

# Homophobia in the Classroom

## One Teacher's Response

by Cynthia Peters

"If one of my kids turned out to be gay, I would kill him," said one of my ESOL students.

"But you might not want to kill him," replied another, "because that would be murder, and they could put you in jail for that."

There was nodding all around.

I sat down, stunned. What had I prepared for class that day? A game for learning fractions? Reviewing the past tense? I couldn't remember. None of it seemed to matter. I didn't feel like a teacher at that moment. I felt angry, shocked, sad and personally vulnerable even though my own life partner is of the opposite sex and so for that reason, according to my students, I should be allowed to live.

I did not try to mask my feelings. I felt too much respect for the members of my class. We were friendly and affectionate with each other. I cared a great deal for each of them. They had consistently impressed me with their finely tuned sense of justice and fairness, and their understanding of how power reveals itself in U.S. institutions—in the workplace, in the school system, in the home, in how U.S. foreign policy impacts their countries of origin.

But here they were advocating killing their own children in the event they should be gay, and the only argument against doing so was a practical one ("you'll go to jail"), not a moral one.

"My sister is a lesbian," I told them. The classroom was silent. "It hurts me to hear what you are saying." I know I showed what I was feeling—my face had probably gone pale and my hands may have been shaking—and it affected them. Because of the trust and affection we had built up over many hours in the classroom, they had no desire to cause me pain. And their faces

showed what *they* were feeling—conflict between their hatred of homosexuality and their curiosity about what it could mean that someone they thought they knew and respected could be close to a gay person. I felt that the students were looking at me completely differently.

"My sister is a wonderful person. I love her. My parents love her. If they had rejected her because she is a lesbian, we all would have lost so much. Our family would have been divided. I am so thankful that they loved their daughter even though it was hard for them to understand her."

When issues arise in the classroom, most teachers respond as teachers. We look for what can be learned from the moment; we see it as an opportunity for critical thinking, debate, and English language practice. In a flexible classroom, such moments might lead to a writing project or some research. Maybe we mine the conversation for vocabulary and create a lesson plan around related themes for the next class. I have done that kind of thing many times. But in this case, I reacted not as a teacher, but as an individual who was clearly *affected* by what the students were saying. The students experienced an immediate consequence to their words and sentiments. I didn't absorb what they said in a neutral way. Instead, I let it bounce back to them, and thus they got a second look at it in a different light.

Not that they changed their minds. "It's against the Bible," they argued. "It's against nature, and a crime against God."

"The Bible also says not to have children out of wedlock," I replied. There was no need to point out that most of the people in the class had gone against the Bible on that score.

We all looked at each other, feeling un-

nerved, and I didn't rescue the situation from uneasiness—the way I usually might in difficult situations. We sat in this strange stillness. The charged feeling hung in the air. I had no particular strategy about where to take the class, but I had a strong sense that I didn't want to be less than honest about my reactions. This felt like the more respectful—if more potentially teacherous—path.

"Next class," I offered, "let's all bring in pictures of our family." We returned to the lesson plan of the day, but something had been opened up between us. It felt raw but honest.

For the next class, I brought in pictures of my sister. "She looks just like you," the students said, still seeming to study me with new eyes.

I showed them pictures of her sons. I showed them pictures of my parents and siblings and numerous cousins and nieces and nephews—my parents proudly in the center of it all. Ours is a mixed race family as well.

While we passed around everyone's photo albums, delighted over baby pictures, noted the family resemblances, and teased each other about the changes that are apparent over time, we talked about family. The students wrote about family being important because it offered unconditional love and because it was a source of comfort in a difficult world. We noted that this was something we had in common despite our di-

verse families. One student began to speak up about the importance of accepting people who are different from you. She talked about tolerance. She argued that people should mind their own business. "No one's asking *you* to be a homosexual," she said.

I did not attempt to steer the class toward any kind of resolution on the matter of homosexuality. But I hope I opened up a space for people to think about it differently, and for at least one student to voice her own argument against homophobia. As teachers, we often confront moments that challenge us to decide how to handle our own (sometimes very strongly held) political positions. There are various ways to take on these moments. In this particular experience, I learned that being personally honest but not didactic had some value. It was possible for me to pursue this course partly because, being straight, I did not have to take an enormous personal risk. It was also possible because I felt enough respect for my students to give them an honest reaction. This confluence of factors may not always be present in the classroom, but when it is, it presents a way forward. Teachers can draw off of it to find their way, respectfully and honestly, towards greater understanding.

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## Coming Out to Students

*by Deborah Schwartz*

*When I taught adult basic education at the Archdale Family Literacy Project in Roslindale, Massachusetts, I kept a journal. More precisely, we—the ten women students and myself—all kept journals. Our medium was stacks and stacks of green steno-pads. In them, we tried to tell the truth about our lives, though the students started noticing gaps in my story. They challenged me not to hide myself from them. Following are several edited entries from my own journal, which tell the story of coming out to my students. Most are from my experience with this class, but I also included two entries from two other classes I taught concurrently.*

### March 3

They are writing frantically in their journals. S writes about driving the rats out of her apartment. C writes about playing her music as loudly as she likes. L writes about her grandmother—about living with her in the mountains and drinking her coffee so black that it stings her eyes before she swallows.

When J reads, she interrupts herself to tell us that she's getting evicted because her oldest son Tom came home with some guy named Eddie who lit a joint in the hall then walked into her apartment with the lit joint and now the housing authority has the right to evict them.

C responds, "Even in this lousy project, you still have some rights." She is on her feet: "Do you know how often they've threatened to evict me? Just for playing my music after church on Sunday afternoon?"

C is smart and community-minded. She has set up this protocol of letting the neighbors know when she's going to be playing loud music. Half the time, they say it's fine and half of those times she invites them over because "it's no fun to dance alone," and the other half of the time, she shares chicken with them and then they change their minds, and half of the time they end up watching TV together.

"All those halves don't add up," B notices.

"They add up," responds C. "Believe me, they add up." Everyone laughs. The classroom is a world of words and stories and noise and quiet while we're writing.

We have authority over our lives for this brief time. The crocus doesn't just come up in the spring, but has the purple-colored chutzpah to bloom through the hard, cold earth. These women are like that. They give me bravery, but what do I give them? Room, that's all.

### April 23

"Read what you wrote, Deborah. You always make us read what we wrote," J notices that I skip passages when it's my turn to read. I remind her that it's ok to skip passages, or to not

even read at all.

"But Deborah, you never tell us anything about your life, or at least anything good," which I know is a code word for anything interesting.

"Well nothing all that interesting happens in my life," I counter.

"Are you kidding?" replies C.

"You come in here some mornings and you look like a train hit you. You and your double latte!

Then some days you come in looking like

a shining star. You have a life too, just cause you're a teacher doesn't mean you can hide behind that. Jesus, you know what color each of our bedroom walls is painted. We don't know anything about you. Nothing that counts anyway. You take a risk, Missy, and read!" That's what C says.

So I read without censorship. I read about how hard it is pretending to my family that I am not who I am and that my partner is not my partner and that the commitment ring that I wear is just another ring. Then there is a silence. C and L and B and A and J are there listening to me so intently. The way I try to listen to them when they read their truths.

I say, "Oh God, I am so sorry. I have been lying to you about having a boyfriend, and..."

"It's ok, honey, sometimes you have to lie, but here you don't," C says to me. "Keep reading."

When I'm done, B says, "Girl, you're a lesbian." That makes us all laugh.

Then A says, "My sister's cousin GG is a fag and we love him. He does all our hair."

It goes on like this. They want to know about sex and I tell them I'm too uncomfortable to talk about that. But I can give them some resources. They want to know who sleeps on the couch, and I tell them we try not to go to bed

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angry. They want to meet Nancy. They want to call her at work and invite her to our end of the year party, which I remind them isn't until May.

Later, they draw a huge invitation to Nancy. Here's what it says on the front cover: *YOU ARE INVITED TO OUR GRADUATION PARTY*. On the inside it: "Thank you for putting up with Deborah. We love her and now we love you."

### May 26

Nancy came to the party last night. She played with the kids. J wanted to sit next to her and later came over to me and said she thought she was shy. C's teenage girls were staring at us at one point, but later they kissed us both goodbye. Nancy loved meeting the women and eating the heaps of food they piled on her plate. J's speech about being the first one in her family to ever get the GED made us all weepy, but when B put on "I'm coming out," saying that she knew we would like this "old people's music," and persuaded Nancy to dance with her, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

[The same year I was teaching the ten women, I also taught two other classes in which the issue of sexual orientation surfaced. The following two entries are about experiences in those classes.]

### May 10/Notes from the VideoFest

During the first half of the Spike Lee film, "Get On the Bus," I struggle with the gay jokes and name-calling circulating in the room.

I try, "Let's respect everyone, please." Then: "Abide by our ground rules, or I'll kick you out of here." And finally, "No gay jokes. It's mean and it's unacceptable."

"What are you a Dyke or something?" S calls out so that everyone can hear.

I remember how I have just promised myself to never lie again. I look at him. He is waiting for me to say something. The whole room is waiting. "Well," I pause, not at all sure what it is

I will say, "Well, yes, I am a Dyke."

Some of the students giggle. We watch the movie. Later, as I walk up to the front of the room, floating a bit above my body, ready to hand out their assignments and then dismiss them without discussion, I hear S's voice loud and clear from the back of the room as he gets up to leave. "Hey Deb, I'm sorry." That's what he says.

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### May 12

Before class, when I am usually alone doing some planning, a kid I have never seen before comes to visit.

"Listen," he tells me. "You can't tell anyone. I live up at the Beech Street Projects and I will be killed if they know." I tell him about BAGLY (Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth). I tell him about the gay men of color group at the Fenway. He gives me one of those hip, youth handshakes. I'm really klutzy and don't know the moves, so I just hug him. When he leaves, I cry.

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# 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.*

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*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.

### *Socio-drama: Rosa worries about her sexual health*

This is a sample socio-drama activity that was implemented in the VozMujer multi-level ESOL class as part of the health unit of the curriculum.

#### **Desired Outcomes**

- Explore the causes and solutions for health problems that affect us.
- Share our experiences overcoming health problems.
- Ask questions and find solutions for health problems.

#### **Setting the Stage**

Rosa just found out that her husband Pablo has been unfaithful and she is worried about their relationship and her own sexual health. Rosa has never been to the gynecologist in the United States. Rosa asks her friend Sonia what to do. What should Rosa do?

#### **Instructions**

Work with the other members in your group to write a socio-drama about Rosa's situation. Every member must write and act out at least three lines. Everyone must participate.

Try to use the language topics we have reviewed in class:

- Asking questions with do/does and is/are
- Verbs: to be (am/is/are), to have (have/has), and to feel
- Health Vocabulary: problems, causes, and solutions

After you write your socio-drama, you will present it to the class. Have fun and be creative!

#### **Notes to the Facilitator**

After all groups have presented their socio-dramas, the class reflects on the situations and solutions that were presented.

#### **Guiding Questions**

1. How did it feel to be in the socio-drama?
2. Do you think the solutions to the problem are realistic? Why or why not?
3. What can we learn from the socio-dramas?
4. How can other women in our families and communities benefit from what we learned today?

#### **Other Things to Keep in Mind**

- The most effective socio-dramas are based on learners' own experiences and problems that they bring to class.
- Socio-dramas are great opportunities for learners to practice newly-acquired language skills. Make sure that learners are comfortable with the vocabulary and language skills needed to create the dramas so that they can focus on practicing their speaking and problem-solving skills.
- You can also help learners develop the socio-drama by brainstorming certain characters that should be represented (i.e. Pablo, Rosa, Sonia, a gynecologist, and a counselor).

# Expressive Arts in Prison

## *Healing and Self-Discovery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility*

*by Steve Podry, with Bobby Blanchard*

The Literacy, Education and Parenting program (LEAP) is a family literacy resource at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York state. As program coordinator, I have tried to utilize my background in the arts and as an expressive arts therapist to develop a learning environment that kindles the creative spirit of the women we serve.

The women we serve are mothers. Between 1977 and 2001 the number of women sentenced to prison in the U.S. increased 592%. Currently, there are over 97,000 women in jail, and 75% of those women are mothers. The ripple effect in terms of damaged families and children is an American disaster.

In response, the Children's Center at Beverly Hills emerged over 25 years ago to become a cluster of thirty inmate- and civilian-staffed programs and classes designed to nurture the relationship between children and their incarcerated mothers. One of the Children's Center core endeavors is the Nursery program, which provides an opportunity for incarcerated mothers to follow the love for their new babies as source and guide into new life. Women accepted to the Nursery keep their newborn children with them for up to 18 months. Most are released before this, or soon thereafter. LEAP is the family literacy and learning resource center for the Nursery community.

Prison amounts to a life-quake, a void, a troubling transitional space of chaos and vulnerability. LEAP offers the Nursery mothers an invitation to use this occasion to plunge into their own being. Each student begins by writing her autobiography, and proceeds to participate in

### LEAP's Classes and Projects

- "Parenting Through Art & Play" and "Work World Preparation" classes for mothers
- "Art Education for Young Children" for the inmate caregivers who staff the Infant Development Center where the mothers leave their babies while attending class
- community art projects in the Children's Center Visiting Room as a way for older children and their mothers to celebrate their time together while also saying good-bye
- "The Musical Art of Making It Up" improvisational music-making classes
- a series of classes on using the expressive arts to work with dreams
- monthly visits from a retired poetry teacher and an authentic movement therapist
- volunteer instruction on the beautiful old art of quilt-making
- a six-week workshop in the art of telling stories
- open studios in the Nursery housing unit where moms with babies make art in a lively community atmosphere
- community murals, a variety show, and artistic and moral support for holidays and babies' birthdays

many creative activities. (See the box about LEAP's classes and projects.)

Everything we do in LEAP bears some connection to human creative potential. Trust, gratitude, a sense of wonder, and many other spiritual, aesthetic, and ethical qualities wait in the wings to emerge when a woman's creativity

comes alive. I often think of one Nursery mother marveling at her own art work: "How did I do that?" Writing and making art together, we begin to glimpse each other's strange beauty too. These awakenings and creative practices that support learning—journal writing, group sharing, and art for relaxation, healing, self-discovery—serve to disrupt the prisoners' feelings of victimization.

Prison is mad, less because of its reluctant guests, perhaps, than because of society's contradictory mandate that prisons should both punish and rehabilitate. An archaic part of our brain confuses "pain" and "gain." I have come to believe that punishing lawbreakers, children, or anybody else is counterproductive, since retribution is founded on feelings of vengeance and righteousness that only engender more of the same. It is an old habit to punish others and comfort ourselves by believing that the problem (e.g., the national drug epidemic) is being adequately addressed. One difficulty in supporting a non-punitive approach is that the alternatives to punishment appear far more bewildering, a challenge to our collective social imagination.

"Prison is the program; we try to create a sub-context," says one seasoned inmate, a parenting and prenatal teacher. Rehabilitative prison programs are simultaneously supported and undermined by the double-binding fallacy of rehabilitative punishment. Yet, prisoners themselves often construe a method in the madness of their predicament: "I'm lucky to be alive. Prison gave me a second chance." LEAP seeks to become a vehicle through which prison may reveal and give more than its destructive contradictions take away. Art-making supports imagining one's victimization in ways more conducive to living mindfully and creatively in the future, because an artistic attitude sees obstacles as opportunities to create something new. When an incarcerated woman re-imagines her prison time as an opportunity for reflection, for example, she shifts the potentially toxic consequences of imprisonment onto fertile ground. Still immersed in the literally creative act of giving birth, the

Nursery mothers may be especially keen to contemplate creativity and the remaking of their lives.

LEAP's guiding vision is that human beings are essentially creative. We imagine, shape, and make split-second decisions every moment, whether we realize it or not. We are *in* "Creation." We are in collaboration with a creation that is still in progress. No one has arrived. Nothing is a *fait accompli*. LEAP's vision says, "No wonder the world's such a mess! We aren't finished yet!" By using the arts to shape life and become aware of the ways in which life shapes us, we learn to navigate the tender middle ground of inner choice and imaginative action. Working in the expressive arts engages our identity as creator-participants in the world—making us all a little more free.

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*Bobby Blanchard was program coordinator of LEAP for a year before becoming the Nursery manager. Steve Podry has been LEAP coordinator since 2000.*

## Resources

### ***Collective Voices in Expressive Arts***

This excellent compendium put together by a variety of artists, educators, and therapists at Appalachian State University presents a range of specific frameworks and ideas for working with groups. Contact Professor Sally Atkins at [atkinsss@appstate.edu](mailto:atkinsss@appstate.edu) to purchase a copy.

### ***www.glasslakestudio.com***

A great site to explore for more information on expressive arts therapy.

# 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.

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**“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

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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.

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**"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

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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](http://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.

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**"[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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*Mev Miller is the founder and director of WE LEARN and has facilitated book groups with women learners for many years. Mev also works for the System of Adult Basic Education and Support (SABES) in Fall River, MA.*



## **Book Reviews**

### *The Dirty Girls Social Club*

by Ivette Rivera

*The Dirty Girls Social Club*, written by Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, is a story about six Latina women and their lives. "Las Sucias" became friends while studying at Boston University. After they graduated, they promised to meet at least twice a year to have a *Dirty Girls* reunion, usually a night of dinner, drinks, and girl talk. The book's characters are Lauren, Sara, Amber, Elizabeth, Rebecca, and Usnavys. The main character is Lauren, a Cubana who works as a columnist for a local newspaper. Lauren is struggling with her identity as a Latina because her father is Cuban and her mother is white. Lauren also complains about her co-workers' stereotypes of Latina women. Lauren thinks she's not a good Latina because she doesn't speak Spanish, but at the same time criticizes people's notions about what they believe Latinas are like.

Another "Sucia" is Usnavys, a dark-skinned voluptuous Puerto Rican woman who grew up poor in Boston public housing, which has made her obsessed with the finer things in life as an adult. Usnavys is looking for a man who can support her financially, even though she is more than capable of supporting herself. Her father left her mother when she was very young and her

brother was murdered at a young age. So, she has abandonment issues that she masks by staying aloof with the men she dates.



Rebecca runs her own magazine called "Ella." This "Sucia" is a Mexican woman but refers to herself as Spanish. Even though Rebecca has olive skin and dark hair she views herself as Spaniard and totally denies her Indian side. Another "Sucia," Amber is Rebecca's polar opposite, she is a very proud Mexicana. In college she discovered the Mexica Movement and decided she no longer wanted to be called Hispanic, and wanted to be referred to as Native American. While Rebecca denies her Indian roots, Amber denies her Spanish roots. Amber is a starving artist who is trying to get a record deal singing angry Spanish rock songs about what the white man did to her Indian people.

Meanwhile, Sarah is a white Jewish Cubana with blond hair who models herself after her idol Martha Stewart. She is a stay-at-home mom and comes from old Cuban money. She married her high school sweetheart Roberto, who turns out to be very abusive. Last but not least is Elizabeth, a beautiful Black Colombian, a successful news anchor who is hiding the fact that she is a lesbian.

As you read each chapter, you get a glimpse

into a day-in-the-life of each woman. I loved this book and from the very beginning I couldn't put it down. I thought the author did a wonderful job highlighting some of the issues Latina women face. And, she did a great job showing the reader how vast the differences can be in each Latino culture by explaining some cultural histories and incorporating some of the rich traditions each culture holds. The book makes references to some of the typical foods, music, and customs, and it uses just the right amount of Spanish words to give you a glimpse into the minds of Latina women and culture.

Even though this book is about Latina

women, this is a story about women in general. It is about their struggles and the bonds that keep them together. I think Alisa Valdes Rodriguez wrote this book to share her experience of friendships and to make the reader aware of some of the issues facing Latina women. You can tell the characters are dear to her by how human she makes them. She shows all their weaknesses and strengths in a way that makes you feel that both contribute to their empowerment. I would highly recommend this book to anyone.

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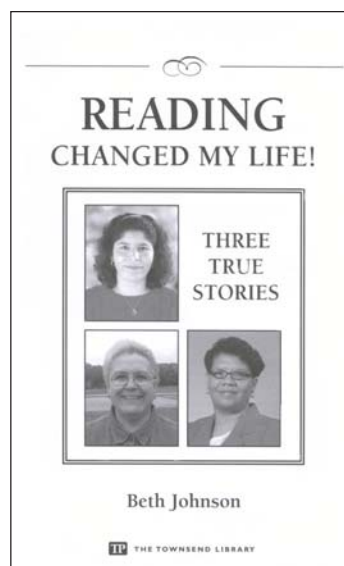


### *Review: Reading Changed My Life*

*by Hillary Gardner*

I can remember clearly the day we sat around discussing Maria Cardenas' life. My summer class of adult students in the ESOL/Civics program at the Center for Immigrant Education and Training formed a semi-circle in front of me. We were talking about how in Maria's story, her father was an alcoholic and had been verbally abusive with her, telling her as a young girl that she was stupid and would never amount to anything. One student said: "My father was like that too." Another agreed. That day, a half dozen of my students came forward and admitted that alcohol and anger had been a part of their households when they were young.

That day changed how I thought about the cycle of learning. As a teacher, not a counselor, it wasn't my job to ask students to share their personal experiences, particularly experiences that were so difficult and personal. At the same time, because of the story we were reading, we gained a shared realization— maybe we all



ended up here for the same reason—we never got the support for education from our families that we needed when we were young. And maybe from the story in front of us, we could learn some ways to move beyond that fact.

As an ESOL/Civics teacher, one of my biggest challenges is finding reading materials for my class with an appropriate vocabulary level that will motivate my students to read but aren't oversimplified or childish. I like materials that show real people overcoming hardships, but

they can't be maudlin. In one text I considered using, the narrator explained the domestic violence she'd experienced in such detail that I couldn't imagine the text accomplishing its primary purpose—getting students excited about reading more. I want my students to be able to identify with the narrator of a story, but I have

students from many different backgrounds, educational levels, and ages. How can I accommodate all of them and keep within my very limited materials budget? If I buy my students a reader, I can't afford to also get them a dictionary or vice versa.

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**As an ESOL/Civics teacher, one of my biggest challenges is finding reading materials for my class with an appropriate vocabulary level that will motivate my students to read but aren't oversimplified or childish.**

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The Townsend Press has helped me resolve this dilemma. *Reading Changed My Life* by Beth Johnson (available for \$1 per copy) is a collection of stories of three women from different backgrounds who learn to read late in life. Maria Cardenas is a migrant worker from Mexico who never finishes school because at a young age she must work with her family in the fields. In Maria's story, we focused on the marigold she cared for as a symbol of what she hoped to improve in her future. We learned to label paragraphs with the main idea so we could find the details we wanted to look up later. We argued over whether it was a happy story or a sad story. We looked at some of the events that happened in Maria's life and compared them to our own. We talked about her slogan for success, to find beauty in the simplest thing, then studied more, sayings like one day at a time or don't put the cart before the horse.

In chapter two, we met Daisy Russell. Students read about how a U.S. citizen grew up

without ever learning to read at more than a second-grade level. We focused on the adjectives that described Daisy at different points in her life. Students looked for the adjectives in context and discussed why Daisy felt the way she did at different points in the story. We created a table of synonyms and antonyms with our adjective lists. Then students chose adjectives to describe themselves.

In the final chapter, we learned about Julia Burney, a police officer who started a reading center for underprivileged children in her community. Some students felt this achievement made her story "the best." We talked about the different ways all three women had gone about improving their lives: from visiting the library, to studying for the GED, to finding a Laubach literacy tutor. We looked at the turning point in each person's life and talked about "before and after" events, especially how they were different before, and what changed after, they learned to read.

The title *Reading Changed My Life* says it all; this book is about reading. It is also about immigration, poverty, alcoholism and abuse, but the smiling faces of the three women on the cover need no interpretation. At the end of the book there is a special offer: a coupon for five books for \$5. I will always remember the day my graduating student, Hilda, showed me the first of her five books, an abridged version of *The Call of the Wild* that she had ordered on her own. It will be hard to forget her look of determination and pride.

My thanks go out to the author, Beth Johnson, and the Townsend Press for producing materials that are sensitive, inexpensive, and inspiring. It is a rare and much needed resource.

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# WE LEARN

## *A Resource for Women's Literacy*

*WE LEARN promotes women's literacy as a tool for personal growth and social change through networking, education, action, and resource development. Like its name, WE LEARN is full of hope, promise, and expectation.*

**W**omen – WE LEARN focuses on the issues, needs, concerns, viewpoints, strengths, and wisdom of women. WE LEARN encourages the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being of women. Though WE LEARN primarily focuses on adult women, we are also sensitive to the needs of girls and teenaged/young women. We also know that women live with children and men in a variety of ways and acknowledge women and their lives in families and communities. We encourage men to understand the importance of women's issues. Justice and respect for women helps the rights of all people.

**E**xpanding – Women are always growing and changing in their bodies, minds, and hearts. Women expanding means that WE LEARN encourages women to increase their power and participation in all aspects of life. This expansion involves personal growth and acceptance of responsibilities. It also increases women's contributions to transform and change the quality of life in their families, communities, and the world.

**L**iteracy – WE LEARN focuses on the basic literacy needs of adult women. An alarming number of women in the United States and the world cannot read or write very well. WE LEARN advocates for women's literacy. WE LEARN also knows there are different kinds of literacies and helps women to understand that there are many ways of knowing.

**E**ducation – WE LEARN supports education for women. It is not enough for women to have basic literacy. Women must also have access to a variety of educational experiences. Education includes reflection and action, research and discovery, knowing and doing. Education includes school and more than school. We are all learners. Many experiences in life can educate us.

**A**ction – WE LEARN takes action to support and promote women's literacy and access to adult basic education. WE LEARN encourages women learners to take action in their lives and communities. WE LEARN assists women learners and teachers to develop leadership skills. Action involves advocacy. Action creates change and transformation in our world.

**R**esource – WE LEARN creates opportunities to publish and promote women-centered basic English literacy and reading materials and curriculum resources. WE LEARN also assists teachers and tutors to work together to create such materials to continue their own learning. We maintain a clearinghouse of these resources.

**N**etwork – The success of WE LEARN depends on the participation of students, teachers, tutors, administrators, researchers, librarians, writers, community activists and anyone interested in women's issues and adult basic literacy education. Network means we work together as friends and equals. Everyone's ideas and activity are important. We collaborate as colleagues.

*WE LEARN is a non-profit membership organization based in Cranston, Rhode Island. It is the only national organization in the U.S. dedicated specifically to women and literacy. To learn more about our projects go to: [www.litwomen.org/welearn.html](http://www.litwomen.org/welearn.html), email [welearn@litwomen.org](mailto:welearn@litwomen.org) or call 401-383-4374.*