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How can we rethink some popular stereotypes about women's learning?

A New Look at Women's Learning

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Why Women's Learning?

Women's potentially distinctive characteristics as learners have been a topic of interest to scholars, educators, and women themselves for centuries. Noted Western (male) philosophers, ranging from Plato to Rousseau, questioned whether women could learn at all, or could at least engage in the kind of rational thought typically associated with "higher" learning. Women were described as the gender of "fruitful wombs and barren brains" (Hales, 1999, p. 240). Even within the last century, women's ability to learn has been questioned, or at least subordinated to their reproductive and affective capacities. A popular obstetrics textbook in the early twentieth century stated that "A woman has a head too small for intellect but just big enough for love" (Hales, 1999, p. 4). Such views prompted Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a prominent feminist in the late 1800s, to argue "the brain is not an organ of sex" (Hales, 1999, p. 241).

Our ideas about women as learners have come a long way, reinforced by women's success in formal education. While at one time women were excluded from higher education, they now constitute more than half of all bachelor's degree recipients. Girls and women tend to earn higher grades than boys and men (Howe and Strauss, 2000). "Women's ways of knowing" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986), popularly characterized as collaborative and empathetic, have been promoted as more effective and appropriate ways of learning in the workplace and in formal education than the competitive, individualistic modes of knowing traditionally associated with men. Increasingly we have come to acknowledge the previously invisible yet significant informal learning that takes place in the traditionally female activities of motherhood and household management.

However, the nature of women's learning remains controversial. Several years ago, I and a colleague, Daniele Flannery, reviewed a large body of literature on women, learning, and education, hoping to develop a comprehensive picture of women's learning. In some literature, we found a litany of characteristics reminiscent of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1992). Women and men learners have been described as speaking "different languages." Women are oriented toward sharing feelings and communicating empathy, while men share information and give advice; women are thought to prefer solving problems in groups, while men prefer independent problem solving. The descriptions have some disturbing similarities to centuries-old stereotypes of women, stereotypes that were used to question women's learning capacities.

Indeed, some scholars argue against a search for distinctive attributes of women's learning, claiming that any actual differences are inconsequential and that women's "difference" will be used to assert women's "deficiency" as learners. Indeed, we found little convincing evidence to support most assertions about women as learners or educational practices for women based on these beliefs (Flannery and Hayes, 2000). Women's learning has received growing attention from researchers in the last two decades, but conclusions drawn from this research remain questionable. Overgeneralization about differences between women and men is a very common pitfall. For example, sex differences in mathematics ability have been exaggerated and distorted in scholarship and the popular media (Crawford, 1995; Hyde, 1990). While there is actually more overlap than difference in male and female test scores, and factors other than sex, such as age and race, have a significant impact, the "superior" mathematics ability of males has been widely acclaimed and even attributed to genetics or hormones. Such conclusions contribute to a "generic" category of women that renders invisible the considerable diversity among women as learners. Generalizations about groups of women based on attributes such as race and ethnicity are derived from the experiences of only a handful of women, with little attention to differences within such groups.

In this chapter, I will encourage readers to take a "new look" at some popular beliefs about women as learners. I will draw on some recent conceptualizations of gender and learning to suggest alternative perspectives that might serve as a basis for understanding and supporting women's learning in a variety of settings. My purpose is not to encourage an emphasis on difference, but rather an appreciation of gender as a crucial aspect of our lives and learning.

Popular Beliefs About Women as Learners

Two prevalent, interrelated sets of beliefs about women as learners relate to the significance of relationships, or "connection," in women's learning and women's presumed preferences for subjective and affective ways of learning.

Relationship. The significance of relationship in women's lives has been widely touted ever since Carol Gilligan (1982), along with other psychologists such as Jean Baker Miller (1986), popularized the idea that a woman defines herself—and views her world—primarily in relationship to others. Numerous other scholars have supported the idea that women's psychological development is oriented more toward increasing intimacy with others than toward autonomy (the orientation typically associated with men's psychological development). Various explanations for this relational orientation have been proposed, such as the idea that mothers encourage their daughters to identify and affiliate with them as women, while they encourage their sons to differentiate and strive for separation as men (Miller, 1986). This centrality of relationship has led to recommendations that educational programs for women should emphasize collaboration, support, and affiliation, as well as to critiques of gender bias in the emphasis on autonomy and self-direction in much adult education literature and practice (Flannery, 1994).

Another perspective on relationship in women's learning concerns women's ways of acquiring new knowledge. The concept of "connected knowing" was introduced by the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986), which became perhaps the most influential publication about women's learning in the last two decades. Connected knowing was described as embracing new ideas and seeking to understand different points of view. Connected knowing was contrasted with "separate knowing," characterized by taking a more adversarial stance toward new ideas and looking for flaws in logic and reasoning. While the authors identified a variety of ways of knowing used by the women in their research, they asserted that connected learning was preferred by the largest number. They proposed "connected teaching" to support this way of knowing. Connected teaching was intended to contrast with traditional modes of education that emphasize separate knowing, and, presumably, conflict with women's preferred modes of learning. These ideas influenced the design of many educational programs for women, particularly in higher education (Stanton, 1996).

The idea that relationships figure prominently in the lives of many women is hardly surprising given women's traditional roles as caretakers in the home and their concentration in caretaking roles in the workplace, such as teaching and nursing. These theories offer intriguing ideas about how relationships might influence women's learning—ideas that have great appeal because of how they resonate with the experience of many women. Unfortunately, this orientation toward relationship is frequently interpreted in simplistic terms, leading to beliefs such as that women learn best in groups rather than alone. Furthermore, emphasizing an orientation toward relationship can fuel stereotypes that women are not, or cannot be, competitive, autonomous, or self-directed.

Subjectivity, Intuition, and Emotion. Women's presumed orientations toward human relationships are linked to characterizations of women as reliant on subjective, intuitive, and affective ways of learning (Flannery, 2000).

Establishing rapport with others, nurturing them, and responding to their needs depend on appreciation for the subjective, sensitivity to affect as well as intellect, and understanding that goes beyond the purely rational.

These beliefs about women's learning are not particularly new. The precursors of modern beliefs can be traced back to Greek philosophers and the Western Enlightenment philosophical tradition of creating a dualism of mind and body, emotion and intellect. Women were associated with the bodily, emotional, nonrational side of the dichotomy, and thus considered to be incapable of reason. This belief was used as a rationale for excluding women from political participation, higher education, and the workplace outside the home. More recently, feminists as well as other scholars have asserted the value and importance of nonrational modes of thought, while pointing out the limitations of an overreliance on rationality. While this revaluing of the nonrational promises to benefit everyone, men as well as women, the extent to which women really are more inclined toward affective or subjective modes of thought remains questionable. Similar to a focus on relationship, associating women primarily with intuition or affect can reinforce the idea that women are not well-suited for logical, objective, rational thought.

How Gender Affects Learning

How can we come to a better, more inclusive understanding of women as learners? As a starting point, we must revisit our beliefs about gender and the role it plays in our learning. The most common theories about women's learning have approached gender from a psychological perspective, emphasizing the impact of women's socialization into gender specific roles or their relationships with parents and other caregivers. The changing nature of gender roles, however, renders generalizations based on these theories somewhat suspect. Recent studies of brain functioning have led to renewed interest in biological explanations for differences in women's and men's learning processes, prompting some authors to proclaim the existence of a "female brain" (Hales, 1999, p. 240), in contrast to Gilman's separation of sex and the brain a century ago. The results of this research, such as the finding that more parts of women's brains are active in certain cognitive tasks than in men's brains, have led some authors to claim that women's brains are "a model of connectedness" (Hales, 1999, p. 12). However, the significance of these differences in terms of actual learning abilities or performance has yet to be established.

This emphasis on psychological and biological theories about women's learning is perhaps not surprising, given the long-standing view of learning as primarily cognitive. More recently, learning theorists have begun to explore the social dimensions of learning, arguing that all learning is inextricably intertwined with the context in which it occurs. Gendered behaviors and characteristics, or our conceptions of masculinity and femininity, also have been increasingly theorized as products of socially and culturally deter-

mined belief systems, rather than rooted in purely psychological or biological sex differences (Crawford, 1995). These belief systems create different expectations and norms for people of each sex. We experience considerable social pressure to conform to gendered norms, though we each choose to conform or not in different ways. For example, if a social norm dictates that "self-assertiveness" is inappropriate for women, one female student might choose to be quiet or self-deprecating in order to maintain her "feminine" identity, though these behaviors might raise questions about her academic ability. Another woman might choose to be more assertive, risking negative judgments about her femininity in favor of expressing her knowledge and confidence. In each case, gender affects both behavior and its outcomes.

This view of gender suggests that attributes of women's learning are not innate, fixed, and uniform across situations ("essential" attributes of women), but are integrally connected to a particular set of situational, social, and historical circumstances, and thus changeable as those circumstances change. However, at any point in time these gendered belief systems can contribute to different patterns in women's and men's knowledge and approaches to learning. Sandra Harding (1996) describes the existence of "gender cultures" within broader cultures of society, such as the "masculine" cultures of the military or sports and the "feminine" cultures of the fashion world or elementary schools. While women and men can be found in both cultures, these cultures shape their experiences in different ways, giving them the opportunity to acquire different sorts of knowledge and abilities. As stereotypical examples, Harding notes that women may have more opportunities to interact with babies, while men have more opportunities to interact with car motors.

Furthermore, Harding states, the system of gender relations can give women and men different interests and concerns even when they are in similar situations. Accordingly, knowledge acquired from the same situations may be different. To use another stereotypical example, a woman with primary responsibility for childrearing, when seeking a job may gather detailed information about potential employers' policies toward maternity leave and provision of childcare. In contrast, a man with primary responsibility for supporting a wife and family may seek to gain more knowledge of employers' health care plans and life insurance policies.

Gender relations also may lead women and men to develop different ways of learning. Some theorists suggest that since women have traditionally been in positions of less power than men, as a means of survival they have become more attuned to identifying and understanding the feelings and perspectives of others, leading perhaps to the orientation toward "connected" learning popularly ascribed to women. As with gender relations, these gendered ways of knowing may differ by society, culture, ethnic group, locality, and so on, thus potentially resulting in differing learning preferences among women as well as between women and men. For example, several of my African American women colleagues feel that conflict and strong

emotions are essential for a meaningful learning experience. Their beliefs seem to reflect a cultural upbringing in which such conflict reflected an authentic engagement with the topic and with other people. In contrast, many of my white female colleagues (including myself) are very uncomfortable with such strong emotions in the classroom, undoubtedly a link to a different cultural proscription against overt conflict.

Gender and Educational Practice

How can this understanding of gender as a type of social relation, which is experienced and acted upon in different ways by different people, inform our practice as adult educators? Certainly it offers nothing quite as simple and concrete as the popular beliefs I described earlier, such as “women prefer connected learning.” In fact, this perspective requires us to question any such generalizations and assumptions about women’s learning—and men’s. It can be tempting to simply ignore gender, perhaps in the name of treating each person as a unique individual. Ignoring gender can make us blind to the significant impact that it can have on our learners, and to ways that we can improve learning experiences for all learners.

As Jane Hugo (2000) has pointed out, how adult educators use any kind of information about women’s learning will depend on their commitment to different educational goals and purposes. Educators who primarily seek to help learners acquire knowledge of content may draw different implications than, for example, educators who emphasize the personal development of learners, or who wish to promote social change. Here I will describe just a few examples related to different educational goals.

If we focus on content learning, we can use Harding’s conception of gendered knowledge systems to consider how gender might affect the prior knowledge that learners bring to bear on the subject matter of an educational activity, what kind of knowledge they might consider to be important, and how they interpret new information. We can be alert to potential gender patterns while trying to avoid gender stereotypes. The value of identifying learners’ current knowledge and interests as a basis for instruction is an adult education truism. By using gender (in combination with other influential factors such as race and class) as a lens for understanding *why* learners may have some kinds of knowledge and not others, *why* they have some interests and not others, we can gain more insight into appropriate instructional approaches and ways of presenting subject matter. Let’s use a basic math class as an example. An educator might seek more information about how her learners use mathematical skills outside of the classroom, and how these skills are linked to gender roles. She might discover that the women have developed sophisticated strategies for estimating discounts or for comparison shopping. She might also find that they use certain tools in their mathematical reasoning, such as drawing pictures or using homemade measuring tools. The educator can use this information in a variety of ways,

from creating relevant examples to incorporating learners' own math strategies into classroom activities as a means of facilitating content learning.

With an orientation toward personal development, educators can engage learners in identifying the gender belief systems that have affected them as learners, and in challenging those beliefs that might limit their learning. Returning to the math class example, the educator might encourage learners to explore the gendered nature of mathematics and how gender has affected their personal identities as mathematics learners. They might reflect on their experiences in school as children and teenagers, asking questions such as "How were the experiences of girls and boys with math similar and different?" "What did these experiences teach you about girls and boys as learners of mathematics?" "How do those experiences influence you now?" Similar questions can be raised about their experiences with math in the home or in workplaces. Sharing these reflections in groups enables learners to identify patterns of broader belief systems, to consider how those belief systems affected them in similar and different ways, and to consider how they might resist those beliefs that interfere with learning.

If educators seek to promote social change, they might explore with learners how gendered beliefs are acted upon, recreated, and transformed in the classroom. They might examine the potentially gendered nature of the knowledge that is presented in mathematics textbooks, and how gender affects their responses to these texts. They might explore their stereotypes about women and men as mathematics learners, and how these stereotypes are reinforced or challenged in their own experiences. They might learn to use math through activities that enable them to question current beliefs about gender and math; for example, by examining the statistics used to support women's inferior math abilities or by collecting and analyzing their own data on gender and participation in higher level math courses.

Taking a new look at women's learning can reveal more complexity and dynamism than we initially might have discerned. It offers us greater challenges, but also greater opportunities to create learning experiences that are supportive of both women and men.

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