



A CHANCE TO TALK:
THE BIRTH OF THE
FEMINIST LITERACY
WORKERS' NETWORK

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A Chance to Talk:
The Birth of the Feminist Literacy Workers' Network



Prepared by H el ene Blais and Sally Gellard

Feminist Literacy Workers' Network/R eseau des
travailleuses f eministes en alphab etisation

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◇ INTRODUCTION

This is a report on the activities of the Feminist Literacy Workers Network (FLWN) over the past two years.

This report was written cooperatively by Helene Blais (Quebec) and Sally Gellard (B.C.) We have worked with both French and English in the writing of the report and it is available in both languages.

We are writing this report for all women who have been connected with our young organization, especially the women who attended the FLWN conference in Vancouver and the women who have written in the Wandering Books. This report will also introduce our network to many women who are interested in our work and want to join us.

Our first purpose in writing this report was let you know that we're still around and to maintain contact with everyone who attended the Vancouver conference. We also want to continue exploring the possibilities of the network. Many thanks to each and every one of you who took the time to respond to the questionnaire we sent out in mid-September 1992. Without your participation, this report - this concrete sign of the continuation and evolution of FLWN - could never have been produced.

The report is arranged in four sections which cover the following topics:

- First, a short history of FLWN and its creation¹
- Second, highlights of the conference held in Vancouver in May .
- Third, the "after the conference" section: a selection of comments and suggestion made by women who attended the Vancouver conference, taken from the questionnaire sent out in mid-August 1992 .
- The report concludes with some suggestions for action aimed at continuing and building our network.

1. FLWN stems from an already-existing network composed of women who were not at the conference and who have not written in the Wandering Book.

◇ A LITTLE BACKGROUND

The call went out around the cafeteria. "All women in literacy work who consider themselves feminists and who want to form a network of support, come to this table and eat lunch together." This happened at the Literacy 2000 Conference held in New Westminster in October, 1990.

These women discovered a common vision, to be able to identify themselves as feminists and to be recognized as contributing to the women's movement through their work in literacy programs. They uncovered a common need: to have the opportunity to speak with each other as women, and to share and compare their concerns and experiences.

So began the exciting discussions and plans to bring together a diverse group of women from every region of Canada who work in the literacy field.

Over lunch, these women formed a committee that asked the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) to support the development of the network and to help organize a conference. CCLOW agreed to assist with the network and help raise funds to hold the conference. CCLOW's support and connections with women and literacy gave the group a strong base for starting an organization.

The Ad Hoc Steering Committee, formed to work on this project, agreed that the network would be called "Feminist Literacy Workers Network" (FLWN) and that all women working in the field of literacy as students, workers, researchers or volunteers could join the network.

Their main goals were:

- to create a feminist literacy workers network, and
- to organize a national conference on feminism and literacy.

In the meantime, a "Wandering Book" began to circulate among a loose network of women. The idea of the book was to provide a forum for women in literacy to tell their stories and to share their feelings, thoughts and experiences of literacy work with other women. The list of women interested in the "Wandering Book" and in the network grew. Soon there were several Books circulating and the momentum for a national conference and a founding meeting was high.

◇ WHY DO WE NEED FLWN?

Many women feel isolated, many work alone, many have little connection with other literacy workers who share their concerns.

Every day literacy workers deal with the realities of women's lives; issues of poverty, unemployment, racism, harassment, violence against women and children, inappropriate curricula and materials, lack of child-care, health concerns, and others. When these issues are talked about in the classroom, many literacy workers feel they lack the necessary information, skills and confidence to deal with them.

In addition, Many women feel silenced in literacy programs when they suggest program changes or attempt to put woman-positive programs and events into place. They are often afraid to identify themselves as "feminists", and experience negative feedback from colleagues, administrators, students and volunteers.

Women working in literacy need to discuss common problems and issues, to share experiences, and to work together towards making literacy programs supportive and positive for women.



◇ A CHANCE TO TALK: THE CONFERENCE IN VANCOUVER

On May 15, 16, and 17 1992, at the University of British Columbia campus in Vancouver, a conference was held. Some 80 women working in the adult literacy field came together from all corners of Canada to talk with each other and make their voices heard. We'd like to share some of the key moments of this event with you.

The FLWN Conference consisted of a number of small discussion groups. In each group, a maximum of 12 women sat side by side in a circle. The topics for discussion had been suggested to the conference organizers by the participants themselves, and were directly linked to the daily reality of literacy workers.

It was also possible to participate in a speak out, a sort of public tribunal where women could take the floor and speak on a given topic. Their voices were heard and found a resonance in an audience of women ready to accept the thoughts, words, and life experiences of others, those who opened up and revealed themselves with their words. The speak outs allowed women to risk the experience of talking without interruption. Among the themes explored were the goals of feminist action and consciousness raising, the organizational hierarchy of the literacy field (on national, provincial, and territorial levels), francophone identity in Canada ², cultural diversity, violence, literacy in the workplace, the holistic approach to literacy, racism and homophobia.

2. Since there were several francophone participants who were in a minority during the Vancouver conference, the francophone branch of the FWLN - which came to be called RÉTRAFRA - was born during the conference. These women wanted to ensure that the francophone presence within the network was recognized and facilitated. To this end, they proposed the following measures: 1. That the mailing list include francophone organizations across Canada. We know that there already exists a Canadian francophone literacy organization, but it does not specifically address the concerns of feminists. 2. That, should a charter be created which includes a list of special interest groups, francophone appear in that list. 3. That, should a publication result from the Vancouver conference, it be available in both languages (cf. the present report and the French version of the Wandering Book, known in French as the *Livre Vagabond*). 4. That a translation budget always be provided for FLWN publications. 5. That, should francophone women decide to group together to organize a conference similar to the one held in Vancouver, or make requests for funding such a conference, it be done in collaboration - not in competition - with the existing FLWN network.

The last half-day of the conference was set aside for a plenary session to share ideas, wrap up the conference and discuss possible continuations. The outcome of this brainstorming was a mountain of ideas and a sharing of energies. What became clear in the end was that we must reap the fruit of the conference: it should lead us to reinvest the positive energies that were created during the three days the conference lasted into concrete actions. It's a matter of time, and of organization; it means channeling our individual and collective forces; finally, it's a question of heart.

During the entire conference, great importance was placed on the peace of mind of the women who spoke up, whether in the discussion circles, speak outs, or plenary session. The participants had to feel comfortable, in an environment that was informal and non-hierarchical, in a climate of mutual respect and openness towards all that women did, thought and were.

The amount of work accomplished by these small discussion groups was pretty amazing, especially considering that the conference only lasted a relatively short time. These small symbolic places allowed each participant to speak her mind in a safe, supportive environment and with full confidence that she would find an attentive audience.

Thus the conference was given a unique configuration through recognition of the personal status of each participant: mother, lesbian, heterosexual, farm worker, immigrant, learner, teacher, First Nations woman, woman of colour, mentally or physically disabled person, survivor of violence, abuse or sexual assault. This recognition accentuated the fact that our strength lies in our diversity; this distinctive or shared status is something we can reinvest in our work, our research, and our actions.

Themes, Burning Issues

After a highly spirited opening reception Friday evening, the conference participants got together on Saturday and Sunday to exchange ideas about very precise and pertinent discussion topics. We talked about our feminist practice, the violence that we ourselves face and that women learners in our literacy workshops must face.

We talked about our intercultural experiences and our working conditions. Brainstorming sessions at the beginning of each discussion period allowed us to flesh out sub-themes for each of the proposed themes.

The formal organization of FLWN was given a significant place during the last half-day of the conference, when the founding meeting was held. Among the outcomes were a list of objectives and a sense of FLWN's *raison d'être*.

OBJECTIVES OF FLWN

1. to be a national voice for women's literacy
2. to coordinate with other groups to lobby government for:

- on-going funding
 - improved access for woman learners
3. to raise awareness of feminist issues with other literacy organizations
 4. to promote feminist analysis through:
 - non-sexist, non-racist, non-abled resource material. language and imagery
 - culture specific resource material
 - feminist methodologies
 - change in curricula
 5. to build a strong FLWN national network
 6. to provide on-going personal and professional support for FLWN members
 7. to improve the working conditions of FLWN members (both professional and volunteer)
 8. to explore the possibility of forming a union
 9. to support women learners
 10. to promote feminist literacy research on topics such as:
 - women's ways of knowing and learning
 - feminism across cultures and classes
 - violence against women
 - language and imagery

◇ AFTER THE CONFERENCE

Something very special and unique had happened during the Vancouver conference. Following the conference, we wanted to capture some of energy and the magic that was there. We did this by sending out a questionnaire. 38% of you responded.

1) **What were your return thoughts, impressions, feelings on the Vancouver conference?**

For the great majority of women who responded to the survey the comments were positive. A few flat notes were sounded, for example, on the fear of what feminism represented, and the money spent on giving ourselves a chance to talk among feminists. Some participants felt marginalized in relation to the other women who were present at the conference.



I was deeply with the most successful experience of feministpraxis I have ever experienced"

" A real eye-opener for me - I want more"

My only concern was, "Am I really a feminist?" To me feminism means wanting better things for women .. so I guess I am."

"Beaucoup d'énergie, d'émotion, d'idées mettant en lumière la réalité des femmes dans le milieu de l'alphabétisation

"My impressions are the conference used literacy dollars to promote feminist views"

"What a diverse, fascinating group we are"

"I felt energized and refreshed and very pleased we had pulled off a women's event that wasn't a mock men's event with flexibility and creativity"

"I enjoyed the opportunity to hear so many different stories"

" I felt amazed that so many literacy workers were identifying themselves as feminists and raising feminist concerns in relation to their work"

"Certainly interesting to meet so many different types of women from across Canada"

"Disappointing - coming from a small community, I found the conference pertained toward the larger cities"

"Extremely positive"

"I was very impressed by the organization, the warmth and the energy"

"There is so much to learn from each other"

"I have been trying to define the word 'feminist' ever since"

2) What issues or problems would you like FLWN to work on?

We can summarize the participants comments under the following headings: training literacy workers, education, working conditions, FLWN as a site for action and reflection, strengthening the network, financing, increasing public awareness, political action, studies and research, priorities and choices.

Training Literacy Workers

Concern ourselves with the training of literacy workers; address the following issues:

- job security
- the "market value" of women, both paid workers and volunteers
- training and certification for paid workers and volunteers
- the establishment of Canadian standards for the quality of literacy work
- the development of a feminist studies program
- sexist language
- training in literacy management
- training in counselling, developing skills to cope with an "emotional emergency" (counselling includes giving advice or information to learners on any subject of a personal, administrative, academic or family nature).
- additional training for working with adults experiencing learning difficulties
- the need to include creative activities in the planning of our own conferences.

"I want our focus to be feminist and to keep the initial talk mandate uppermost."

"Working conditions - literacy work tends to be undervalued women's work and we need to address the economic and political issues."

"Strengthening the feminist analysis bond - I worked for years in literacy then in the women's movement, finally, as a result of the Vancouver conference, I have begun to make some sense of my frustrations."

"Self-care - in every session I heard women speak of isolation, of very difficult work in hostile environments, of frustration, of fatigue."

"I was disappointed to find women at the conference who still wanted to shy away from the word. We need to bring home the idea that feminist is as feminist does"

"Let's make feminism a good common everyday word - ie not scary."

"Promote understanding of feminism in the general population - among women in particular. "

"Women returning to school and the issues they need to overcome in order to be successful and remain in the educational system."

"Racism toward Native women who live in the city."

"Continue the dialogue and keep the network going - this is an important voice."

"Continue the discussion about what feminism means- not that we have to agree - just so we don't become afraid to debate it."

"There is a need to foster a better understanding of women's issues within the context of literacy. Access is the key - Access to other women as well as literacy programs and resources. We can learn from each other and together move resources. We can learn from each

- Place greater importance on centrist issues, like the links between child-care programs and literacy programs, violence against women in literacy programs, psychological counselling which literacy group coordinators may or may not take responsibility for.

other and together move toward change."

"Women's writing and research"

"Make connections within my area"

Education

- Develop meaningful, non-sexist reading material.
- Make the most of learners' experiences and opinions about the resource material provided and about what helps them learn best (useful learning strategies).
- Support the professional development of the literacy workers, particularly in their work with women who have little basic knowledge /of reading, writing, and mathematics.

Working Conditions

- Study the relation between women literacy workers and low salaries.
- Make space for the recreational, spiritual, relaxing and healing aspects of our work

FLWN as a Site for Action and Reflection

- Set up pilot projects; make the results known in the FLWN network and elsewhere; take them into consideration in our future practices.
- Acknowledge the reality of violence, poverty or the protection of youth and cultural differences, rather than the usual middle-class analyses of the fear of success, the fear of women, the challenge to poverty, which are currently addressed through workforce-oriented programs for women.
- Define and agree upon the objectives of our organization.

Strengthening the Network

- Grant equal status to all members of the network.
- Work towards an understanding of feminism that suits our needs and brings us together.

- Reach women in outlying regions, such as in Manitoba: The Pass Band, Thompson, Nelson House, Cross Lake, Norway House, Grand Rapids, etc
- Act as a link between all women literacy workers in Canada so that we become a support network and a force we can count on in terms of literacy policy, working conditions, innovation in the field, etc.
- Promote national, regional, and local events; establish links with other women's groups or networks; sponsor such events.
- Become an active network using electronic and printed communications to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information.
- Organize provincial assemblies to allow more people to meet, share ideas and act.

Financing

- Find money to be able to hold yearly meetings; the annual conference is an ideal way to keep the network strong and provide an oasis for overworked and underpaid literacy workers.
- Find money to be able to train workers in sectors that specifically concern women.

Increasing Public Awareness

- Increase public awareness of the issues that concern women in literacy, through regional meetings, exchange sessions, etc.
- Increase our public profile as a non-governmental organization (NGO) which aims to promote services specially designed to meet the needs of women.
- Draw up a written declaration that would return the spotlight to International Literacy Year (ILY) , possibly taking it up where it's at now.

Political Action

- Facilitate women's access to literacy programs.
- Address the issue of child-care, both for women literacy workers and for learners.
- Ensure that women's issues and literacy become intimately linked and are given prominence within government, ministries and grant organizations.
- Demystify the fear of feminism, which can neutralize positive political actions for women in education.
- Demand better working conditions and better salaries for women literacy workers.
- Continue to increase public awareness and recuperate "political dollars" to achieve that goal.
- Press for greater promotion of literacy and its social and political status, particularly in the current context of budget cuts.

Studies and Research

- Evaluate the working conditions of women in literacy.
- Evaluate the needs of illiterate women.

- Make the possible links and parallels between feminist literacy work and low literacy rates among women.
- Examine what it is that makes literacy a feminist problem.
- Reinforce feminist analysis of literacy (taking charge rather than making do)

Priorities and Choices

- Ensure that the Wandering Book is published.
- Determine the most pressing issues each year; make sure that our calls for change and the solutions we propose to the problems are brought to the forefront and known to the public.

3) What ways of communication and publicity do you think FLWN should use to reach women across our land?

The participants' suggestions about ways of communicating with all members of the network can be grouped into the following categories: practical means (contacts, information, promotion) and other means and ideas (defining feminism, research, writing by women literacy workers).

PRACTICAL MEANS

Contacts

- Establish contacts with other groups, for example those which promote women in education and women in the workforce, as well as organizations dedicated to improving the status of women.
- Continue to discuss the definition of terms like "literacy worker" and "feminist." Not necessarily to arrive at a consensus, but simply to establish an environment where a variety of ideas can be heard and discussed.
- Support feminist literacy workers, demand change, educate the public, circulate books.
- Ensure that learners are represented on FLWN committees.
- Invite more learners to the next conference.
- Use teleconferencing and telephone chains.

" Fan outs - one volunteer in each geographic area who would pass on info to knowing members and recruit new ones."

" Wandering Books are wonderful but many people simply aren't taking the responsibility seriously enough."

"Newsletters" (this was repeated many times) "A newsletter . . . or use provincial organizations' newsletters as a vehicle."

" Weave communication in to existing CLOW structures until we are strong enough to go on our own."

"I think we need to infiltrate every newsletter of every literacy group. Each of us needs to take about FLWN at meetings and events and take names. "

" That depends on what the goals of FLWN are. If indeed it is to promote feminism, then direct attention to feminist groups. Define feminism so that prospective members can make an informed decision about joining."

"Send our newsletter to community colleges, women's organizations and literacy organizations."

"Send out brochures, letters to aboriginal communities, churches, school offices in the city."

"Un bulletin d'information écrit national ou une présence dans des réseaux déjà existants."

"Telephone chain."

"Teleconference with area representatives seems good."

"Can we set up a E-mail network?" (computer generated mail)

"A monthly newsletter where we could all send in our news and ideas. We do need some form of regular communication so that we know we are all out there."

"A mail-out with blurb and a reading list with the

- Establish formal and regular communications to maintain the links and contacts we have created.

objectives of FLWN and how to join."

"Perhaps a larger project - of descriptions of life, work dreams, transcripts of our speak-outs - a larger project may keep people plugged in ."

"I would like to see a resource list developed so that we might so have means of contacting each other and sharing ideas."

Information

- Find a volunteer in each region to pass on information to current members and recruit new members.
- Create a national newsletter or use an existing network or newsletter as a vehicle. This newsletter could be sent to members of the network, colleges, community organizations, women's organizations, and literacy organizations.
- Circulate letters.
- Organize ourselves so that all women literacy workers become aware of the existence of FLWN. They may not all wish to join the network, but this should result from a choice on their part rather than a lack of information.
- Send out brochures and letters in native communities, churches, schools, and municipal offices.
- Infiltrate every literacy newsletter of every literacy group!
- Establish a database of members.
- Hire a part-time person to coordinate the publication of a newsletter containing news items, ideas, etc

Promotion

- The Wandering Book is a wonderful idea, but many people don't take their responsibilities as "chain writers" seriously.
- Circulate a pre-publication version of the Wandering Book.
- Talk about FLWN during meetings and events; on each occasion, take names, phone numbers and addresses of future members.
- Enumerate the particular frustrations that feminist literacy workers have, and use this as an ice-breaker to recruit new members. Add a reading list and a membership form.

OTHER MEANS, OTHER IDEAS

Defining feminism

- Set out a clear vision of what we mean by "feminist" literacy worker.

Research

- Research the ethnic backgrounds of FLWN members.
- Initiate a larger project that could bring us together, strengthen our connections and highlight both the diversity and marginality of our voices.

Writing

- Develop a larger writing project describing the life, work and dreams of women literacy workers.
- Transcribe our speakouts.

◇ WHAT SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND FROM THE RESPONSES?

Obviously, the Vancouver conference represented our first occasion to discuss the topics in such a context. Many women had never before participated in an all-woman, unstructured conference. We challenged ourselves to think and act in a way that was both exciting and fearful to us. Not everyone had a positive experience and we need to acknowledge that. But most women lived an important moment in their lives and we should celebrate that!

The issues that women brought up are varied and diverse. There are two main themes we can draw from these responses and which can give us direction for the future of FLWN:

REFLECTION expressed as a need for more "talking, understanding, exchanging of ideas, learning from each other, continuing the dialogue, making connections."

ACTION expressed as "women's writing and research, improve access, address the economic and political issues, produce feminist analysis, improve working conditions."

◇ SO WHAT WILL WE DO NEXT?

At the founding meeting, eighteen women volunteered to be the on-going steering committee of FLWN.

A smaller working group took on the task of meeting regularly by teleconference phone calls. This group represents six regions of Canada: the North, British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime. The goals of this group over the past few months have been: .

- to work on follow-up reports, and
- to develop on-going communication strategies, including a newsletter.

CLOW continues to support us by coordinating our mailings and meetings. We are very thankful for their support and encouragement. It has enabled us to keep the dream of a feminist literacy network alive.

Coordinating a national organization is a challenge, especially in our land. Our differences are enormous, however we try to keep reminding each other of our common ground; we want to improve the learning and working conditions of women involved in literacy programs. We want to overcome the barriers women face when they decide to return to learning. We believe that by talking about our issues with each other, we can find ways of working toward solutions.

THE WANDERING BOOKS

Linda Forsythe has taken over the coordination of "The Book". She tells us that there are now about 100 women taking part. There are 13 books out there wandering around the continent in mysterious ways. Some haven't been heard from for months, however one book has just arrived home after finishing its circuit. Congratulations to Book 4! Linda says, "Carry on, Pass it on."

If you have changed your address or wish to get on the list, write to:

Linda Forsythe
4839 Hickory Court
Burnaby, B.C.
V5G 4B1

After May 18 1992, we all returned to the tough reality of literacy work, each and every one of us with our own personal and professional life experiences. Energized and strengthened by the openness of mind, sharing and listening that was privileged in Vancouver, we're now ready to write down some ideas for the future prospects of the network and its membership: solid proposals for possible actions in feminist literacy work in Canada. We must remember our visions, our voices; strengthen our sense of purpose, believe in our growth, and work to bring to fruition the seed we have planted in FLWN.