

Women Reading Together

Women's Literacies, Women's Power

by Mev Miller

Do we narrow the possibilities of women's literacies when we primarily limit our view of literacy for women to decoding text (reading, writing, arithmetic) or to providing certain expected functions (getting a job, helping children with schoolwork, organizing families)? While reading, writing, and math are important tools in our societies, are they the most important? What are other crucial ways in which women communicate and organize their lives? Can the variety of ways in which women communicate broaden our understanding of women's literacies?

In *Women Speak*, Foss & Foss (1991) discuss the ways in which women's communication about their lives has been muted, misinterpreted,

and held as unimportant. They provide 30 examples of women's communication: architecture, baking, children's parties, comedy, costume design, dance, dress,

family stories, filmmaking, gardening, graffiti, herbology, holiday greetings, interior design, jewelry design, journal writing, language, letter writing, mother-child interaction, motherhood, needlework, newsletters, painting/printmaking, photography, poetry, public speaking, quilting, reading groups, rituals, and shopping. We might



Image courtesy of *Picturing Change*, ProLiteracy Worldwide, NY.

want to add other items to this list as well, such as using email or designing Web sites or participating in protests or community organizing. As you can see, many of the items in this list might not involve reading or writing but they do involve women interacting with each other, their families, and their communities.

By prioritizing schooled literacy, we have negated the many forms of literacy practices and expressive communications common to a wide range of women. To reclaim the breadth of women's literacies, we need to look to each other. Participating in women's book discussion groups is one of the ways that women combine communication and literacy. In my experience of participating with women learners in book groups, this alternative and communal learning environment provides much more than reading and writing. This experiential learning involves the mind, heart, and spirit in ways not always available in a classroom or individual tutoring setting.

“We want more women to join our group so we can learn more about different cultures and learn more from each other.”

—book group participant, Twin Cities, MN

In a relaxing and fun atmosphere, women not only improve their vocabulary and reading skills but they also gain the benefits of each others' experience and life knowledge. This helps diminish isolation and builds a sense of camaraderie sometimes creating long-term friendships or support networks. Women's book groups provide the opportunity to discuss topics women may not normally speak about or perhaps would not discuss in a mixed classroom with men, especially what one learner called "women-stuff." In such groups, some women have more opportunity to speak up in the first place, bolstering self-esteem. Book groups also encourage women to share their viewpoints and ideas or have their own thinking confirmed and expanded. Women who participate from a variety of cultures and backgrounds have the opportunity to challenge and learn from each other in ways not always available to them. Participants become encouraged to read materials they may not have realized they could read or to have access to materials they did not know existed.

"We learn to communicate with each other as women talking to each other . . . we help each other out. We talk not only about the books but also about life in general . . . that's what's different about it."

—book group participant, Twin Cities, MN

Overall, the book groups can provide a sense of confidence and leadership. In such settings, women have the opportunity to choose their own reading materials (leadership & decision-making), to consider their own opinions (critical thinking), to talk more openly than they might otherwise (communication skills), and to develop friendships (community-building). One book group I worked with demonstrated all of

these abilities when they developed and aired a special one-hour radio show for International Women's Day about the lives of single moms (see: www.litwomen.org/learnwrite/RadioBook.pdf).

Women not only want to read the world (as Paulo Freire said), they want to read themselves and each other. Women's literacy often depends on communication

and community and cannot only be viewed only as a solitary analytical act. The relationality women have with each other is one source of power and nurture.

Women's literacy involves emotion as well as intellect, and supports self-esteem, communication, self-knowl-

edge, and cooperation. Women's literacies not only involve text, but also picture and symbol, speech and conversation, creation and activity, emotion and understanding. Group reading and conversation encourages these literacies as it opens the content to wider analysis and deeper understanding. Women learn more about themselves and each other and their worlds. Book groups bear witness to this reality. By appreciating women's many forms of literacies and communication, women will come more easily to personal and social power.

"[My group] has helped me to go and stay in school, getting my life together and being with my daughter and making changes in my life. . . I've seen so many things happen because of the program and women coming out of their shell."

—book group participant, Twin Cities, MN

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