

Women with Disabilities

“Outing” Literacy and Expressing Themselves

by Heidi Silver-Pacuilla

For disabled women, literacy can be a sort of “coming out.” If educators would let go of their low expectations, bring the right assistive technologies to the classroom, stop sidestepping women’s problems, and not isolate disabled women, disabled women learners could have much to gain from literacy programs. In a participatory research project that I facilitated over the course of a year, sixteen women from a variety of backgrounds with various disabilities met to engage in dialogue, storytelling, and social action on the meanings of literacy, disability, and gender. As a result of their work, the women not only experienced personal changes, but also engaged with the issues on a public level. They developed recommendations for service improvements, wrote a brochure of advice to future women learners (see *Take Our Advice* sidebars), and they made group presentations of their findings at local and regional conferences.

One of the goals of our research was to understand the role of literacy in disabled women’s lives. Donna and Cindy, middle-aged white sisters living with their aging mother, both emphasized the empowering effect literacy learning has had on their lives. Donna, dealing with a chronic and barely-controlled seizure disorder, said of literacy, “[It’s about] coming out of my shell, being around people...Cause before I wouldn’t talk to anybody, I wouldn’t go anywhere, just stay home. Now that I’m getting out, [I’m] slowly losing that shell.”

Cindy credited her “coming out” to her engagement with literacy learning. “Before, I wouldn’t talk to people too much, and, you know, I wouldn’t tell people that I couldn’t read. So I had to take my mother and sister with me to

tell me what bus to get on. See, I was always afraid of getting lost. Now I feel comfortable with myself; I know how to get on the right bus; I can read the bus [schedule].”

Cindy is not only mastering skills, such as using the public transportation system, but she is learning about her relationship with others in society and feels less alone.

Sherry, a middle-aged white woman, shared how she had hidden her inability to read and write throughout her adult years. Speaking in the second person, she connected her experiences with others’ at the table, “You parked your life on hold and did for your kids and everybody else around you and put on what I call a false face because you never really looked at your problems head on. You just put it on the back burner.”

Once she enrolled in literacy classes and the support group, she not only admitted and confronted her challenges, she was energized to recruit other women and talk openly about her educational journey. “We’re coming out of the closet into the sunlight and now that we did that, I hope other people can join us and get out of the closet into the sunlight.”

Pam, a middle-aged white woman with learning disabilities, echoed her sentiment, saying that she felt she was “coming out of the dark and talking.” Her primary motivation for persistence in studying toward her GED was so that “I can be proud of *myself*, be happy with *myself*.”

Author Rod Michalko reminds us that what gets “outed” when someone with a disability comes out is not the impairment, which often cannot be fully hidden anyway, but our social assumptions of naturalness and normality. Com-

paring the phenomenon to that of lesbians and gays coming out, writer Simi Linton notes the “loss of community, the anxiety, and the self-doubt” embedded in the experiences of trying to overcome a disability or pass as normal. “Shame and fear are personal burdens... many disabled people live with...but if these tales are told, we can demonstrate how the personal is indeed political,” says Linton.

Participatory research gave these women a chance to reshape their identities as learners, as women, and as citizens through their practices of literacy. Through their dialogue with each other,

they saw themselves and others like them as learners, despite many years of personal and social messages to the contrary. They felt a new freedom to engage with the world—to “come out” and to stop hiding who they were. The action components of the research project—developing recommendations for service providers and other learning disabled women—gave them a chance to use their new-found voices in public.

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Are you a Learner with a Disability? Take Our Advice . . .

Here are some strategies we recommend to help you reach your educational and work goals:

1. Join a support group; it's a place to learn about your rights and let out your frustrations.
2. Involve other family members in education; it helps make education more of a priority in the house.
3. Keep role models in mind for inspiration and encouragement.
4. Recognize and celebrate your own learning and personal growth.
5. Be patient. Building new habits, like studying seriously, takes time.
6. Recognize when you need help and ask for it.
7. Believe that learning builds self-esteem.
8. Get involved, one opportunity leads to another.

Written by women from the Speaking Up and Speaking Out Project, Pima College Adult Ed, Tucson, AZ.