

Case Studies on Adult Learning

Women's Work Training Program

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ADULT LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

July 2009

Overview

The Women's Work Training Program (WWTP) in Regina was founded by two tradeswomen to provide low-income women with the skills necessary to find well-paid jobs, something they saw as a gap in government programs in the 1990s. The government of Saskatchewan provided support for this initiative and the program focused on training low-income women in carpentry.

In 1995, a coalition of provincial and federal government departments agreed to support a program that would bring more women into Saskatchewan's building trades. The standard provincial training program was deemed inadequate for the task so an alternative 5-year training strategy was developed and a worker's co-operative established to supply the women participants with trade time for the balance of their apprenticeship and first-hand experience in the management of viable businesses.

Two-thirds of the clients who enrolled in the WWTP were of Aboriginal origin, and this proportion grew as the program progressed. The instructors realized early on that the training would need to be accompanied by a substantial period of time dedicated to life skills training, not just workplace (carpentry) training. As a result, the program provided participants with opportunities to address their own personal histories of substance abuse, poverty, abusive relationships, and dependency on social services. The students worked together to address these histories that many of them shared. In addition to this life skills component, the program also included opportunities for the women to upgrade secondary school subjects such as Mathematics, Science and English.

Program Focus and Type

The Women's Work Training Program was designed to help disadvantaged women earn a living wage income – one that would enable them to bring dignity, not mere subsistence, to their lives and those of their dependants. The choice of carpentry as the occupational target stemmed from the skills of the two leaders who developed the program and from their shared belief that women should be afforded equal

opportunity in trades training. Thus the program's efforts were directed by two agendas: personal transformation and institutional change.

The WWTP provided practical training and experience in construction, renovation and carpentry for women who wanted to enter these predominately male trades. The first 20 weeks of the program included instruction in Level 1 carpentry apprenticeship skills and additional workshops and training in communication, assertiveness and job-readiness. The second 26-week phase of the program continued to provide life skills training but the participants also had the opportunity to put their carpentry training into practice in workplaces as registered apprentices.¹ They completed projects with non-profit organizations primarily in renovation settings.

A third phase of the program involved working with the Women's Construction Co-operative which was set up to support the women during the remaining years of their apprenticeship training. The co-operative was formed by the initial principle partners to obtain more work and bid on certain jobs, with the idea that the apprentices would progress and take over the co-operative. Several women did complete their apprenticeship training through the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) for their fourth and final level of their interprovincial carpentry apprenticeship, and the co-operative did provide support to them and many other women. Although the participants were unable to take over the co-operative for a variety of reasons (e.g. limited work contracts possibly because of gender and racial

¹ Apprenticeship training is a combination of on-the-job learning and in-class instruction. Thus, apprentices are workers and earn a salary for the work that they do with their salary increasing in step with their increased knowledge and skills. An apprentice has to be employed by a company participating in the apprenticeship program. In general, the apprentice must:

- Review the training competencies for the trade with his/her supervisor (a certified journeyman) on a regular basis to ensure the completed training units are "signed off" by the apprentice and the supervisor;
- Keep an accurate record of the hours worked as an apprentice; and
- Obtain a letter from the employer confirming the number of apprenticeship hours that he/she has worked.

For the in-class portion of the program, apprentices are required to attend classes for 4-6 weeks each year of their apprenticeship (normally, 3-4 years). For the remainder of each year, they are expected to be working in the trade under the supervision of a certified Journeyman.

stereotyping, scheduling challenges, personal challenges) the organization did succeed in providing a safe place for the women to grow personally and professionally.

Target Audience

The program focused on women who were receiving social assistance and who had limited employability skills and employment opportunities. Many of the women were Aboriginal.

Evidence of Effectiveness

While formal evaluations of this initiative are limited, the effectiveness of the program can be determined from published reports, newsletters and also from a book entitled *If I had a hammer: Retraining that really works*² which provides a thorough overview of the program. This evidence combined with anecdotal reports from members of the apprenticeship community in Saskatchewan leads to the identification of a number of outcomes including:

- An increase in the number of women who completed Level 1 carpentry and wrote the Level 1 provincial exam
- An increase in the number of women who registered as apprentices and continued working and training as carpenters
- An increase in the number of women who completed their requirements for Level 4 Journeyman status and who passed their final exams (4 women received Journeyman status)
- An increase in the number of women employed, either part-time or full-time, in the field of construction

² See Hillyard Little (2005). *If I had a hammer: retraining that really works*. Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press.

Several other reports³ note that participants in the program have seen dramatic changes in attitude, behaviour, modes of communication, assertiveness, and self-esteem, and that as a result of their carpentry skills they are able to enjoy a career and make a living.

Indications of Innovation

The program had many original features that could be used in training contexts for low income women; particularly, women entering trades. Not only did the program provide skills training but the instructors also addressed matters of race relations, dependency, and substance abuse. As a result, participants graduated with highly marketable job skills and developed strategies for combating adversities related to their gender, racial background, class, and welfare status.

Membership in the Regina Women's Construction Cooperative provided a gateway to work experience for these women. To establish a business model in the very competitive construction and renovation industry, the Co-op carefully researched the marketplace and identified opportunities to provide "barrier-free" accessible housing and renovations to people with disabilities. Although there were already general contractors willing to build or renovate according to accessibility standards, the Co-op believed that it could offer better service by offering creative solutions to meet the specific needs of potential clients. The Co-op undertook a number of renovation projects. One such project was the adaptation and conversion of a large house and garage into a seniors' care home.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

This program did help participants overcome barriers that have traditionally prevented many women from entering trades training and occupations. Often, there is

³ See Needham, D. and Overend, V. (1999). Good work: Construction co-operative renovates homes, rebuilds lives and challenges institutions. *Making Waves*, 10(4), 5-9. Retrieved May 23, 2009 from <http://www.cedworks.com/files/pdf/papers/MW100405.pdf>

See also Co-operative Secretariat (n.d.). *Worker co-operative success stories*. Retrieved June 1, 2009 from <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/A80-924-3-2000E.pdf>

an ingrained reluctance to having women work in the trades. Further, such stereotypical sentiments are heightened for women who face the added challenges of motherhood, violence, lack of experience as paid workers, poverty, and racial discrimination.

The program provided time for the women to focus on and develop strategies for dealing with these challenges. In addition, the opportunity to be part of a program that focused only on women provided a much needed support network for the participants as they moved through each phase of their personal and professional development. The program also addressed specific learning needs, such as the fact that most women had little or no experience with construction and carpentry tools. As well, the program allowed for a continuous intake of trainees which facilitated the involvement of women.

One of the difficulties was getting work experience and adhering to apprenticeship ratio guidelines. Under the apprenticeship guidelines, an apprentice works with a single employer and under the supervision of a fully qualified journeyman.⁴ The ratio of supervisor to new apprentice cannot normally exceed one-to-one unless an exemption is granted by the provincial body responsible for apprenticeship.

To meet this challenge, WWTP was recognized as a joint apprenticeship/training committee and in that way there was one contract. That is, the joint committee became the employer for all of the women and assumed all responsibilities for the apprenticeship agreements. Thus, the participants could work in different contexts and workplaces to get the full experience of the trade and yet still have their working hours count toward their apprenticeship. The WWTP monitored the work experiences to ensure that each apprentice was receiving appropriate mentoring and work experience. Further, the program was granted flexibility with the ratios as the

⁴ A certified Journeyman is recognized as a qualified and skilled person in a trade and is entitled to the wages and benefits associated with that trade. Specifically, a certified Journeyman has met the requirements for writing the relevant provincial examination (may include an interprovincial endorsement), has successfully passed the certification examination, and has received a Certificate of Qualification for his/her trade. A certified Journeyman is allowed to train and act as a mentor to a registered apprentice.

principle partners were journeypersons and they were able to get senior women apprentices to work with them.

Finding employment locations for the participants during their apprenticeships also proved to be challenging. While the co-operative concept did support the women, finding contracts and securing funding remained a constant challenge. However, as a result of the Co-op, several women received their Journeyperson status and others found work in the construction sector. Further, the co-operative undertook renovation work that may not have been completed without the support of the program.

A crucial support structure of the program was its flexibility in regard to the women's availability to work. Many of the participants needed time to attend to family problems, to care for children, and to prepare for and write exams. While this flexibility was welcomed and needed by the women, it did restrict the type of projects that the co-operative could undertake. In some instances, the co-operative could only work on contracts that did not require a complete crew at the worksite each day.

The initiative was successful in getting social service recipients out in the work place and living in a more positive environment. Many other women also wanted to participate in the program but the funding criteria dictated that they had to be social service recipients. It would have been interesting to continue the program with a full class of non recipients and compare the success of that group to the assistance group.

Finally, the program partners suggest that they could have benefited from greater input from Aboriginal instructors and elders to provide support for the women.

Partnerships

A number of partners were involved in this project, including: the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission; Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training through Canada-Saskatchewan Career and Employment Services; JobStart/Future Skills and Employment Programs; Human Resources and Skill Development Canada and the Women and Economic Development Consortium.

The initiative began with funds from HRSDC for job readiness training of social service recipients. The program later received funding for the first year of apprenticeship from the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission.

Overall Impact

This program, organized by two women carpenters and run over a period of five years, provided non-traditional skills training within a women-only environment to more than 65 women from low-income backgrounds. Further, the majority of the members in the program and of the co-operative were First Nations or Métis women. Five issues that particularly affected these women's lives were those of race, motherhood, violence, lack of experience as paid workers, and poverty. Although the program was able to address some of these concerns through flexible work arrangements and life skills training, it was less successful in helping to alleviate poverty. Transformation takes time and the contextual circumstances of discrimination and gender stereotyping remain as barriers to women with low incomes.

And yet, this program demonstrates that poor women, many of them single mothers, Aboriginal, or both, can defy the odds to become apprenticing carpenters. To do so may require juggling the logistics of child-care schedules, developing job-readiness skills, raising self-esteem, and in some cases dealing with abusive partners and drug habits. But the women can be successful in meeting these challenges if given relevant support and adequate time.

Prior to receiving training and joining the Co-op, the women had very little hope of becoming financially independent. Being able to learn skills in the construction trade, obtain enough apprentice hours, achieve trade papers and own a business gave the women a sense of economic security. Thus, even though the program no longer exists, the experiences and skills gained by the women continue to live on. As such, these women serve as role models to other women and the program model provides an innovative example of how to increase the representation of women in trades

training and occupations. To create an environment where women can reinvent themselves and their lives is a significant achievement and one that can be replicated in similar settings.