ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR NON-TRADITIONAL WOMEN STUDENTS: THE POWER OF THE GROUP

PART ONE: THE JANE-FINCH BRIDGING PROGRAM AT ATKINSON COLLEGE

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Les auteures décrivent la planification et la réalisation d'un programme innovateur spécial offert en 1983 par le collège Atkinson de l'Université York. Ce programme était conçu pour répondre aux besoins en éducation d'un nombre de femmes qui sont exclues, pour la plupart, par le système traditionnel. Ce programme inspira un autre cours donné l'année suivante par une équipe de professeures et présenté conjointement par l'Université York et le collège Seneca.

Plato, in advocating the provision of equal opportunity for the education of the sexes, shows that his 'concern' carried a sub-agenda. Plato thought that if education was open to women, it might de-fuse the 'power' he suspected women acquired when they gathered in groups. "They are," he said, "inclined to secrecy and craft" and ought not to be "left to their own disorders." There is certainly a connection between education and women-in-groups, and if there is a craft involved, it is the craft of bonding. A group of women quickly generate a powerful bond that will help them in their quest for education.

In the Spring of 1983 we taught a bridging course for a group of women in the Jane-Finch community bordering York University. This community is in a densely populated new suburb with a high proportion of public housing accommodating low income, new immigrant, and single-parent families. The area developed so rapidly that there are insufficient resources to sustain it. So York University appears to hold enormous treasures for these neighbours, particularly in providing one major opportunity for the powerless – that of obtaining a university degree. Despite the existence of Atkinson College, a college designed for mature and part-time students who may not have the conventional requisites for entering university, the women in this community, like most women, lacked the confidence to tackle this huge institution. A few women had tried, been overwhelmed, and left. The bureaucratic quagmire, curriculum decisions, and a mandatory math or logic course seemed beyond their ken; even if they tackled all of these obstacles, the cultural and social norms of the university inhibited their participation. As one student put it, "the barriers that separate the university from the community are not material fences or gates . . . they are *attitudes*."

So the bridging course was designed to act as an overpass – a way of leapfrogging the barriers so that these women could have the chance they wanted. This meant changes on both sides, for the student and for the institution. It also meant a bag of new tricks. The first trick was to identify academics who sufficiently believed in the rich potential of this group of women to allow a flexible and experimental approach: we found a Departmental Chairperson, a Dean and an Associate Dean who were enthusiastic. The other trick was to help neighbourhood women deal with the bureaucracy of a large institution. When we put these two things together we found a way to let the women enter the university as regular students in the Fall semester, but the dominant factor in making a success of the course which got them there was the strength of the women students *as a group.*

The group was developed by outreach techniques – going out into the community to listen to needs and wants, and then seeing how they could be translated into action. What Elspeth heard from the first small group (a group that was later expanded by their own network and ours) was:

Many of us do not have grade 13 but we have developed strong leadership skills setting up organizations and resources in this community, and we have discovered that we are not stupid. Now we want to gain recognition for our capabilities, but we also want to grow and expand. We see education as a route to achieving these objectives but we don't know if we can cope with university.

What they *did* want was a feeder course that would give them new skills and build confidence, yet have some relevance to their everyday lives. Then they felt they could decide whether university was the route most appropriate to their needs. The members of the group suggested that a course involving women's issues would interest them. The course we designed under the sponsorship of the English Department examined women's issues through Canadian women's writing; we built in a heavy literacy component. The content focussed on the experience of contemporary women: how they see themselves and how society sees them. The course used the novel, poetry and essays, with articles from *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* forming a catalyst for discussion. The group wrote weekly in-class essays and out-of-class assignments. They read, discussed and eventually wrote on such topics as: women and power/powerlessness; women and creativity; women and choice; women and the economy; woman as 'hero.' They moved from the concrete to the abstract, from the personal to the political.

In developing the content and format of the course together with this target group of women, the truth of the adage "communities have problems, universities have departments" became very apparent. The multi-disciplinary approach made good sense: in securing the interest of the Departments of English, Sociology and Economics, and by adding a strong literacy component, the group had access to many stimulating lectures. The term

"Department" as used in the above adage goes beyond subject areas and becomes symbolic of the differentiation and specialisation endemic to a university. This, naturally, puts up barriers to non-traditional students who have "whole" problems. The total package required much more than selective poaching of sympathetic faculty members for in-class lectures. The project needed solid institutional support which would be acknowledged by other university personnel. This was where the Deans came in, by opening up resources accustomed to serving only registered students. Admissions, Accounting, Counselling and Library Resources all provided people who gave information crucial to students before they were able to make the decision to register. Representatives came out to the community, thus creating a travelling Information Centre; by coming out in person they made the university seem much less intimidating. The usefulness of this approach to the needs of the whole person was compounded because it was taking place in a process. As the students in their final evaluation expressed it:

> *In this group we have had the opportunity to share our concerns re: course content, time frames, priorities, planning, etc., and together meet as a group with University personnel who were able to answer specific questions around our needs. This process has meant that we have been able to hear other people's questions as well as our own. It has also meant that we have been able to ask questions after having some knowledge and experience of being in a course. We would not have known what questions to ask before the course started. It has been helpful to have so many visiting people, this way we could build on the initial questions in a very specific and significant way.*

It was exciting to develop a program outside the normal bureaucratic barriers of a large institution. The freedom we were given to experiment was almost overwhelming. We found that we fled to the security of both rules and assumptions. No one would be allowed to audit the class – we would expect total commitment. We would choose a text which the women could identify with: Margaret Laurence's *The Fire Dwellers* seemed just right. We were wrong on both counts. The auditors (university students who were also community residents) provided invaluable in-class assistance. The group found Stacey in *The Fire Dwellers* an unassertive, tedious and irritating woman. It became clear that any unilateral decision had potential pitfalls. The only way to avoid these involved decision making *with* the group. This pragmatic approach used and developed the strengths of the students themselves.

This group was composed of feisty women, many of them actively fighting for community needs. Once they realized that they could trust us and that they were being consulted (and that, anyway, they could not allow themselves to submit to the fear of a university system any more than any other system), they became a source of instant feedback for us. They were quite clear and vocal about certain things. They wanted honest assessment, realistically 'difficult' assignments and specific instructions on how to cope. Their 'feistiness' meant that they could risk real and honest learning. As a group, they had not learned academic and bureaucratic dependency. They did not want what many students want – to be given the same task and to do it better than other students. While they realized that there was a sense of security in being told what to do and how to do it, on many occasions they deliberately avoided that as giving little potential for growth. They did not get upset if they were given different mountains to climb and often chose their own. Their untutored minds were often more supple than those of students within the system.

Thus, when "left to their own disorders" this group certainly strayed from many of the norms of formal education. Their decision to downgrade individual and competitive marks came from a sense of group spirit. Their realization that "it's only me that cares about a grade" was possible when they found that the group cared about individuals – beyond the grade. With this realization came an insistence that, after oral presentations, the other students in the group should assess them: they didn't want just pats on the back, they wanted honest criticism. Once they could jointly admit to fears of academic inadequacy they were able to give the support that was really needed. One or two members needed a call before class to ensure that they turned up. Many needed to discuss essays and reading during the week. Some needed strength to cope with denigrating remarks from husbands or families who thought the whole idea of the course was a laugh.

Like Plato, many outsiders were suspicious of the decision to restrict the class to women only. Fears of "secrecy and craft" were cloaked under accusations of discrimination. This decision had been made with the initial target group and was only strengthened as the course progressed. From the beginning the group agreed that the absence of men would be less stressful. The students felt that they would not have to worry about being tactful when they discussed personal reactions to texts. By the end of the course, all the students thought they had revealed much more in class because of the presence of exclusively female peers and instructors. One student found it harder to have a woman teacher – she had only had males in school and had always hid behind an academic facade. She felt forced to be honest now. Most students said that they produce for men what they think men want; for a female instructor they felt compelled to produce their own ideas. In the same vein, they could analyse their role as students. At first, many of the women found an ambiguity in their student role vis-a-vis their roles as mother, wife or worker. In each of these roles they were expected to take some initiative, to call upon their experience and knowledge. In the student role they suddenly felt powerless and incompetent. It was the examination of the 'role' of women in their readings that brought them to the realization that they could not allow themselves to take a passive stance. They had to take responsibility for their own learning.

In personal terms the course seemed to be an unqualified success. The group process ensured that everyone got something out of it. One member – one of the few who did not attain the necessary 'B' to gain university entrance – felt pleased with her own measure of success. Her personal goal for this course was simply to attend. As a single-parent, family-benefit mother she had much to contend with; she said she had never been able to be consistent about anything in her life. She had to force herself to attend and did so each week because of the group pressure and support. She missed only one class when her son was taken in by the police.

What about the more conventional indicators of success? How does one measure the success of such a venture? By the numbers who pass the course? By the grades these students get at graduation? By high ratings on standardized evaluation forms? Certainly everyone's grades had risen by the end, some dramatically. Three went from 65% in the first assignment to 80% in the last, two went from 55% to 75%. Of the initially interested twenty-seven, twenty came to the first

class and fourteen stayed to the end. Ten of those entered university this Fall. Numbers may not be high, but the enthusiasm is infectious as students talk to friends and neighbours and a snowball effect is built. Not only is there a determination that the course should be repeated for those who were not courageous enough to take it the first time, but there is also a trickle-down effect: community women are asking for other forms of adult education from other institutions.

Perhaps the experiment is most useful in its suggestions for how a university can move beyond just educating the educated. It is a common complaint that the institutions of society do not meet the needs of the individuals they are set up to serve; both sides recognize the need for change if this is to occur. As the students put it, "We must work at lowering and erasing these barriers from both sides of the fence, community and university. We see this type of program as a very appropriate vehicle for beginning the demolition process." The components they listed as important were:

1. *location* – "having it taught in the community made more more accessible and less fearful for us;"
2. *class size* – "we felt less subject to ridicule because of the small class-size and the resulting opportunity for participation;"
3. *low cost* – the heavy subsidy was a strong factor for most women in this group;
4. *timing* – "with our personal workloads, one three-hour class a week was all we could cope with. Some of us are having to get up at 5:00 a.m. in order to get the reading accomplished;"
5. *participation* – the high participation of all students helped to foster confidence;
6. *self-counselling in the group* – this reduced the inhibitions of people who had been out of school for a long time and created a supportive and non-competitive atmosphere.

The methods of outreach used involved time and patience to develop trust on both sides. It was necessary to identify the target population and use the flexibility offered by the College to tailor the course to fit particular needs. Two factors needed to be kept in mind for this group of women. Most of them would never have thought themselves capable of going to university without this stepping-stone approach. For others who had gained entry in the past and could manage intellectually, but not emotionally or practically, this gave them the support they missed first time around.

If a university is serious about access for non-traditional groups, then supports have to be built in ahead of time. High schools have a battery of guidance counsellors who perform these tasks. Universities send out flocks of admission and liaison officers to assist the young in their university decisions. How much more is this needed for women in a lower income bracket who, in the long years between school and the decision to go to university, have frequently suffered both scorn and disrespect for their lack of schooling. These are the potential students who need support. The institution can indeed bend its rules and regulations to provide this.

There is no sense of failure for those who did not enroll in the university. For them it was an opportunity for informed choice. They decided it was not the right time in their lives or not the avenue they wanted. For those who went on, Atkinson College opened up space for them to enter a course *as a group* – and the course teacher recognized the value of a cohort group in this instance.

The students themselves recognize the value of the group and in the interval between the conclusion of the bridging course and the beginning of the university course, they set themselves another text to read and a time for discussion. They arranged downtown theatre expeditions together. Some women lent their older children to babysit for the younger children of others. There is no holding them back. Now they 'do battle' with the other students in their class – a group of policemen – on feminist issues! They told us there is *still* some surprised wonder in their joint chant as they go for coffee together and 'come down' after the class high each week: "WE ARE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS!"

PART TWO: GRANDDAUGHTER OF JANE-FINCH: THE SENECA PROGRAM

Leslie Sanders

The Jane-Finch program described by Elspeth and Shelagh continues, alive and well. More of the following group, however, decided university was not for them and it became evident that specific, concrete career counselling would be a useful component in the course. *Enter:* negotiations with the province for funding for a longer and more complex program and enter Seneca College. *Born:* a team-taught course, jointly sponsored by York and Seneca, which combines academic work and material related to career counselling.

Much in the new generation imitates its predecessor. The course is situated in what is called "the peanut," a densely populated,medium-to-low-income area about ten miles east on the same Finch Avenue as its ancestor. Ethnically, the area is the most diverse in Toronto. Tuition is low and financial support for anything from books to babysitting is available.

For various reasons, it was not possible to recruit the first group of students through the kind of community networks that were used at Jane-Finch, nor to build a curriculum in response to specific community needs. But the recruiting for this course taught us a different lesson: a short article in the *Toronto Star*, days before the course was to start, produced one hundred phone calls; sixty people showed up at the information session. Twenty-nine of these enrolled, four went to the Jane-Finch course already underway. Midway through the course, only two have dropped out.

The core of the curriculum is Women's Studies. The students are reading some short stories, *The Fire Dwellers* (this group liked it!) and Meg Luxton's *More Than a Labour of Love*. The students are required to write and write and write (the effects of all this writing is the real topic of this article, when I get to it). However, the academic sessions are interspersed with discussions of time-management, of skills and their transferability, with interest tests and role-playing job searches, with assertiveness training and preparing a resume. Students have full access to and use the counselling services at Seneca (the course is taught at a high school at Seneca's doorstep).

Students came for a variety of reasons. Most had a dream, if not a plan, related to university attendance, but almost none of these felt confident they could "make it." A few had definite plans to attend Seneca and some came seeking direction. In short, their goals were more general than those of the Jane-Finch pioneers,