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The Neighbourhood House: site of struggle, site of learning

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ABSTRACT   *Adult education research has tended to concentrate on the pragmatics of facilitating learning and developing educational programmes in institutionalised settings. Critical, contextual analysis of adult learning, and studies of informal learning, are both relatively neglected in the adult education literature. Applying concepts drawn from contestation theory to data from two Australian women's learning centres, this paper suggests that, while women gain considerable knowledge from adult education courses conducted in community centres, the informal, incidental or embedded learning that takes place as women participate in these centres is also very significant. This experiential learning enables women to make sense of and act on their environment, and to come to understand themselves as knowledge-creating, acting being. It appears that much of this informal learning is generated by conflict between people within the centres.*

Introduction

In Australia during the past 20 years there has been a significant growth of community-based social provision, in adult education and in other fields. A pattern has emerged of a local group expressing a desire for a particular service (e.g. health, child care) or course, and a government-funded, often community-based, agency funding it (Johnson & Hinton, 1986, p. 13). Such demand often grows out of social activity. In the new suburbs and in country towns, it is common for women to begin meeting socially, and then to attempt to do something about issues that concern them—such as the need for child care, or for transport, shops, community centres or adult education. Some of the positive aspects of the women's education that this development has given rise to have been discussed elsewhere (Benson & Saleeba, 1984; Kimberley, 1986; Clarke, 1987; Foley, 1991a; Savage, 1991). This paper will look more closely at the dynamics of community-based adult learning, through an examination of informal learning in two neighbourhood centres in an Australian city.

Informal adult learning refers to learning that is embedded in, and incidental to, other activities. Much (undoubtedly, most: see Brookfield, 1986, p. 150) adult learning is not acquired in formal courses, but is gained through experience, through participation in an aspect of social life such as work, community action or family activities. To date, this dimension of social life and learning has been neglected by both social activists and adult

educators. In general, social activists have concentrated on the development of organisation and strategy, and have paid little explicit attention to social action *as* learning. This is despite the fact that the success of social action frequently depends on whether or not activists learn from their experience. Moreover, the most successful activists have implicitly treated social struggles as learning experiences. The approach of the Chinese Communists under Mao Ze Dong is paradigmatic here (see Foley, 1993a).

Adult education research has tended to concentrate on the pragmatics of facilitating learning and developing educational programmes in institutionalised settings. (For surveys of knowledge development in adult education, see Usher & Bryant, 1989; Bright, 1989 and Peters *et al.*, 1991). Some work has also been done on the informal learning effort of individual adults (see Candy, 1991, pp. 157–201 for a review of this literature). There are also some excellent accounts of the work of adult educators, and of community development and community learning projects, which have an implicit informal learning dimension (see, for example, Adams, 1975; Lovett, 1975; Thompson, 1983). There is a growing interest in informal and incidental learning in the work place and in the notion of organisations as structured learning environments (see, for example, Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Field, 1991; Drysdale & Field, 1991; Senge, 1992). But, overall, there has been little research on the nature and dynamics of informal learning in work places, communities, families and social movements (see Leymann and Kornbluth, 1989; Rossing, 1991; Field, 1991; Foley, 1991a & b, 1993 a & b; Foley & Flowers, 1992).

Currently, a number of writers on adult education are attempting to articulate a more critical approach to the analysis of adult education (see, for example, Mezirow, 1981, 1990, 1991; Griffin, 1983, 1987, 1989; Welton, 1987, 1991; Usher & Bryant, 1989; Bright, 1989; Collard & Law, 1989; Clark & Wilson, 1990; Hart, 1990a & b; Collins, 1991). This is a welcome development, because it challenges adult educators to move beyond the instrumentalism and individualistic humanism that currently characterises so much of their practice and theory (see Welton, 1987; Usher & Bryant, 1989; Bright, 1989; Collins, 1991) and to locate their work more firmly in social analyses and struggles for social justice.

A major problem, though, with much supposedly critical adult education theory is that it is often very abstract. A great deal of energy has gone into epistemological analysis (Usher & Bryant, 1989; Bright, 1989), the construction of typologies (Brookfield, 1983; Lovett, 1983; Mezirow, 1990, 1991) and the production of developmental stage theories (Mezirow, 1981). Much of this work has been highly abstract; it has generally failed to develop analyses of adult learning in particular social contexts. (There are exceptions to this: for example, the work of Lovett (1975, 1983) and Welton (1987, 1991)). Clark & Wilson (1991, pp. 78–80), in their critique of Mezirow's work, have identified weaknesses that are common in the adult education literature. They argue that despite his stress on the importance of 'contextual awareness' in the development of learners' 'meaning perspectives', Mezirow's 'critical theory' of adult learning takes little account of the social context of learning. "Learning is construed as a psychological process located in the individual, giving primacy to human agency over social context." Further, the conception of the individual embedded in Mezirow's theory is the "unified and uncontested" self of humanistic psychology, very different from the "fragmented and contested" notion of subjectivity found in critical theory.

We need analyses which take account of the specific social contexts of adult learning, and which treat all aspects of adult learning as socially constructed and problematic. This requires both a broader notion of context and more detailed, specific analyses than are

usually found in adult education theory. The rest of this paper will attempt to place some signposts to such analyses, by applying concepts drawn from critical theory to data on the two neighbourhood houses examined in this paper.

The core concepts in this analysis will be *contestation, informal learning* and *critical learning*. As Terry Eagleton (1989, p. 167) has observed, human history can be interpreted as being characterised by domination, by "the mind-shaking reality of consistent, unending, unruptured oppression and exploitation". Feudalism, capitalism, State socialism—all have been systems of domination. This domination has had both a material and an ideological dimension. Domination originates in, and is constructed in, relationships of production and power, but it is also constructed in ideologies and discourses, i.e. in the ways in which people make meaning of situations and speak about them. So domination comes to be internalised, to be embedded in people's consciousness. (This is to radically simplify a complex argument, and to gloss over the hotly contested issue of the determination of domination. For aspects of the domination debate, see Skinner, 1985; Lears, 1985; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & Fitzclarence, 1986; Metcalfe, 1988; Harvey, 1989; Ball, 1990; Milner, 1991; Shilling, 1992)

But if domination is universal, it is also continually contested, so history may also be seen as a continual struggle by ordinary people to maintain or extend control over their lives. There is now a huge literature on this struggle for autonomy and liberation, ranging from E.P. Thompson's (1968) sweeping history of the English working class, to ethnographic studies of struggles for control in individual work places and classrooms (e.g. Anyon, 1983; Webb, 1990; Skeggs, 1991). The story of this struggle is one of gains and losses, of progress and retreat, and of a growing recognition of the *continually contested, complex, ambiguous, and contradictory* nature of the struggle between domination and liberation. While these concepts can be read into existing accounts of radical adult education projects (for example, the work of Myles Horton [see Adams, 1975] and Jane Thompson), the contestation problematic (see Walker & Barton, 1983; Anyon, 1983; Wexler, 1987; Shilling, 1992) has been virtually ignored in adult education research. This neglect is part of the wider problem in adult education scholarship referred to above: its tendency to instrumentalism, psychological humanism, abstraction and idealism, and a general underdevelopment of sociological analysis.

A basic assumption of the contestation problematic is that contradiction and conflict are embedded in social life. As Walker & Barton (1983, p. 14) have noted, "all social life involves a central contradictory principle in the sense that a person's individuality is both realized and restricted through participation in group life". Within capitalist modes of production, fundamental contradictions operate in all spheres of social life: in production, in institutional life, and in cultural practices (Barton & Walker, 1983, p. 15). Examination of contradiction in the arena of cultural practices is of great interest to the study of informal learning in capitalist social formations. As Barton & Walker point out,

> the cultural practices which arise under capitalism operate on a contradiction
> in the forms of cultural life whilst *reproducing* attitudes, activities and artefacts
> which support the particular arrangements of the social order also *produce*
> recognitions, reactions and responses which provide for the development of a
> challenging and critical stance towards that order.

The analytical difficulty is in separating the warp and the weft of reproduction and recognition. Here case studies which focus on the learning dimension of social life can be useful. Analysis of the dynamics of informal learning in different sites can produce insights into the way people develop critical consciousness, i.e. an understanding of

themselves as social actors in struggles for autonomy and liberation. It is important to reiterate that these struggles are not 'sequential or logical' (Adams, 1975, p. 227), but are complex and contradictory. But by setting narratives of people's experiences alongside conditions for the development of critical consciousness, judgements can be made about whether or not instances of collective action are examples of critical learning.

In a paper on consciousness raising groups in the women's movement, Hart (1990b, pp. 48, 58) notes that in such work content (analysis of women's oppression), process (based on equality and reciprocity) and epistemology (starting from women's subjective experience) interweave and mutually determine one another. By working from women's experience, consciousness raising groups are able to generate "a particularly dense matrix of themes and questions directly relating to female oppression". Hart argues that consciousness raising work is emancipatory, focusing as it does on "the internal and external effects of power" on women, and involving a process of critical reflection leading to a transformation of "meaning perspectives" (Hart, 1990b, pp. 48, 53). Warning that consciousness raising can easily be co-opted or distorted in educational settings, Hart sets out a number of 'enabling conditions' or principles for authentic consciousness raising work. While Hart is writing about the intentional development of critical consciousness in women's groups, her principles provide a means of understanding the dynamics of informal learning in settings like neighbourhood houses.

Hart's five principles are:

(i)   the learning group must be representative of an oppressed or marginalised group;
(ii) the experience, assumptions and social position of members of the learning group must be relatively similar;
(iii) the learning group must develop a 'structure of equality';
(iv) the members of the learning group must have the motivation and the time to critically reflect on their subjective experience; and
(v)   members of the learning group must gain a 'theoretical distance to personal experience'.

The fourth and fifth conditions require elaboration. As Freire (1972a) notes, people are distinguished from other animals by their capacity for both action and reflection. People are "capable of simultaneously transforming the world by their action and grasping and expressing the world's reality in creative language". Their ability to reflect on their actions means people are potentially capable of emancipating themselves from oppressive social relationships: "Only beings who can reflect upon the fact they are determined are capable of freeing themselves" (Freire, 1972a, pp. 51–52. For more on the importance of reflection in learning, see Boud *et al.* 1985, and Boud & Walker, 1991.) But, as Hart (1990b, pp. 66–67) points out, to *critically* reflect, i.e. to understand the ways in which our consciousness is shaped by social relations and ideologies, requires "the special powers of theory". Theory "does not follow the contours of immediate experience". It "sets a distance" which enables people "to fathom aspects of the world hidden from the eyes of its own authors and actors", and to "make transparent the relations that obtain among isolated and fragmented incidents of personal experience". This, then, is the creative paradox of consciousness raising work: personal experience is its necessary point of departure, but for critical consciousness to emerge people must gain theoretical distance from their subjective experience.

It will be argued here that:

—The neighbourhood houses can be seen as 'sites of learning', arenas in which

significant informal learning, including the development of critical consciousness, occurs.

—This learning is generally tacit or implicit, embedded as it is in the routine activities of women in the house.

—Much of this learning takes place in conflict, and these conflicts are shaped by individual, interpersonal, institutional and broader social and cultural factors.

—This informal learning is not automatic or inevitable.

The Houses

In their current form, neighbourhood centre (or 'houses' as they are locally known, after the ordinary houses in which they are generally located) emerged in Australia in the 1970s, their numbers increasing substantially in the 1980s. The houses were established for a variety of reasons: women's desire to come together to end their suburban isolation and obtain social and intellectual stimulation, to establish play groups for young children, to provide education for women, to furnish productive outlets for women's skills. Typically, the original reason for participating led to other activities, in particular to the establishment of adult education classes for the women themselves, to some women participating in the management of neighbourhood houses, and, in some cases, to women working in the houses as voluntary or paid workers (Gravell & Nelson, 1986).

The houses that will be discussed here are both in the same city, one in Higby[1], an inner-city suburb, the other in Sage, an outer suburb. The Higby Neighbourhood House started in the late 1970s as a drop-in centre for women and a playgroup location. It is now a registered co-operative with membership open to all interested residents. Higby is administered by an elected committee of seven and is located in a house owned by the local council. Higby is rare among neighbourhood houses in that a large proportion of its budget is federally funded and because, until recently, it has not had to struggle for funds. Sage Neighbourhood House was established in the early 1980s and targets disadvantaged women. It has a large volunteer and paid staff. All local residents can become members of the centre, which has a committee of management of 12. The centre hosts a range of activities, projects and facilities, including adult education classes, playgroups, a consumer and tenancy programme, community development and environment projects, and discussion and self-help groups.

Methodology

The original intention of the research on which this paper is based was to examine women's studies courses in neighbourhood houses, a theme discussed briefly in an earlier paper (Foley, 1991a). An initial taped discussion in April 1991 with 10 members of one of the houses pointed to the importance of both informal learning and learning in conflict in the houses. Further individual and group interviews on these themes were conducted in April and October 1991, and in April–May 1992. Interviews were open-ended, but were intended to unearth narratives which would facilitate an understanding of the learning dimension of interviewees' experience of the houses. After each of the three rounds of interviews a draft paper was distributed to the interviewees. A seminar of 50 people concerned with neighbourhood houses discussed the second draft.

The data collected allows only tentative conclusions to be drawn. The research is part of a wider project concerned with the learning dimension of struggles for social justice (Foley, 1981, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1993a & b; Foley & Flowers, 1992). The intention of

this project is to document instances of informal and critical learning in a number of sites: in an environmental campaign, community centres, Aboriginal communities and work places in Australia, as well as in national liberation struggles in China and Zimbabwe. The stimulus for this project is both academic and political. In part it is a reaction against the perceived technicism and abstraction of much adult education writing, referred to above. But the project is also inspired by a desire to counterpose a notion of 'people's learning', learning that is embedded in the social activities of 'ordinary' people (those whom the US educator Myles Horton called "the uncommon common people" (Moyers, 1981)), against the professionalised, controlling and increasingly commodified processes of official 'education'.

This paper, then, needs to be read as an instance of 'politically committed' or 'openly ideological' research. This approach to research requires a re-examination of conventional approaches to research design, data collection methods and dissemination of results. In a landmark paper, Patti Lather (1986) has argued that it is important that 'openly ideological' researchers develop an expanded concept of validity, one which goes beyond the received notion of internal consistency, and which allows theoretical frameworks and data to be continually checked against the perceptions of research subjects and research users. Such an approach would incorporate notions of construct, face and catalytic validity. The first of these refers to researchers' willingness to allow the theoretical constructs on which their studies are built to be challenged by the perceptions of research subjects. 'Face validity' involves researchers going back to respondents with tentative results and refining conclusions in the light of the respondents' reactions. 'Catalytic validity' refers to "the degree to which the research process re-orients, focuses, and energises participants in what Freire (1972b) called 'conscientization', knowing reality in order to . . . transform it" (Lather, 1986, p. 67).

Learning in the Houses

(i) Finding a Place

When asked why they became involved in a house, some women spoke of a sharply-felt need to end their isolation. Trish, who is now a community worker, brought two daughters to the Sage playgroup and subsequently lost contact with the house. Then one of her close friends went back to work:

> It wasn't until she did that I realised how much of a companion she'd been . . . I felt lost, really lonely, and went through a whole self-analysis thing where you think 'What am I doing? Who am I?' and felt the whole thing of being a Mum and not a Trish, if you can understand that. You tend to lose yourself, you become somebody else's person. I figured I had to get out of it, I had to do something about it. So I decided to join the committee of management here.

Participation in playgroups helped women to recognise their common interests, and to end their suburban isolation. Rita, a member of Higby house, recalls:

> I learnt that there were a lot of other people in the same situation as I was. When I finished work I didn't know anyone else in Higby. I'd been living here for 3 years . . . and didn't know any of the facilities available. I learnt where to go, where to look for things, how to find out what was available, and met lots of different women. Right from the word go, because I started going out when

my daughter was so young, I never felt stuck at home and trapped, and I knew places to go. To get out, and not to be stuck at home climbing the walls. So many people get to that stage and then find this place. I think I was lucky that I found it very early.

Soon after Sage house was established, Doreen, then in her early twenties, was persuaded by one of the Sage workers to take on a part-time child-minding job in the house. After 4 years of this, Doreen left the house to take up a job in a local supermarket. "I wanted to expand myself, and I felt that being a child care worker I couldn't do that. I needed to get out and meet more people, and I was always in here and I couldn't't". During the same period she left her husband, who was becoming progressively more abusive and violent. Doreen left the area for some years, returning towards the end of 1990.

> When I came back I had a lot of problems, but everyone here has been supportive. . . .They were all pleased to see that I had accomplished what I wanted to do, and sort of begun my life again. . . [It's] taken a lot of years to get back on track again,. . . going through separation, divorce, abuse, stuff like that. But the Centre's always been here for me, to sort of help me get through it. Coming here I always know there's a friendly ear. . .

One gets a sense of the house as a safe, supportive place. But the houses are not always warm and welcoming: people sometimes have to struggle for a place. At Higby, where 40% of the students in courses are migrant women, Conchita, an active member, herself an immigrant, explained the low participation of migrant women in the house's committee of management by referring to her own experience:

> When I first came here. . . I could see all these people having a normal conversation at the (kitchen) table. It was so overwhelming, I was just sitting in one corner. I liked to be there but at the same time felt very uncomfortable because my level of English wasn't the same as theirs. . . Perhaps if I'd been more outgoing . . .I couldn't follow a lot of their conversation and they didn't notice it. . . I could talk one to one, or with a group of children but not (with) a group of adults. It was very confusing. I remember that after a week in the house I was in a very bad mood at home, saying 'What am I doing here?' But I decided to stay and see what happened and it was really good, and I got a lot from this house. . .

(ii) Learning through Participation

Once they attend playgroups with their children, many women undergo a gradual and sometimes confused and painful process of asking for something for themselves. This something might be any or all of involvement in education or other house activities, participation in the management of a house, or paid or voluntary work in a house or elsewhere. Explicit women's education in neighbourhood houses is significant in both process and outcomes, and has been discussed elsewhere (see Kimberley, 1986; Clarke, 1987; Foley, 1991a; Savage, 1991). But the whole experience of participating in a house is an important learning process for women. Much of this learning is informal and incidental, it is embedded in other activities, and it is often not articulated as learning by neighbourhood house members.

At Sage, a discussion with four working-class women revealed a common experience of expanded knowledge and growing self-confidence as a result of participation in the house. Initially, the women approached the house cautiously. When Heidi first came to

the house "it was very frightening, very sort of, don't know what to expect. But after a while you get used to it". She began by getting involved in the house's multicultural women's group. In this group, which met fortnightly, women from non-English speaking backgrounds "just got a cup of tea and a chat, sometimes we'd do craft, sometimes we'd have guest speakers, outings". After some time a house worker asked Heidi if she would "like to do a couple of hours' voluntary work, just answering the phone and general inquiries". Five years later Heidi had been consistently involved in the house, both as a volunteer and through holding several short-term paid positions in the house, "computer work, typing, things like that". Looking back on her experience, Heidi considered she had learned a lot:

> Half the things I've learnt here I would never have known if I would have stayed at home. . . Things on domestic violence. How to get intervention orders, what to do, how to protect yourself and things like that. The same with, we've got a consumer worker here. . . If something (I bought) was faulty, I might have gone back and said, 'Oh look, this is not good'. They might say, 'You've used it already? Yeah? Sorry, we can't give it back'. And I would have gone, that would have been it. But apparently now you can go to the consumer [affairs regulatory agency] here, ask them, they'll help you, they'll tell you what you can do. There's so many things. There's not a day goes by when you don't learn something new. It's sort of an education, isn't it?

That the knowledge is acquired informally is made clear by another comment of Heidi's:

> It's funny you know, you try not to listen to people when they're having a conversation on the phone (laughs). But you're down this end, you've got an ear this way, and it's so informal, unless it's really something hush hush. . .

One of the most frequently mentioned outcomes of participation in the house is a growth in, or a regaining of, self-esteem and self-confidence. Specifically, the women come to see themselves, and to be seen as, competent people with something to contribute to society beyond their roles as mothers.

> *Heidi:* When it comes time to write your resumé, when you put down you can do this, this and this, you think: look at all the things I've done. . . You think: crikies, can I do all this?
>
> *Doreen:* I find that Nikki, my eldest, she looks up to me because I'm out there trying to do something, to make something of myself. So she encourages it, you know.
>
> *Antonia, a volunteer grief counsellor at Sage:* The. . . confidence that you had before comes back, because it died down a little bit staying at home for a while. . . You're just a housewife. People think, 'She's got nothing to talk about, so let's not talk to her'. . . It does connect you, doesn't it, back to your kids again. Because as they grow up they think you're just a Mum. And now all of a sudden you're relating with a lot of different areas that they come across in their life. . . What happens is I take [thinks that happen in the neighbourhood house] home, and they realise that there is a world that I'm involved in now, and they want to know what's happening in my world. . .

(iii) Learning through Conflict

Conflict and struggle are central to informal learning in neighbourhood houses, something that was expressed very clearly by one of the women interviewed:

> This place as much as anything is about conflict—really difficult stuff about learning, the difficulty of getting people on committees, the difficulty of getting people to work together. . . Intense friendships are made and then broken, lots of difficult things happen here. . .

In Higby house, struggles over child care have been at the heart of this process of informal learning. The initial reason for the house's existence was a children's playgroup. But quite soon 'a kind of education by stealth' emerged in response to learning needs expressed by women attending the playgroup. A class was set up to teach women to drive. A Turkish women's group and an Arab women's group were established, initially with a social focus, but soon started having English lessons. An Italian-speaking child care worker conducted a bilingual playgroup and that also led to Italian lessons for the English-speaking members of the group. These and other activities, such as a netball team and committee of management meetings (which 'were always chaos because the kids were there'), raised the need for child care.

But the women found it difficult to demand child care. 'There was this real prejudice in those days about child care'. There was a 'sense that it was valid to have child care if you were earning an income', but 'if by choice you were at home being a mother it was different'. Most of the 'first generation' of house members, the women who had established the house, felt guilty at demanding something for themselves. The dominant feeling was 'I don't really need this place for myself': it was a 'real playgroup mentality, you had to be here with your kids, doing stuff with your kids'. But the educational and other activities referred to above had begun, and women needed to be freed from child care responsibilities so they could pursue those activities. Newer members of the house suggested that people take turns in minding children on Friday mornings. This suggestion was resisted by older members and 'a huge debate ensued. . . between the old guard and the newer people. . . and eventually the new guard won and the Friday morning roster was established'. People still participated in playgroups on other days, but 'come Friday morning they came here, dropped their kids off, mostly with great delight, and went off' to do other things.

Women who participated in the struggle for child care at Higby remember it as a decisive phase in the life of the house. The Friday morning roster became 'an enormously strong focus in the house'. 'The people who were really active in the house—the "movers", the "second generation" of house members—gravitated around' the roster. The roster helped to focus house activities: women now knew that their children would be minded while 'they went off to do other things'. The women who participated in the roster became a close, 'strong' and 'committed' group, 'a real support network'. In 1986, this group, through one of the house workers, secured funding from the local technical and further education college to enable the house to become a community provider of adult education. Starting with a women's discussion group, women's studies and tertiary bridging courses soon became central to the house's activities.

But if, in retrospect, participants can see how important the establishment of the Friday morning roster was in releasing house members' energies, they also remember the struggle for child care as fierce and difficult, and one in which individuals learned political skills and clarified their political positions. Mary, the first worker employed in

the house, remembers the conflict over child care as "the first big struggle, and the first big learning experience for me and other people". While Mary admired the older members for their achievements in setting up the house, "I was pretty clear about whose side I was on" in the child care issue. "Because it was to do with opening the place up, and making it accessible to more people and different people. . ." Mary worked with the newer members to 'stack' a meeting of house members called to fill a vacancy on the house committee of management.

> I'd *never* done that before in my life, I was so frightened about it. . . It put you in direct conflict with certain individuals, which was something I'd never had to do before, in my work life. . . And there was all that thing about it being a women's place, and it's a community centre, and we're all girls together, and we're all working together on this. And there was that, but there was also the conflict there about, 'All right, you're in this group of women here, with certain needs and ideas. There's this other group. And trying to make decisions about which way it should go. . .'

Looking back, Mary believes she was going through a rather tortuous process of "coming to terms with and putting into action what" she really wanted, professionally and politically.

> . . .[I]t was what I perceived as a worker was needed and wanted. It was also the sort of place I wanted to work in. I didn't want to work in a place with all these—I used to call them 'mothers who wanted to be mothers'. . . I thought, 'Well, if that's what they want, they can have playgroups in their lounge rooms, they don't need a community centre'. It was this whole thing of actually admitting to yourself, and then to others, 'This is what I value, and this is what I want'. And it works on a political level, and on a . . .personal level. . . Because I was young and relatively unpoliticised and I wanted to 'help' the community, [I had] a very unformed approach to it, and it gradually had to harden up and get more focused in terms of what I was on about, in terms of my values and political leanings.

She sees the house members who came to demand child care as having gone through a similar process:

> Also for the people who came there to use or take part in the place: 'I come here for my children, because I'm a good mother and this was a good thing to do with the children'. And gradually it becomes obvious that you are also there for yourself. And as you join in the activities, or the running of the house, or the learning activities, you have to come to terms with: 'This is what I want, as well as being a mother. . .' But it's hard, because of the sort of pressure on people, especially first time around parents, this is the be-all and end-all. . .

(iv) Critical Learning

In the state in which the neighbourhood houses exist, community organisations wishing to gain access to government funds are required to become incorporated organisations administered by committees of management. Committees are elected annually by the organisations' members and are responsible for policy, finance and staffing. In neighbourhood houses members frequently move from involvement in playgroups to participation in the committee.

Women interviewed felt they had learned a lot through being committee members. They learned about how the house operated, how to read and keep accounts, how to make collective decisions and how to plan and budget. They also developed a clearer understanding of broader women's issues: 'the lack of resources and facilities' for women, for example. Most importantly, perhaps, participation in the committees gives women experience of the complexities of trying to run organisations in democratic 'women centred' ways.

For committees, like other aspects of the life of the houses, are sites of struggle as well as learning. Interviewees constantly referred to both the importance and the difficulties of trying to develop a non-hierarchical way of administering the houses. At Higby house in the late 1980s the Friday morning roster collapsed because eight of the 12 women who participated in it had second babies at around the same time. This was followed by another 'generational change' as the active members' children grew up and the activists left the house and became involved in other activities.

The next generation of house members have used the house differently from the preceding generation, largely, it appears, because of the economic recession. Many of the women who now use the house have, or want, part-time jobs and are interested in courses that will lead them into the work-force or further education, rather than in participating in a playgroup or the committee of management. The Higby committee was 'virtually non-existent' from the end of 1990, and in April 1991, had only three members. At the previous annual general meeting 'four or five' committee members had resigned 'because of friction with staff'. In 1991 conflict between members and staff continued. In interviews with house members this conflict was initially attributed to 'personality clashes—the co-op members being a bit picky with staff, and staff members being very defensive'. But later the interviewees suggested that the source of the conflict lay in lack of clear house policies and guidelines for workers, and in poor communication between committee members and workers. This was a theme that was echoed in interviews with an earlier generation of house members.

There was also a strong feeling that differences between committee and staff had a structural basis. Rhona, a former committee member, saw the problem as partly lying in differences in the positions and power of committee members and workers:

> The power-base of the committee of management is uncertain. The committee is technically the employer, but the employees have more on going knowledge of the affairs of the house. The tenure of staff is usually much longer than that of the committee, but staff are subject to constant revision of the rules of their employment, while possessing much of the acquired knowledge about the house. . . The experience of Higby house has been of repeated bouts of conflict between staff (established with knowledge/power) and changing committee (unsure of their knowledge and power, reluctant to accept old rules which may no longer be appropriate, but tentative about creating new rules). . .

Rhona saw the source of the structural problem as being the house's relationship with the State, and recognised that there was no ready solution to the problem:

> Higby Neighbourhood House has to be an incorporated body to receive funding. . . Fundamentally, the employment/control model imposed by the funding body is inappropriate. It exacerbates the conflict involved when women are struggling to create more democratic and sensitive ways of relating to one another and running organisations.

This contradiction was felt by the women very sharply. Rhona remembers how

uncomfortable she felt when, as a committee member, she had to tell workers who had pointed out to the committee that they were being paid under-award wages "we don't have the money to pay you. . . It's fine for us to recognise what you deserve, but if our funding is finite we can bake ten thousand cakes and we're still not going to make enough money to pay your top-up wages".

Mary, who was a worker at Higby at the same time that Rhona was a committee member also remembers salary negotiations as difficult and painful, partly because of her own resistance to acquiring information about industrial issues, but also because of the difficulty committee members experienced in "actually performing their employer responsibilities". Mary recalls that the committee members "did things on a personal level to try and compensate for" workers' low wages:

> There was a Christmas bonus of a half case of champagne. . . When each staff member left [there was] the most fantastic going-away party, that sort of thing. . . So, on the one hand, you've got these people who do all these wonderful things for you. . . cook you beautiful meals when you go round to their place, all that personal way of saying, 'You're terrific, you're doing a great job, we appreciate what you're doing'. . .

On the other hand, Mary now believes, the warmth with which the committee treated workers was a way of "avoiding the realities of being an employer". Workers also got caught up in this avoidance, which was exacerbated by the existence in the house of an ideology that maintained that "this employment situation transcends all that, that's all nasty stuff that only goes on in adversarial employment situations".

Mary was "gradually becoming aware of it as a problem, but I very much saw it as *my* fault, because I couldn't assert myself. . . But it was just an impossible position to be in, educating your employer to be a good employer". The conflict over worker wages was 'disillusioning' and 'upsetting' for workers. These feelings were heightened by the way the older group of house activists, who were terrific, who we'd relied on, and who we'd come very close to personally, were treating newer members. "It was awful to see. . . Excluding people from decision-making processes, not in an overt way, the way you can run meetings just to keep new people out. . ."

The staff finally wrote a grievance paper, and put it to a committee meeting. The committee was 'furious', "that meeting just disintegrated, nothing much came out of it". But it was followed by other meetings, and informal discussions: "people asking you around to tea and asking you, 'What's wrong, why are you being like this?'. This in turn led to a workshop with an external facilitator who

> tried to help people come out and say what they really meant, instead of skirting around the edges. That was quite useful. Though people were still really hurt, it put it back in perspective a bit, and more attempts were made to at least formally make sure that there was a process by which newer people could be included and encouraged on to committees. But I think a lot of people had lost heart [and withdrew from the house]. It was time for them to do that anyway, their kids were getting older. . .

Rhona recalls the intervention of Mary and her fellow workers as having had a beneficial effect on the functioning of the committee.

> People like Mary, by forcing these issues, were really forcing people who were on committee to have to find new information, to have to take employment responsibilities that involved a lot of learning for them [but] that they were

really reluctant to have to pursue. It was now, 'Who's going to do this?' at
committee meetings, and there'd be a deadly silence all the time because
nobody wanted to do it, because nobody had the industrial experience. And so
it was forcing people who were on committee to go out and pick up those jobs.

Eventually the committee pursued, and after a long struggle obtained, other sources of
funds to supplement the workers' wages. This search in turn generated learning about
the grudging and tentative nature of the State's commitment to the funding of
community agencies, and about the practicalities of garnering funds from a variety of
sources. When the Higby committee pointed out to its funding body, a Federal
government department, that its grant did not enable the house to pay its workers award
wages, the department redefined itself as the house's 'principal' rather than its sole
funding body, and told the committee to look for other sources of funds. To be treated
in this way by the state bureaucracy, under a Labour government, was for the Higby
committee a 'contradiction' and an 'ideological dilemma'. It was also a 'practical
dilemma': 'where on earth to find the money if they weren't going to give it to us'.

Contestation and Critical Learning

On the basis of the data reviewed here, only the first of Hart's five conditions for the
existence of authentic consciousness raising work is unequivocally met in the neighbour-
hood houses. To date, there is insufficient evidence to make judgements about the extent
to which the second and third conditions are met in the houses. But, for the purposes
of this paper, it is the fourth and fifth conditions that are of greatest interest. And here
there is some sign in the houses of the emergence of critical consciousness and its
precondition, theoretical distance. In considering the following conclusions, two points
should be kept in mind. First, the small amount of data examined in this paper only
allows an identification of apparent tendencies, clues to be tested by further research.
Second, the identification of the emergence of critical consciousness is difficult, because
its growth is both complex and fragile. As Skeggs (1991, p. 136) has pointed out, change
in consciousness

> is not marked by a simple progression from one position of subjectivity to
> another. Rather it is characterised by an oscillation between moments of
> relative incoherence, the breaking up of old political languages and positions,
> and moments when new formulations, often tentative and transitory, are being
> realised.

What, then, can be concluded about the nature of informal learning in the neighbour-
hood houses? First, the women's reflections on their experiences and learnings in the
houses show that they were wrestling with what Walker & Barton see as the central
contradiction of social life, the way in which "a person's individuality is both realised and
restricted through participation in group life". There is often an implicit recognition of
this dilemma in the women's reflections. Recalling the experience of women in child care
groups at Higby, Mary feels that

> trying to function. . . in a more communal way was quite difficult. . . You got
> lots of support, there were lots of people, you could ask for help, just social
> contact. But also when you're dealing with a group of 10 or 12 or 15 kids, the
> kids fight, they bite each other, people get really embarrassed about how their
> kids behave, there's competition. . ., people compare [their children]. . . Some-
> times it was handled really well, and people were supported through times of

> low confidence. . . And other times it wasn't handled well, and people were
> made to feel worse. . . and weren't properly supported. I mean, it wasn't magic.
> Just because it was a group of fairly committed people together, who basically
> wanted the same things, it didn't make the nasty things go away. I think there
> was plenty of hurt inflicted along the way, unfortunately.

Second, the data reported here suggests that neighbourhood houses can be seen as 'liberated spaces' in which women have opportunities to explore their experience and build women-centred, nurturing relationships. The houses can also be viewed as 'sites of learning'. In the houses, women learn in playgroups, in courses, through their participation in committees of management, and in their roles as community workers. Through participating in house activities, women gain instrumental skills and knowledge, as well as self-awareness and an understanding of the complexity of interpersonal relationships. They also become clearer about their own values and they recognise that, because people have different interests and values, conflict among them is inevitable, and that the conflict can be constructive or destructive. The women also learn that wider contextual and structural factors shape what happens in the houses. Much of this learning is informal, incidental and embedded in other activities. It is often not articulated as learning by the people who do it, but it is still very significant learning.

The houses can also be seen as sites of struggle, and the struggle themselves as providing opportunities for learning. These struggles might be with one's self, against one's own sex-role socialisation. So, for example, the women at Higby had to overcome their belief that housework was not work before they could demand child care in the house and free themselves to pursue non-playgroup activities. Life in the houses also generates struggles between individuals and groups. So, at Higby, there was a decisive debate over child care between older and newer members, and there was a difficult and painful struggle over workers' wages. Such struggles have the potential to be destructive and debilitating. But they can also lead to decisive, liberating, action, which itself is full of learning for the people involved. For example, the early struggle over child care at Higby freed the women involved to pursue other activities. This struggle also helped to create a close, strong, committed group of house members, 'a real support network'.

Although struggles within neighbourhood houses are often painful for the individuals involved, and although they can and do lead into cul de sacs of destructive conflict, they also generate what is probably the most significant sort of human learning. This is learning that enables people to make sense of and act on their environment, and to come to understand themselves as knowledge-creating, acting beings. Through their participation in neighbourhood houses, women have learned to overcome the fear and lack of confidence instilled in them by their gender socialisation, to fight for something for themselves and to participate in difficult collective decision-making. They have also developed an understanding of the individual and social sources of conflict, a capacity to analyse situations contextually and act on them strategically, and an ability to examine and act on their own values and goals. All this is clearly *critical* learning: it involves the deprivatisation of previously apparently idiosyncratic experience, the completion of understandings, the opening up of possibilities for action, and changes in "the structure and frame of experience" (Hart, 1990b, p. 55). This process of critical learning involves people in theorising their experience: they stand back from it and reorder it, using concepts like power, conflict, structure, values and choice. It is also clear that this critical learning is gained informally, through experience, by acting and reflecting on action, rather than in formal courses.

This said, it is important to re-emphasise the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of life and learning in neighbourhood houses. For example, voluntary work in the houses, valuable as it might be for individual women, opens up a further unpaid, unaccredited arena of exploitation of female labour[2]. Again, informal learning in the houses frequently appears to be latent and is not recognised by learners *as* learning. At this stage the processes by which experience becomes learning (see Boud *et al.*, 1985; Boud & Walker, 1991) are not at all clear. Much more remains to be discovered about the characteristics, determinants, dynamics and effects of informal, embedded learning in community centres and other social sites. Hopefully, the material examined here will encourage adult educators and social activists to pursue this line of inquiry.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

[1] The houses, and their members, have been given fictitious names.
[2] I am indebted to Anita Devos for this point.

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