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Women's experiences in learning to write fiction: Exploring gendered engagement in communities of practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how gender impacts upon the participation women fiction authors in different communities of practice. While some communities of practice may provide valuable supports, in other instances, women may be systematically marginalized. The development of social media is also creating new opportunities and challenges for participation in virtual communities of practice for women writers.

A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. *Virginia Woolf*

Although the experiences of women fiction writers vary considerably, it is worth examining some commonalities of experience to determine the factors that may foster opportunities for women to become successful authors. This paper draws upon a subset of the data from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded study that examines connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing. While noting variations in individual learning experiences, we draw upon Wenger's (1998) concept of "communities of practice" as a way to explore the social aspects of women's learning experiences in connection to writing. Even though, as Virginia Woolf suggests, having space, privacy, autonomy, and financial security (all of which are often more precarious resources for women to access than men), it appears that social connections and supports are also integral to the success of many women fiction writers.

Fiction Writing, Women, and Communities of Practice

Using the concept of "communities of practice" Wenger (1998) explores learning as a socio-cultural practice. Newcomers to a field gradually learn their way into accepted practices and shared meanings and understanding through the process of "legitimate peripheral participation" (p. 100). Rather than just observe, newcomers must also participate,

which involves access "to mutual engagement with other members, to their actions and their negotiation of the enterprise, and to the repertoire in use" (p. 100).

In general society, learning is often viewed as occurring through engagement with (or via) curriculum, content, skills, metrics, training or methods. What is innovative about Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice is that he locates learning in the "*practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities" (p. 4) (original italics). Thus, "practice is not merely a context for learning something else. Engagement in practice – in its unfolding, multidimensional complexity – is both the stage and the object, the road and the destination" (p. 95). This "learning through practice" is an integral aspect of learning to become a fiction writer, both in terms of developing the craft of writing, and in terms of learning the business of publishing.

Fiction writers participate in different communities of practice. Wenger points out that geographical proximity is not an important criteria for defining communities of practice (p. 130). Although fiction writers may live across the country or in different parts of the globe, they come together at different writing events, and increasingly, through on-line environments. As Wenger argues, what is important for members of a community of practice is "sustaining enough mutual engagement in pursuing an enterprise together to share some significant learning" (p. 86). Fiction writers learn through writing but also through many varied practices related to the writing process such as reading other authors' works, attending readings and conferences, taking or teaching classes, or entering into editing partnerships. They also belong to the larger constellations of practices (Wenger, 1998, p. 126) formed through writers' unions, publishing houses, distribution agencies, and arts councils.

Fiction writers' relationships to their audiences are also part of their communities of practice. Although writing may

ostensibly seem like a very isolated profession, Wenger gives a comparable example when he states, "Being in a hotel room by yourself preparing a set of slides for a presentation the next morning may not seem like a particularly social event, yet its meaning is fundamentally social" (p. 57). Similarly, writers intend that their manuscripts will be published and obtain a readership. Thus, it is not only through direct interaction with other people or institutions in the writing community that fiction writers engage in their communities of practice.

Often women fiction writers engage in communities of practice to further develop their skills as writers and to navigate the uncertain terrain of becoming a published author. Jackson (2012) notes that discourses on lifelong learning often overlook gender differences in experience. Social relationships are often an important component of women's learning experiences, even when they are characterized by conflict as well as support (English & Peters, 2012). Callahan & Tomaszewski (2007) explore women's experiences in a male dominated organization and note that there may be more than one community of practice, whereby one may sustain traditional gender relationships, while another may support more individualistic and equitable approaches to participation. In what follows, we hope to tease out some of these complexities to consider how communities of practice may both support and provide challenges for women striving to become successful fiction writers.

The Study

This study includes life history interviews with over forty authors who write literary, crime fiction, and children/YA (young adult) fiction. Most authors were Canadian, although some interviews with American and British authors were included for cross-cultural comparison. In this paper, the experiences of 22 women authors, five of whom are American, were reviewed.

The analysis drew upon critical and feminist theories, as well as a grounded theory approach whereby data was reviewed extensively to determine emergent themes. Three themes are explored in this discussion; a) women and learning in community; b) gender and peripheral forms of exclusion, and c) social media and communities of practice.

Women and Learning in Community

Women fiction authors often described their participation in communities of practice, such as writing groups or organizations, as having a positive influence on the development of their writing careers. Women usually see each other as mentors, supports, friends, and professional colleagues. Yet given that they are often competing for the same limited resources (grant funding, press coverage, book contracts), and working with similar constraints (limited income from their writing, childcare, domestic responsibilities), these communities of practice could be based on adversity.

YA (Young Adult) author Christine Walde, commented on being a member of a writing group: "there's a sense of connecting with other writers...members of the literary community, and I find that very rewarding and fulfilling" (p.29).

Mystery writer Elizabeth Duncan echoes these thoughts when she says, "My advice to people who aspire to do something is to get in with the people who are already doing it... It's certainly great to be part of an organization. I belonged to a little writers and editors group that brought in guest speakers, and I would leave the meeting every Saturday really charged up; could hardly wait to get back home and start writing again" (p.11). Daphne Marlatt, a poet and literary author, observed that "having a community of writers is extremely important because we nudge each other and we ask after each other's work....All of that is tremendously supportive psychologically."

Most of the women also discussed having positive relationships with men in the writing organizations that they belonged to. However, as we will see in the next section, there are still systemic issues of gender inequalities that may situate women in a more peripheral position within the "communities of practice" located within in the realm of fiction writing.

Gender and Peripheral Forms of Exclusion

Some women authors discussed the perception that women's stories are still not recognized to be as valuable as men's stories. Fiction writers form a larger community of practice that sometimes reinforce gender norms whereby men's contributions are systemically given greater support and acknowledgement than women's contributions. This results in the majority of women remaining in the periphery of a community of practice while larger percentages of male authors are given greater acceptance and recognition such as being nominated and given writing awards and receiving larger advances.

Wenger (1998) notes that communities of practice are characterized largely through the *interactions* of people. Many of the women writers in this study commented that the start of their careers as writers was challenging. For instance, Rosemary Nixon reflected on her experience of growing up with a lack of women writer role models: "I thought writers were old dead men, I really did. Old dead British men. It never occurred to me that somebody sat and wrote the book I read, which is ridiculous."

Women authors, more often than male writers, commented on how it was hard to find a balance between writing, caregiving, and domestic responsibilities. Dawn Bryan, a literary author said, "I remember typing and nursing at the same time... because that was the only time that I could sit down. I had very active kids." Gender differences of commitments to the homeplace continually shape the capacity of women to engage in different learning experiences, including maintaining a higher profile within various communities of practice such as writing organizations.

At a more institutional level, Cathy Pickens comments on the advocacy work done by Sisters in Crime, an organization dedicated to supporting the work of women mystery writers that began as a small group in the United States and now has a large national membership as well as a few international chapters. Pickens notes that:

A third of the mystery books in the mid-eighties [in the U.S] were written by women and they were getting less than ten percent of the reviews. Now half the mysteries are written by women and while a gap still exists, it's a lot narrower than the gap for literary fiction (roughly 45% to 48% of reviews). That's because of a group of women who decided to get out there and educate people and reviewers about this idea of equity, and educate women writers about what it means to promote yourself and be professional. That's powerful, and it's an important legacy.

Sisters-in-Crime was established in 1986 as a response to the belief that women were disproportionately underrepresented by formal publishing houses – particularly in the area of crime fiction (Gouthro, 2012). One of the founders of the organization, Sara Paretsky, discussed the initial reaction of the larger crime fiction community: “there was a lot of anger and opposition towards us when we got started. One woman on the west coast was told that she would never get a publishing contract again if she agreed to serve on our initial advisory committee.”

Wenger (1998) emphasizes that communities of practice are not always positive or inclusive. Indeed, he points out “they can reproduce counterproductive patterns, injustices, prejudices, racism, sexism, and abuses of all kinds” (p. 132). What's more, Wenger (1998) declares that communities of practice are “the very locus of such reproduction” (p. 132). Thus, setting up an organization such as Sisters in Crime is an example of women creating a new community of practice to work in a united and collaborative way against gender bias within existing communities of practice in the writing profession.

In Canada there are many supports for both male and female writers, particularly literary and children/YA (Young Adult) authors, through arts councils, publishers, and other arts-based organizations, but there is also evidence to suggest that women face greater challenges in having their contributions acknowledged in the prizes that are awarded for literary books. Statistics show that women continue to be systemically marginalized in the large public arena of writing. As a *Globe and Mail* article (2012) sums up:

Seven of 19 winners of the Giller Prize have been women. And about a third of the winners of the Governor-General's Award for English-Language Fiction have been women. The Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour has been awarded to only five women since it was established in 1947.....[and for] the Nobel Prize for Literature numbers, the result was more disheartening: Only 12 of the winners since 1901, or about 11 per cent, were women.

In addition, the Canadian Women in the Literary Arts (2011) published a statistical analysis of more than 2000 book reviews of fourteen nationally circulated publications, which found that more than half the publications reviewed

more books by male authors, and published more literary reviews written by male critics. The fiction prize and review culture in Canadian Arts matter to the success of women fiction writers individually and collectively.

Wenger (1998) writes, “Communities of practice are not self-contained entities. They develop in larger contexts – historical, social, cultural, institutional – with specific resources and constraints” (p. 79). This question of resources and constraints specific to fiction women writers' community of practice has material and ideological implications for how well female authors can succeed in their chosen profession.

Social Media and Communities of Practice

Social media as tools for communication are not significant because of the technology, but for the “socio-technical dynamics that unfolded as millions of people embraced the technology and used it to collaborate, share information, and socialize” (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p.9). Some of the women authors interviewed for this study discussed their use of social network sites as a way to participate in communities of practice with other authors at a distance. Susanna Kearsley explains: “I find Twitter is a way for me to keep in touch with my writing friends, mostly in Britain. There are people who I've come into contact with that I would ordinarily see once a year at a conference and now I can be in touch with them all the time”. Others use social media as a way to connect with current and potential readers of their work. Vicki Delany states, “Facebook is very worthwhile, in my opinion. There are people here at Malice [a mystery conference] who have friended me on Facebook and then bought my book”.

Lave and Wenger (1991) talk about the importance of active participation in the group: “The purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation” (p.108-109). Social media and social network sites are non-traditional spaces where learning can take place and knowledge is shared amongst individuals. Regardless of location or time, these forums can bring individuals with shared interests together.

This is by no means a new idea, but rather an evolution in participatory learning. Sara Paretsky notes, “Sisters [Sisters-in-Crime] was very early on in the computer world, and long before social media we had our Guppy [Great Unpublished] chapter that was an online space for people in remote places to connect. That was really great”. The Guppy chapter provide online mentorship, sharing and learning spaces for aspiring writers to learn about their craft and the intricacies of the publishing world.

Wenger (1998) observes that meaning is always in constant negotiation in communities of practice. Women fiction authors are always making choices around how to best spend their energies. The publishing world as a constellation of their community of practice impacts on women's abilities to have a viable career. Wenger (1998) says that “reification” (p. 57) and participation complement one another. Reification is a symbolic “shortcut to communication” (p. 58) of what

matters internally to a particular community of practice. In the case of women fiction authors, developing “the platform” as it is referred to, came up frequently in our interviews. This term refers to publishers’ move toward authors having to devote significant amounts of time to promote their own work through digital means such as Facebook or Twitter. While we have noted that social media has provided women authors with important tools for communicating, many authors see this shifted onus of self-promotion as very time consuming rather than emancipation. For women who already tend to bear the brunt of domestic labour responsibilities, this engagement in an on-line community of practice may sometimes act as a deterrent in developing a successful writing career.

Conclusion

American feminists such as Elaine Showalter (1999) draw attention to how women’s writing has long been marginalized, not because of the quality of its writing, but due to patriarchal norms of what matters and counts in writing and in life. Women writers may help to create an epistemology shaped by women’s experiences and perspectives that may never have otherwise reached a larger audience.

Participants in this study have written about experiences very specific to women. For instance, Dawn Bryan’s (2008) *Gerbil* tells the story of motherhood from an extremely unsentimental perspective. Rosemary Nixon’s *Kalila* (2011) explores the experience of parents whose baby slowly dies over the course of a year in hospital.

It is important that women writers find a voice through their communities of practice in part because their stories often provide great insight into the lived experiences of women, which may contribute to the public discourses around gender and feminism. Virginia Woolf discusses what women need in order to be able to write – space, time, and financial support. These are all important issues, but so are the opportunities to engage fully in communities of practice that are integral to those who wish to have a career as fiction writers.

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