

VozMujer: Querer es Poder

Uniting Language & Leadership Development for Latina Immigrants

by Dina Lopez and Adriana Valdez Young

Querer es Poder. Aspiration is power. To love is power. Angelina, a 42-year-old daycare provider from the Dominican Republic, recalls these as the most important things she learned through VozMujer, a women-centered ESOL and leadership development program for Latina immigrants in Providence, RI. For Angelina and other VozMujer participants, aspiration and love brought them to class each night to learn from and support one another; it inspired them to commit to changing their lives and communities.

Social, political, and economic systems in the U.S. place immigrant women at society's lowest rung. For Latin American women, this is compounded by the machismo, or the social subordination of women, that pervades their native cultures. This power dynamic may manifest itself in the ESOL classroom. It is common for men to dominate class discussions, while women listen attentively and take notes. It was to address these urgent issues that VozMujer was born: to create supportive, women-centered learning spaces where immigrant women can realize their power to pursue their personal and collective goals.

VozMujer is a new initiative of English for Action, a participatory educational organization that provides community-based ESOL and leadership programs to Latino immigrant families. VozMujer has two course components: a 14-week ESOL and women's studies program and a 10-week leadership and empowerment course in Spanish. The first component emphasizes learning English through classroom dialogue about women's health, women's economic challenges, and women's role in the family. The second

focuses on developing critical thinking and leadership skills by discussing power structures, gender, race, and women's roles in Latin America and the U.S.

During the ESOL class, twenty women from four Latin American countries gathered to learn, share, and build the language and leadership skills they needed to shape their new lives in the United States. The classroom became a transformative space. For many older women, it was the first time their own education took precedence over the needs of others. Many, like Aracely, had sacrificed their goals to provide opportunities for their children. After working in a factory for over 20 years, Aracely was now fulfilling her dream of returning to school. Sharing this experience with women like her allowed her to fully participate and feel comfortable in the classroom.

The facilitators, also Latina immigrants, designed the curriculum, lesson plans, and activities based on participatory, learner-centered practices. They implemented activities that encouraged women to express their opinions, engage in dialogue with each other and share their personal experiences. As a result of the emphasis on trust and relationship- and community-building, those with more advanced language skills became co-facilitators and learning-partners.

Socio-drama: A Powerful Tool

One of the most effective participatory tools that emerged from the classrooms was the "socio-drama." By working in small groups to enact solutions to difficult life situations, the group developed a socio-drama to rehearse, experiment with, and problem-solve using new language

skills. Through the socio-drama, they explored complex social problems that many women did not initially have the language skills to discuss. The method allowed women of different language levels to write and perform the drama according to their comfort and ability.

The process of creating, performing and reflecting on the socio-drama unearthed hidden acting talents, tricky language concepts, and unforeseen challenges and solutions. Not only is the socio-drama an effective way to practice and develop language skills, it is also an effective tool to promote critical thinking and community building, and a safe way for women to explore different opinions and approaches as “characters” rather than as themselves. Through the socio-drama, women can question and alter the behaviors of their husbands, bosses, and themselves. As a result, they build the confidence and support to make life changes outside of the classroom. They develop what Paulo Freire refers to as new ways of “reading the world” and “rehearsing for social change.”

Socio-dramas and methodologies based on the *Theater of the Oppressed* were also an integral part of the program’s leadership development workshops. Women developed gender analyses and skills in public speaking, community organizing and collective decision-making by creating body sculptures, animated images, and forum

theater (see definitions of these classroom activities below). After participating in these workshops, many women became involved in immigrant rights organizing through the Immigrant Freedom Rides and campaigns for immigrants’ access to driver’s licenses and higher education. They have also used their skills to organize fundraisers for the program as well as celebrations for their co-workers.

When reflecting on the course, women attributed their successful learning experiences to the fact that they could speak “sin verguenza” (without shame) and “con confianza” (with confidence). Betty, a participant, talked about the collective power of women, “Women have a lot of worth and we can achieve very important things if we try to reach them together.” Betty also realized through the course that she doesn’t have to put up with macho attitudes. “They can’t push us aside. As women and workers, we have the same rights. We have the same right to decide what is right, what is to be done, and what can’t. Now we are equal.”

At the core of this learning process is a strong love for life, for learning, for families, and community. A love that builds power, fuels aspirations, strengthens voices, and creates change. According to Rosario, another participant, our lives are sustained by this love and the “solidarity [that] exists between women as a way of surviving.”

For more information about VozMujer or to obtain copies of the curriculum or more lesson plans, please contact Dina Lopez at English for Action, 401-421-3181, dina@englishforaction.org.

Dina Lopez has been working with English for Action for the past three years, first as board member and then as founding coordinator of VozMujer in 2003.

Adriana Valdez Young founded English for Action (EFA) in 1999 with her classmate Spring Miller. She served as EFA’s executive director for three years, and co-facilitated the VozMujer Leadership and ESOL programs.

Definitions

Body sculptures — In order to portray a feeling, situation, or idea for others to analyze, women work with one or more of their peers as human clay and mold their bodies into static images.

Animated images — As another tool for self expression, women collectively create a static image with their bodies and add a repetitive movement to accompany the image.

Forum theatre — Based on the work of Augusto Boal, this is a theatrical activity where a group acts out in an unsolved problem, and the audience is invited to suggest and enact solutions.