and strengthen the capacity of unions to represent workers of all genders, races, and backgrounds" (Burke et al., 2002, p. 292).

The school offers an example of non-formal learning using an approach that is gendered and intersectional. Noteworthy in this regard is the innovative way the school trains and develops facilitators with diverse groups of women. The participation of diverse groups of

racialized and newcomer populations in the school, however, remains an area for additional work and study.

Recently, scrutiny to the gendered and political ideologies underlying labour education was suggested (Briskin, 2013). The school's efforts toward including a feminist perspective provides an impetus to ensure that union members engage in gendered consciousness-raising—a narrative often absent from discourse on union activism (Briskin, 2006, 2013; Kainer, 2006). The dearth of literature referring directly to the PSUW is perhaps symptomatic of gaps in literature about non-formal labour education in general, gendered consciousness-raising in particular, and the lack of networking between union and non-union sites of knowledge generation. The discussion about recommendations and priorities with the steering committee further revealed sites for action, including the importance that the organizers place on emphasizing feminist ideas and practices.

The field of feminist adult education has generated valuable analysis and learning in the past. There are, however, few examples of feminist labour education. Lessons from the PSUW in intersectional approaches, in feminist popular education, and in understanding how to integrate women's triple workload into programs might be adapted for other non-formal adult learning environments that aspire toward transformative and social justice agendas.

Participatory Research, Reciprocity, and Action

The participatory workshop with the PSUW steering committee to analyze recommendations and priorities from the study was an opportunity to discuss the school's future directions. The researcher considered the workshop a critical juncture in the PAR process, because if the participants in the study were to be considered co-creators of knowledge and if the researcher sought a process of reciprocal understanding and sharing, then discussion of the findings in order to reach a mutual plan for action was necessary. After the steering committee discussed the key findings through a participatory small-group process designed by the researcher, they achieved consensus on top priorities for the school. Among the top priorities were (1) strengthening the emphasis on feminist analysis in all that the school does, (2) strengthening the facilitation and co-facilitation practices, (3) providing continued attention to diversity in course content and in the school's operations, and (4) enhancing the school's communications and marketing. Using this process demonstrated not only rigour on the part of the researcher in analyzing the data, but also a letting-go or trust in the community organization, in this case the school's steering committee, to decide on priorities and act accordingly. Finally, the results demonstrated that the school was a source of transformation in the lives of many of the participants, and this eventually resulted in a second study.

Moving Forward

While the extent to which the PSUW creates transformation in union culture remains a topic for further study, the stories expressed by study participants indicate that transformation is experienced in personal perspectives and in confidence-building among individual women. Transforming the energy and commitment of the school's participants into supported and respected union activists is less frequent, but does occur. A second study exploring how the transformation experienced by women at the PSUW can be built upon and sustained

is nearing completion.³ The generation of such knowledge may have implications for the school, labour education, and, perhaps, broader social change movements.

The collaborative approach between the researcher and the steering committee in disseminating the research through various mediums, including the release of the first study and its posting on SFL's website, notably on International Women's Day, provides an additional example of how community-based participatory research develops learning relationships and possibilities for knowledge-generation on multiple levels—academic and community-based—and using both academic and popular formats. The benefits of such an approach are reciprocal, transformational, and considered further in the second study. While the constant feedback loops between the steering committee and the researcher bode well with the philosophy of PAR—although taxing on researcher energy and commitment—they honour the spirit of mutual learning and benefits of PAR. Equally important are the lessons learned about the value of the school to the learners, university–community relationships, union activism, labour education, feminist popular education, and transformative learning theory and practice in non-formal adult learning.

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3 The United Association of Labour Educators funded a second study about the PSUW in 2012.

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