Immigrant Women's Access to Community-based Learning:
Social support, self-perception and other (non)material motivators and barriers

Chloë Brushwood Rose and Colette A. Granger

York University

Immigrant Women's Access to Community-based Learning:
Social support, self-perception and other (non)material motivators and barriers

Abstract

This paper reports on a study of two community-based digital storytelling workshops in

downtown Toronto for women who are newcomers to Canada. Through the stories of the

women, told in the workshops and in in-depth interviews, this study considers the

(non)material – the organizational, social, and psychological – factors that encourage

newcomer women to participate in, or exclude them from, community-based adult

education opportunities. These factors include language fluency and resources, program

design, family and community support systems, self-perceptions and beliefs, and societal

perceptions of immigrant women, each of which may act as a barrier or motivator at

different times for different women.

> *I think whenever you get the opportunity to enrich your knowledge or learn new*
>
> *things… you have to pay a price. And sometimes, some people might not be able*
>
> *to pay the price for that new knowledge. –* Liliana, peer leader

Introduction

Data released following the May 2006 national census indicates that two-thirds of Canada's

population increase of 1.6 million over the previous five years resulted from international

immigration (Statistics Canada). Of the approximately 240,000 newcomers arriving in Canada

yearly, a majority settle in large urban centres such as Toronto. There is an increasing need for

community-based adult education that is responsive to these diverse, and often marginalized,

communities and sensitive to the socio-cultural complexities they face. Our research project[1] was

developed in response to this need, and with the particular aim of considering the nonmaterial – the social and psychological – factors that encourage newcomer women to participate in, or exclude them from, community-based adult education opportunities. Our hope is that the insights generated here can offer educational researchers and community-based organizations greater insight into the complex social and personal dynamics structuring the participation of newcomer and low-income women in adult learning initiatives.

In planning to facilitate two digital storytelling workshops and to conduct interviews with workshop participants, we began with several questions: What non-material barriers and motivators are experienced by low-income and recently immigrated women who access community- and arts-based adult learning programs? How do previous educational experiences and personal beliefs about education inform these women's ability to access learning opportunities? Might some factors or beliefs act simultaneously as both barriers and motivators?

Based on participant narratives collected in interviews and in a focus-group discussion involving the program facilitator and the workshop peer leaders,[2] this paper outlines some of our most significant findings regarding motivators and barriers these women face as they encounter community-based adult learning opportunities. We first examine factors that comprise both material and nonmaterial elements: childcare, transportation and proximity to workshops, language, and program scheduling. We then consider nonmaterial factors, including the dynamics of social difference and family/community support; previously held beliefs about learning, and about themselves as learners; and experiences of social identity and the various social relations at stake in community-based learning – between peers, with mentors and facilitators, within families, and within the immediate community and larger society. Finally, we offer some thoughts about the potential for appropriately conceived and implemented

community-based learning opportunities to yield important implications for both individual

achievement and community socio-political relations.

Research context and methodology

Since 1998, the Women's Program at Central Neighbourhood House (CNH), a community centre

in east-central Toronto, has offered media programs for diverse groups of low-income women,

primarily those who have been in Canada less than five years. Currently, most participants in

these workshops are from immigrant and refugee communities that include Somali, Chinese,

Mexican, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi. The overarching goal of the programs is to provide an

adult learning experience through which participants develop literacy and media skills by

accessing technological tools that enable them to explore social issues such as poverty or

violence against women, to tell stories of their lives and communities, and to promote social

change creatively and innovatively. Since the inception of its media workshops, the CNH

Women's Program has used numerous media technologies, such as black-and-white

photography, digital photography, digital video, web design, and sound recording, to engage

women in telling their stories.

<u>The workshops</u>

Most recently, CNH has offered workshops based on an educational model called "digital

storytelling" (Lambert, 2006) – a multi-media practice developed by artists Dana Atchley and

Joe Lambert in the early 1990s and disseminated by the Center for Digital Storytelling

(www.storycenter.org). In this model individuals work in a close-knit learning community,

producing short (2-3 minute) digital videos that reflect multiple approaches to personal narrative and storytelling, from confessional to more experimental or poetic. The workshops represent a semi-formal, community- and arts-based adult learning experience through which participants explore issues of social identity and difference, and improve oral, written and computer literacy skills (Beeson & Miskelly, 2005; Freidus & Hlubinka, 2005; Burgess, 2006), while creating content meaningful to themselves and their communities.

The digital storytelling process comprises several learning and production stages: sharing personal narratives in the oral storytelling tradition; creating storyboards; writing stories or "scripts" and recording them as voiceovers; collecting visual artefacts and footage; and combining and editing all these elements in a non-linear digital environment to create digital videos. Participants become familiar with a number of computer-based applications, including programs for word-processing, sound-, photo- and video-editing (such as Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Premiere). In our project they also worked closely with facilitators to develop their spoken and written literacy.

Documentation by the Center for Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2006) and in a few other settings indicates that this educational model is effective in a wide range of contexts, including projects geared toward community development and mobilization (Beeson & Miskelly, 2005; Freidus & Hlubinka, 2005), art education (Chung, 2007), media access and literacy (Meadows, 2003). In addition, researchers are beginning to theorize the richness and complexity of expression afforded by a multimedia or multimodal narrative structure (Hull & Nelson, 2005; AUTHOR 2008a) and its potential as a site of identity construction and representation (Burgess, 2006; Hull & Katz, 2006). Nevertheless, the use of digital narrative as a research method is largely undocumented in educational research literature.

During our research project, we facilitated digital storytelling workshops for two groups of newcomer and low-income women. The first was offered for two hours once a week over 16 weeks, to accommodate participants who are primary caregivers to their children. This workshop was attended voluntarily by eight women from diverse backgrounds who spoke five different first languages: Tamil, Bengali, Mandarin, Somali, and English. The second workshop was offered one full day a week for nine weeks: six women participated in it as part of a year-long training program called the Immigrant Women's Integration Program (IWIP), and two others attended as part of their training for other community-based organizations. The women enrolled in IWIP had come to Canada from China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Egypt.

Both workshops, in which participants created digital stories about significant and often transformative events in their lives, were co-facilitated by a team including the principal investigator, the CNH women's program manager, a research assistant, and three "peer leaders" – women who had participated in earlier iterations of IWIP and previous digital storytelling workshops. The workshops functioned both as research context and as a data collection method. Following the workshops we conducted in-depth interviews with willing participants. These interview narratives provide the rich and complex body of data that primarily grounds this paper.

Narrative research

Perhaps better than any other method, narrative inquiry and biographical research of the sort we have conducted "reflects the complex interwoven relation between the individual and society, or between subject and structure" (Stroobants, 2005, p. 48), inviting insights into how social relations support and/or constrain individuals, and understandings of individuals as "competent agents who actively give meaning to their life and to their social environment" (Stroobants,

2005, p. 48). The study of marginalized communities within adult education requires an

approach that recognizes the complexity of individuals and their social networks (Alfred, 2003;

Phillion, 2003; Rhee, 2006), engaging issues such as what immigration means for newcomer

women who experience complex social challenges and socio-economic oppression, and whose

strengths, resilience, resourcefulness, and community networks are often disregarded by social

scientists (Alfred, 2005; Rhee, 2006; Yakushko & Chronister, 2005).

Many have argued that narrative is central to the interrelated processes of cultural

meaning-making and individual self-creation (Bloom, 1998; Pitt, 2003; Richardson, 1997;

AUTHOR, 2007). Following from this, we are interested in how self-narratives and biographical

stories offer insight into the nature of present experience, and how they might, in fact, delimit

and shape such experience. We suggest, as have others, that "an understanding of the

relationship between learners' self-narratives and their experiences of learning" is integral to a

deep understanding of community-based adult education and improved educational practice

(Rossiter, 1999, p. 67). This is a particularly important inquiry for community-based

organizations that provide adult learning experiences to newcomer women who, "as they cross

cultural and national boundaries… are forced to negotiate these early learning and socialization

experiences to participate in the activities of new cultures and meet cultural expectations"

(Alfred, 2003, p. 247).

Unlike large-scale qualitative or quantitative studies that aim to study patterns of

aggregate experience, autobiographical or narrative methods can capture complex social

experiences and "identity shifts" and "reveal much about what it means to speak from the

margins of mainstream discourse" (Morrow, 1997, p. 178). Such narratives disrupt the notion of

a "universal subject" of adult education (Hicks, 1999; Rhee, 2006), by accommodating a greater

diversity of experiences within adult education and suggesting a wider range of approaches to thinking about adult learning. In this sense, by representing the ambivalence and contradiction that can characterize the interminable process of relating our inner reality and the external world, and by pointing to tensions between what we express and what we know, digital stories complicate notions of a unitary subject who can tell a coherent life story, and of the transparency of such narratives for the viewer; a digital story offers an often ambivalent and compelling glimpse into one moment or series of moments, one feeling or complex of feelings, without the demand to capture or represent the whole truth of a life or subject (AUTHOR, 2008a, 2008b). Indeed, both the digital stories of the participants in our workshops, and the interviews in which they reflect on their experiences prior to and within the workshops, are texts that inherently complicate dominant notions of 'the learner' and our images of 'woman,' 'immigrant,' 'Canadian' and so on.

In-depth interviews

At the end of the series of workshop sessions, research team members conducted in-depth interviews with nine participants and peer leaders. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and inquired into educational histories, experiences of migration to Canada, perceived material and nonmaterial barriers to adult education, experiences in digital storytelling, and family and community support.

An in-depth interview is an open-ended, discovery-oriented method that aims to deeply explore the respondent's point of view, feelings and perspectives (Miller & Crabtree, 2004; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994). The key characteristics differentiating such an interview from more usual ones include open-ended questions, a semi-structured format, and an interviewer who

seeks understanding and interpretation by asking probing questions throughout. In addition to recording the participant's responses, the interviewer records her own observations of non-verbal behaviours and her own views and feelings upon completing the interview.

The women interviewed range in age from 30 to nearly 70 and represent a cross-section of immigration demographics. Their journeys to Canada began in different places – China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Indonesia, Mexico, Egypt, Somalia – and took different trajectories. Some came directly to Canada; others lived elsewhere first. The majority (seven of the nine women interviewed) immigrated with spouses and have children, born either in their countries of origin or in Canada. One is divorced; her son remains in China. Another is the sole parent of a Canadian-born child. Their educational and work backgrounds vary as well, from one who immigrated soon after completing secondary school, to a senior engineer, to a social worker with a masters degree; several others are qualified and experienced in nursing and nursing education, computer science or accountancy; one had been an elementary schoolteacher. Several are mothers at home with young children.

Finally, it is important to note that one of the primary differences between the two groups of participants was their relative facility with English. The first digital storytelling group were primarily not English-speaking, and interpretation was necessary for communication during both workshop and interviews. Within the IWIP group, comfort levels in English varied, but all could communicate quite comfortably, and they were able to complete the workshop and interviews without the interpreters.

Findings and discussion

<u>(Non)material barriers and motivators</u>

One of the most significant aspects of this study has been the degree to which it sheds light on the difficulty of distinguishing *material* and *nonmaterial* barriers and motivators in the lives of newcomer and low-income women. As Liliana, quoted in this paper's epigraph, so succinctly puts it, there are various costs involved for women who seek adult learning opportunities, and it is often difficult to separate the material costs from the social and emotional ones. Indeed, many interviewees reported material and nonmaterial barriers to adult education in the same breath, identifying factors such as childcare which are simultaneously material because they pose financial challenges, and deeply nonmaterial insofar as they are largely understood in emotional and relational terms. In addition to childcare, this section briefly discusses transportation costs and workshop proximity, language, and scheduling as (non)material barriers and motivators to adult education for these women – categories similar to those of child (or elder) care, transportation, financial resources, and timing uncovered in McGivney's (1993) examination of issues faced by women returning to paid work in the UK.

Childcare, transportation and proximity

Childcare is a primary motivator. But for the women interviewed, its mere availability was not, on its own, sufficient: as mothers who care deeply for their children's well-being, the quality of the childcare and their own ability to choose the kind of childcare they want were very important factors in facilitating their participation. For IWIP participants, childcare costs are covered, but the women can also choose where to spend that childcare allowance. Nalini articulates this combination of economic and parenting concerns:

9

IWIP is a free training course. And also, the women get childcare, we don't have to

worry about our children. And in my personal case, my family is not set up in the

daycare. We don't like the daycare. … [the IWIP director] told me, you [may] choose one

person, like personally, … They cover the cost. That's why I think as a new immigrant

woman this is really good opportunity. (Nalini, IWIP participant)

In addition to helping women access the childcare they need and want, and attend classes

and workshops without incurring tuition or training costs, these programs take seriously the

small but often prohibitive cost of transportation. As we discovered in the interviews, a woman's

proximity to available programs has a huge impact on her ability to participate. When something

as simple as transit fare is made available to participants, the distance from home may no longer

be experienced as a barrier: "We had one woman, she came from, … I think almost Mississauga,

[or] somewhere [far]. She finished her… digital story, and the [subway] token helped her a lot"

(Sati, peer leader). At the same time, the close proximity of adult education programs was also

identified as a crucial motivator for those who might not normally travel very far for these

opportunities: women often found their way to community-based programs through ads posted in

local libraries and supermarkets. Several of the women describe the benefit of living in a

neighbourhood such as Regent Park where, despite an arguably unfounded reputation as a

troubled area, significant community-based resources and opportunities for community-building

are available:

When I was moving in … lots of people said, 'Why are you moving into Regent Park?

It's not an area that's good, and you know they have lots of problems.' And I said I go

because I need to go, I have no choice… I saw … drug problems and other problems, but

personally I never faced [those]… There is lots of community so I started to go. There are

lots of programs… (Sati, peer leader).

Language

Language, and more particularly accessibility to programs despite language differences, is such

an important motivator that without it the digital storytelling program itself might not be

possible. In the first workshop, most participants spoke very little English or none at all.

Nevertheless, informal interpretation in Mandarin, Bengali, Tamil, and Somali was provided by a

Mandarin-speaking participant and by peer leaders who, although not formally trained as

interpreters, were able to offer support in participants' first languages and to interpret facilitators'

English instruction when necessary. While we had been unable to make prior arrangements for

paid interpreters, it became very clear to us throughout the workshop and in the interviews that

without this language support, virtually no one in this group would have been able to participate.

One particularly interesting dynamic we observed was that the barrier of language had

much to do with participants' perceptions of their own language capabilities. Fadiyah, a peer

leader, suggests, "I think a lot of women have more English than they think. … They feel like 'I

have no English' but they function in an English [speaking] country." Another, Sati, remarks that

"most of the women, though they're educated they feel shy to talk outside [home]. Though they

understand what you're saying, they don't have the ability to speak the expressions. And they

feel shy, so they don't want to go out and talk."

The combination of multiple languages and the multiple media of digital storytelling

poses interesting complexities in relation to representation and interpretation. The language of

the computer – its technical jargon and even its basic technical directions such as "click on this"

or "open that window" – is almost like a third language to be mastered. Some peer leaders

responsible for interpretation felt it was better to give the women instruction in their first

language, so that their explanation could "go deeper, and I can explain *why* you have to do it like

that" (Sati). Others believed it was important for the women to learn the technical terminology in

English: "I can explain everything okay in our language, but words like 'click' and 'open' –

these small words we should use in English… if we say 'open' in Tamil this does not work for

them" (Chandra).

Whatever their various strategies, it was clear that the ability of the first workshop

participants to attend and complete the program depended above all on their access to language

support. As one of the participants, Zhen, said, "I was hoping I could learn something… The

most important thing is there was a translator. If there was no one I could not [succeed]… I

appreciate that somebody [who] cannot speak, [who] is not able to communicate well – is able to

learn something. That is the most important."

Program schedule

The final motivator and barrier comprising both material and nonmaterial dimensions is the

scheduling of adult education programs. Many participants evaluated a given program's schedule

– or even the possibility of participating – in terms of how it would conflict with or undermine

time spent caring for their husbands and children. In some cases, this was a real concern for the

woman herself. In others, participants perceived it as a concern for their husbands, or a potential

source of marital conflict. For Munira, with two school-age children and a working husband, the

time commitments required by some programs had already posed a significant barrier:

I have been trying most of the time to find a course, but I didn't succeed. Most of them

… are from 9 to 5. And as I told you my first priority is family. … So that means I go at

8, and I'm not coming home before 6. So although I was accepted, I refused… [IWIP]

was the first course [to] consider that you are a mother. After all, you are a mother, you

[have] children. … I really like this course, and how they do the time management from

10 to 3, this is a very reasonable time. (Munira, participant)

In an attempt to eliminate precisely this barrier, the first digital storytelling workshop was

scheduled to run only two hours a week, from 1:00 to 3:00 pm, so women could see their

children at lunch hour and then pick them up after school. While in many ways this is a less

efficient workshop schedule, the CNH women's program manager was clear from the start that it

was the only way to ensure accessibility for most newcomer women. For peer leader Liliana,

although her own preference would be to run the workshop intensively, it was crucial to

accommodate the women because this is "the nature of CNH and a lot of women are mothers

taking care of kids and so on." Liliana also acknowledges that "two hours [per week] over a

longer period of time works, and it gives the women more chance to interact… so they can get to

know each other a little bit better."

In this way, the right kind of schedule both encourages the development of community

and demonstrates a commitment to the women themselves, through an awareness that they are

already working full-time at home. With this commitment and awareness, adult education

projects themselves become motivators for women seeking learning opportunities. Otherwise, as

Munira asks, "How can you help women [if] you are forcing them to stay away from their

families? You're not helping them."

Scheduling, language, transportation and proximity, cost, and childcare: these are aspects of the workshops and/or their accessibility that comprise simultaneously material and non-material elements which can facilitate or inhibit women's participation. We turn now to examine non-material factors – individual and community systems of support, perceptions of self and beliefs about technology – which originate outside the program itself, yet significantly affect participation in and completion of it.

Family and community support systems

Many project participants described social, community and familial factors as either motivating or frustrating their attempts to access community-based adult education and, specifically, the digital storytelling workshops. While their participation in the program indicates the presence of motivating factors, on many occasions women indicated how the absence of these factors would, and indeed for others does, inhibit or prevent participation. Their comments about family and community support thus yield rich insights about how social networks can function as both motivators and barriers, again echoing McGivney's (1993) identification of "cultural constraints," including gender socialization, restricted mobility and behaviour, and familial power structures, as issues faced by women entering or re-entering a workforce.

Research also indicates that levels of engagement in adult learning depend on, among other factors, "levels of employer and *public support*, … on *incentives*, on *culture*, … on *family size*, and on the information and advice that is available about learning opportunities" (Pont & Sweet, 2006, p. 45; italics added). Taking the view that these amount to sub-categories of what might more broadly be described as "the social" or the community, we find that an additional sub-category of support, crucial to our project's participants, is support from immediate and

extended families and friends. In our digital storytelling groups this took various forms. Shun

says her friends and family find the idea of digital storytelling "interesting" and are "curious

about it." Liliana, who has no close family ties in Canada, comments that her parents in Mexico

were "very touched" by her story. Lian, who likewise has no immediate family in Canada, is

encouraged by a nephew to persevere. When asked to whom she will show her video, she names

him, adding, "I can visit my friends, and say, 'Oh, I've got my DVD, let's share it!' And give

them a surprise. [They] will be very happy, I think. And [I'll] bring it back to China and share it

[there]."

Children offer motivation and support for participants, as subjects of stories and as a

prospective audience. Liliana's young son, who spent his school break in daycare so she could

participate, was the "main person" motivating her throughout the program. This motivation was

concretized in her story, which is about her son's artistic talent, and her devotion to him: he

"loves" the finished product. Similarly Jiang is eager to show her son the story she has made

about him – to "give him a surprise!"

Husbands too are identified as significant sources of support, for the project itself and for

their wives' educational endeavours more generally. While this challenges in complex ways

some of the prevalent assumptions (and prejudices) about women from – and male-female

relations within – certain cultures, it is understandable, because most participants are married and

living with partners. For example, Nalini's husband, who she says is "excited" to see her story,

has always supported her educational interests, staying at home when their child was an infant so

she could finish her masters degree, and encouraging her application to IWIP. Sati's spouse too,

while not especially enthusiastic about her story as such (due, she implies, to its content), is

nevertheless generally helpful: "He always gives me space to study … and helps me a lot. He's

supportive, very supportive, he always … asks me if he can help me. … We always discuss our decisions. … [H]e gives me opportunities to go and do something for [myself]." Jiang's husband thinks digital storytelling is "great." She adds, "He likes me to do what I want to do". And Munira similarly says her husband has always supported her educational efforts, even helping her with her initial IWIP application, and that he and their children, who occasionally assist her with computer skills, "are very interested" in digital storytelling.

But the motivation garnered from family, friends, and community, and the implications of participating in the workshop, are multilayered. First, some women, particularly those from Bangladesh, see their husbands' support as exceptional within their communities, and by implication, the lack of similar support as preventing participation for others. Nalini contrasts her situation with that of other women: "In my neighbourhood, a woman [might] want to do something outside, but her husband [says], 'Stay at home, take care of the baby,' and he doesn't like the woman to go outside." Sati too describes her husband as "more open-minded than others who have just come from Bangladesh" and says that she sees "lots of barriers … because culturally lots of women can't go outside [the home]." She explains:

> If all the Regent Park [neighbourhood] women came it would be a *big* women's group…
> But [if] the husband is at home at program time, they need to take care of him, [do] food
> preparation … And some [husbands] don't want to take care of the kids … they want to
> relax.

She further observes that sometimes a husband "doesn't want his wife to go outside, doesn't support her learning something new," a remark corroborated by Chandra in the focus group: "Husbands won't allow [their wives] to come because … they don't like to share knowledge. They think, 'she's not listening to me'. She has knowledge and she doesn't listen to me."

Second are feelings of guilt around taking part in unpaid work, however enjoyable.

Liliana acknowledges, "I always feel bad because I should be making money, or…making food."

Ironically, her guilt may stem from the mothering role that inspired her story: "Sometimes I feel

guilty that … my poor boy is … with a babysitter." And "we are [so] submerged in our activities

as mothers, taking care of the house, the children, that we never give ourselves the chance to do

something else for the pleasure of doing it." Munira's involvement too is ambivalent; she finds

both IWIP and the digital storytelling workshop satisfying but feels they diminish family time:

"Sometimes I feel I shouldn't do this, especially to the kids, because my main responsibility is a

mother. … They feel that I'm away all the time from them. Especially my husband."

Third, and perhaps surprisingly, the challenges to cultural norms presented by the

participants may themselves motivate members of their (and other marginalized) communities.

Sati implies that she may be a role model for others in her culture when she reports that women

who attend the Bengali women's group at CNH "already watched my story, and they asked me if

it is telling [secrets], because culturally, we do not actually talk about our past…. So they [tell]

me, 'You have courage that you can talk about those things.' They are happy, they said, 'It's

good that you can talk.' But lots of people … can't talk [this way]."

Self-perceptions and beliefs

Social networks, including the community within the workshops, are shaped in large part by

interactions with others. But they are also informed by individual perceptions of self and society,

as exemplified by the project participants. Peer leader, Fadiyah says, "Especially immigrant

women, we always worry, 'Ah, you cannot do this'… They have limits, as if they can only do

housework." She says that challenging these beliefs is central to her role of empowering other

women. She tells them, "It is challenging. But you can do it… You already have your education. It's just new skills." Throughout the digital storytelling workshops and the interviews, it became clear that women's previously held beliefs and perceptions, and the ways they had been challenged by various life events, were central motivators, and sometimes barriers, to their participation in community-based adult education. In this section, we explore two sets of beliefs and perceptions identified in the interviews: beliefs in oneself as a learner and perceptions of oneself in relation to technology.

Belief in oneself as a learner

While the experience of the digital storytelling workshop is highly collaborative in nature, it is also deeply personal and affecting on an individual level. As Liliana remarked of her experience, "Finally nobody's telling me what to think or how to do it, I'm doing it by myself, it's really exciting to be able to choose my own images." Not only did the women interviewed express the transformative power in being able to express themselves through the workshop experience (a dynamic explored further in another paper; see AUTHORS, in preparation), but it was also clear that for many the fundamental belief in themselves as capable of accomplishing something new, and as deserving of educational opportunities, significantly motivated their participation.

Several women identified their belief that they could make a difference for other new immigrants as motivating them toward educational opportunities. Jiang told us, "In my heart I really, really want to help others. Every immigrant suffers at first, at the beginning, [it's a] difficult time… I [need] knowledge, experience… so I attend this program. I really, really want to find a job in the community service. This [is] my desire." Here, the belief in 'making a difference' for others is a powerful motivator, but underlying it is the more profound *belief in*

oneself as capable of enacting social change. Lian's comment exemplifies the development of this sense of herself as able to contribute in significant ways to those around her: "I [have] received a lot of help from others, I think it's time for me to contribute to society. And this program will help me to realize my dream. I can learn the knowledge, the skills to help others, that's the motivation for me to come here."

In many ways the participants' belief in themselves as active learners and social agents contradicts dominant stereotypes of the immigrant woman – as passive, domestic, and conservative – and illuminates the complex interaction between a woman's own belief in herself and society's willingness to support her vision. This tension is evident in the way Sati expresses her determination to access further learning opportunities: "I'm not uneducated, I finished my studies, I should [find] something [to] do. And it was my plan from… childhood that I'll do something, I'm not going to only stay at home, I'm not. I don't want to be a stay at home mom." The participants' beliefs in themselves also intersect with their beliefs about what is possible, specifically for women, in Canada. Nalini says, "There is a difference between our country and here… in our country, most of the women stay in the home and take care of the baby and do all of the housework… But here, *this country is for women*. That's why I think I can do what I wish to do, here" [italics added]. Despite the reality that sexism and gender inequality are clearly not absent from the Canadian context, these perceptions of Canadian women's freedoms are powerful motivators; at times – when taken up by others who perceive them as threatening – they are also barriers.[3]

Perceptions of technology

The series of perceptions and beliefs about computer technology that the women articulated echo their complex self-perceptions. As with their beliefs in themselves as learners and social agents, their beliefs about themselves as users or non-users of technology are inevitably informed by the dominant discourses that circulate in relation to women and technology. What has been described as the masculinised culture of computing (Jenson & Brushwood Rose, 2003; Volman et al., 1995; Wajcman, 1991; Whitehead, 1996), along with the sexist depictions of women-and-computers so common in popular discourses and texts, have a profound influence on individuals' perceptions of computer technology and their willingness to take up an active role in relation to computers. Not unlike the teachers in a study by Jenson and Brushwood Rose (2003), whose "perceptions of expertise and experiences of access in relation to new technologies were produced and structured by the gender inequities evident in computing cultures and pervasive in both society and schools" (p. 169), the women in our study had to overcome significant discursive barriers in order to see themselves as users of computer technology.

Many of the women's perceptions of technology, and their struggles to see themselves as computer users, are tinged with strong emotional undertones. Lian says, "I had taken some computer courses, but I just was very... nervous and felt bad – what is the word? Resistant. I used to hate the computers." Not only do the participants share strong affective responses to the computer, but it is almost as though they perceive the technology itself as a personal barrier. At the same time, they shared the strong sentiment that the technology skills they would gain were the most practical aspect of the digital storytelling workshop. Indeed, Susila, who insists, "I don't like technology," and who originally saw the workshop as primarily offering technical skills, remarks on how she was confused when initially it did not: "I thought, digital means connected

with a machine, but at the start we're not doing anything with a machine and nobody's telling us

about a machine… that's what [made] me confused."

This tension between the perception of technology as anathema to themselves and the

notion of technology-related skills as a social and economical asset is perhaps best exemplified

by Munira whose script for her digital story explores her relationship to 'the computer,' an object

she both fears and romanticizes:

> From the first sight, I hated [the computer]… I was frustrated as I didn't know how to
>
> deal with it, even to open it. Many times I stood in the room and asked myself, 'Is there
>
> any chance that someday we could be friends?'… 'Is my mind frozen? Are the gears of
>
> my brain rusted?'

After taking a basic computer course, Munira tells us that "My enemy [the computer] has

become my dearest friend. I cannot imagine my life without this friend: my computer is a

window that I open to see the whole world." Ironically, after taking a computer course and

completing the digital storytelling workshop, Munira still insists "I am not a computer expert,"

but she also recognizes that "learning the computer taught me not to be afraid of new things."

Societal perceptions of "immigrant women"

In this final section we focus on how mainstream society's views of women such as those in the

digital storytelling program may act as a barrier to the provision of adequate and relevant

community-based education. Research suggests that immigrant women in general tend to be

"perceived as a 'special commodity,' that is, a group of people lacking 'Canadian experience'

who are not qualified and skilled enough to engage in paid work or assume any position that

would allow them to assimilate adequately into the Canadian society" (Elabor-Idemudia, 2001,

p. 235). Some of these perceptions conform to Western stereotypes of developing countries as

"backward" in terms of education, technology and women's social and economic roles; they

include notions that immigrant women (especially in Asia and Africa, whence come most of the

workshop participants) are generally un- or under-educated, and particularly lacking in both

English language and computer technology skills. Other stereotypes relate to beliefs that females

from some cultures have not yet attained the equality presumed to have accrued to Western

women, but rather are relegated by gender to domestic subservience to fathers and husbands.

Of course, some perceptions concerning immigrant women are grounded, as are those

about any group or individual, in what they tell – or, as discussed below, do not tell – about

themselves. And indeed, about others: some Western perceptions of (especially) Asian and South

Asian immigrant women, as passive and deferential to their husbands' and families' wishes and

neglectful of their own, are reinforced by comments, quoted earlier, that reflect what several

interviewees' claim to "know" of others who are *not* taking part in the workshops. Nevertheless,

in two important ways the digital storytelling participants challenge Western – and indeed their

own – assumptions about immigrant women. First, however true their reports may be, of others

confined to their homes or otherwise prevented from attending workshops, *these women are*

actively taking part in community educational offerings (which in IWIP are geared specifically

toward paid employment); thus, at the very least, the stereotypes are not universal. Moreover,

most are highly educated, speak multiple languages including English, and have used technology

in various ways, although computer knowledge and English fluency vary considerably: Susila

speaks English and four other languages fluently but has previously used a computer only for

email; Jiang has taught university-level computer science and is fairly fluent in English; Zhen is a senior engineer but requires an English interpreter to participate in the program.

They are also resourceful. Zhen is a case in point: inexpert with English, she explains in her interview that while the translator was helpful, when actually working with the computer she did not rely on commands translated into Mandarin but rather "just observed how the teacher did it, and … followed it and just memorized it by heart." Similarly, Chandra describes how participants who are relative beginners (both in English and in computer use) learned the Premiere and Photoshop commands in English, rather than their native Tamil, because "[the] technology is in English, … [so] they can learn better in English, … very quickly."

It is beyond the scope of either this paper or the project as a whole to undertake a full disquisition of stereotypes that may cloud views of immigrant women as potential workers and contributors to Canadian society. Nevertheless, we are concerned that such discriminatory misapprehensions may serve as barriers: not just to employment (or more generally "assimilation"), but also to the provision of community-based educational resources that would initiate newcomers to paid work for which they are already qualified, as well as to new skills and knowledge that challenge stereotypes (Mason, 2003) but in which they might become proficient. In her study of women and self-employment in Sweden (a nation which, like Canada, prides itself on awareness of and respect for cultural diversity), Mason (2003) observes that even in that context, "[i]mmigrant women are seen as miserable, passive, assisted and seeking assistance, and thus get less support, money and confidence invested in them than do indigenous women …" (p. 231). She reasserts "the urgent need to counteract stereotyped images and to rectify the idealized image of Western emancipation that serves as a yardstick by which immigrant women are judged" (p. 231).

Part of this "image of emancipation" includes the presumed capacity, and the desire, to proclaim one's expertise by promoting oneself in competitive or potentially competitive settings (such as, arguably, IWIP). Relatedly, it is not easy to know what educational qualifications or experience an individual has if she does not reveal them. At the same time, it is important to recognize the possibility of a vicious cycle, between society's mis- or under-recognition of potential on one hand, and personal or cultural reticence about announcing one's abilities on the other. For example, Zhen and Jiang were clear from the outset about their substantial academic and professional qualifications, while Susila, Nalini and Lian (variously qualified as teacher, accountant, and social worker) hardly mentioned their professional experience until they were asked in their interviews. While it would be incorrect to draw conclusions about specific cultures based on this small group alone, the contrast between what individuals reveal about themselves may speak to more than individual differences.

Mahoney, Williams and West (2001) argue that "[a] particular challenge of considering the experiences of immigrant women is to take into account the influence of a woman's cultural background without allowing stereotypes to direct one's attitudes about that [woman]…" (p. 166). While their specific focus is on violence against immigrant women, the advice they give would be well taken by community-based education providers too. For instance, a culturally-based disinclination to individualistic self-promotion should not be confused with the absence of qualifications, and it must never, even inadvertently, skew the provision of opportunities for further education and training. Similarly, individuals' capacity for a particular kind of learning should not be wantonly prejudged on the basis of assumptions about what knowledge is or should be already present. The digital storytelling program is a case in point: the women's successful completion of it demonstrates that a lack of computer expertise, and even a lack of

English fluency, need not be a barrier to success *even in a computer-based workshop conducted in English*. Rather, the provision of adequate and appropriate material resources in the educational setting (in the form of up-to-date technology, trained facilitators, and needed translation services), and non-material home and community support systems such as those described here, can motivate and expedite both the undertaking and the completion of community-based learning opportunities.

Conclusion

The combined (mis)perceptions – that immigrant women lack linguistic and technical skills, knowledge, and the resourcefulness to acquire them, and that they are culturally or socially prohibited from seeking paid work – may contribute to the erroneous conclusion that they are a poor investment vis-à-vis publicly funded education. An important conclusion of this study is that however such misperceptions are created, whether by the dominant culture as a whole or by marginalized individuals in response to their understandings of that culture, to apply them would be to risk sabotaging otherwise well-meant attempts to meet community learning needs. Reductive notions of "what a community needs," "what immigrants need," "what women need," or, in the present context, "what a community of immigrant women needs" are problematic because they rely on assumptions that social relations of power, social differences, even entire ethnic groups, can be unambiguously categorized and transparently understood.

Still, the existence of such perceptions raises important questions. Might the assumption that women from some cultures are unlikely to take advantage of learning influence decisions about what to provide? Is there danger that a troubling cycle will develop (or has already developed), based on the perception that immigrant women want and need neither paid

employment nor education in anticipation of that employment, and fed by decisions to cut back on the provision of relevant and fully accessible educational resources? And could such a cycle lead ultimately to the occupational ghettoization of women who want and need work but cannot obtain it because they lack Canadian education and training, and are unsure how to promote the qualifications they do have? What are the implications of such a scenario for community-based adult learning?

Pont and Sweet (2006) assert that "ICT-based adult learning is, or should be, critical and emancipatory rather than solely about the transfer of information and specific skills" (p. 26). While we might well argue that *all* adult learning should aim for these goals, digital storytelling has multiple import in this regard, especially for immigrant women, because it simultaneously challenges stereotypes of women-and-computers, invites the engagement of social issues in ways that can lead to change, and offers space to create personally meaningful work. But telling (often difficult) personal stories involves emotional risks, and while this aspect of our project is not the focus of this paper, it is instructive to consider the connections between the facilitation of storytelling and the context surrounding it.

The other side of storytelling is listening: "In developing their own story and listening to others, people can make the links between their own struggle and the larger social struggle … [and] a larger social consciousness is possible" (Lambert, 2006, p. 160). But both *story* and *teller* must be listened to. Elements such as those outlined here, that support learning in both material and nonmaterial ways, are crucial to the success of the digital storytelling workshops and, we suggest, of any adult learning program. It is very significant that the recently immigrated women in our workshops felt "listened to" when applying for and undertaking *all* their chosen learning opportunities, whether through the CNH women's program, IWIP, or in the digital storytelling

workshops themselves. Material choices – be they learning-related (which music to use in a digital story; how to transition between images) or logistical (daycare or timetable arrangements) – undoubtedly have nonmaterial meanings and effects. The power to make those choices can become symbolic of socio-political relations between individuals, their communities, and society as a whole; the absence of that power can cast doubt on education's sincerest emancipatory aims.

These concerns relate to both the conceptualization and the implementation of learning opportunities. And yet, a cautionary note must also be sounded in relation to the interpretation of research. For to read our findings here, about what "worked" for our project's participants, as a prescriptive recipe for all community-based learning would be to miss another significant lesson: that what contributes more than a specific set of instructions that attempts to remove all barriers to adult learning is a flexible responsiveness to whatever barriers and motivators may be present in a given context. In this vein, we note that given the complexity of narrative inquiry as a research method, the way in which an interviewee conveys perceptions, beliefs, or experiences is inevitably shaped by the research context and her perceptions of, and relations with, the researcher. The non-reproducible intricacies of these relationships underline the importance of guarding against assumptions that what is effective in one setting must necessarily show identical promise for others.

At the same time, in this particular setting and with this particular group of participants, some things did work very well – demonstrating that responsiveness and flexibility can help create opportunities for adult learning that is appropriate, productive, and emancipatory, such that the personal "costs" Liliana refers to at the beginning of this paper might be more easily borne.

Notes

---

[1] The research project described here was generously funded by the Canadian Council on Learning.

[2] The digital stories as such are more intensively examined in other work (AUTHORS, in preparation).

[3] As researchers, we also want to note how Nalini's comment about opportunities for women in Canada, and comments like it, point to the dynamic nature of the interview setting and remind us that the narrated self is a relational self: "how we represent ourselves… depends on who we are trying to be in relation to others in the present" (Hull & Katz, 2006, p. 45). These comments were made in relation to the interviewers, all three of whom were perceived by the participants to be professionally successful "Canadian women" free from many of the constraints they identify in their own lives. A similar dynamic may be at play in the comments in which Sati and Nalini distinguished themselves from other Bangladeshi immigrants (*supra*, p. 16).

Works Cited

Alfred, M. V. (2003). Sociocultural contexts and learning: Anglophone Caribbean immigrant

women in U.S. postsecondary education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *53*(4), 242-260.

Beeson, I., and Miskelly, C. (2005). Digital stories of community: Mobilization, coherence and

continuity. Retrieved July 28, 2008 from http://web.mit.edu/comm-

forum/mit4/papers/beeson%20miskelly.pdf

Bloom, L. (1998). *Under the sign of hope: Feminist methodology and narrative interpretation*.

Albany: State University of New York Press.

AUTHOR. (2008a). Representing the (unknown) self: Ambivalence, contradiction, and

productivity in the digital storytelling of women and girls. Paper presented at the Annual

Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Vancouver, BC.

AUTHOR. (2008b). The Migration between selves and worlds: On the digital autobiographies of

newcomer women as transnational and transitional spaces. Paper presented at the

Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies Pre-Conference at the Annual Meeting of

the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Vancouver, BC.

AUTHORS. (in preparation). Telling stories and being heard: Exploring the complex dynamics

of self-representation and narrative in a digital storytelling workshop with immigrant

women.

Burgess, J. (2006). Hearing ordinary voices: Cultural studies, vernacular creativity and digital

storytelling. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 20*(2), 201-214.

Chung, S. K. (2007). Art education technology: Digital storytelling. *Art Education*, March, 17-

22.

Elabor-Idemudia, P. (2001). Gender and the new African diaspora: African immigrant women in

the Canadian labor force. In I. Okpewho, C. Boyce Davies, A. A. Mazrui (Eds.), *The*

African Diaspora: African origins and New World identities , pp. 234-253. Bloomington,

IN: Indiana University Press.

Freidus, N., & Hlubinka, M. (2005). Digital storytelling for reflective practice in communities of

learners. Retrieved March 28, 2007 from http://llk.media.mit.edu/projects/channelc/crcp-

stories/freidus-hlubinka.pdf

AUTHOR. (2007). Silent moments: A psychoanalytic autoethnography of learning and teaching.

Doctoral dissertation, York University, Toronto.

Granger, C. A., Morbey, M. L., Lotherington, H., Owston, R. D., & Wideman, H. H. (2002).

Factors contributing to teachers' successful implementation of IT. *Journal of Computer*

Assisted Learning 18(4), 480-488.

Grumet, M. R. (1990). Retrospective: autobiography and the analysis of educational experience.

Cambridge Journal of Education, 20(3), 321-325.

Hicks, D. (1999). The particular and the feminine: Gendered accounts in educational theorizing.

Educational Theory, *49*(2), 251-264.

Hull, G. A., and Katz, M.-L. (2006). Crafting an agentive self: Case studies of digital

storytelling. *Research in the Teaching of English*, *41*(1), 43-81.

Hull, G. A., and Nelson. M. E. (2005). Locating the semiotic power of multimodality. *Written*

Communication, *22*(2), 224-261.

Jenson, J. & Brushwood Rose, C. (2003). Women@Work: Listening to gendered relations of

power in teachers' talk about new technologies. *Gender & Education*, *15*(2), 169-181.

Kadar, M. (Ed.). (1992). *Essays on life writing*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kozma, R., and Wagner, D. A. (2006). Reaching the most disadvantaged with ICT: What works?

In *ICT and learning: Supporting out-of-school youth and* adults, pp. 97-120. Paris:

Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.

Lambert, J. (2006). *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community* (2nd edition).

Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press.

Landry, B. M., and Guzdial, M. (2004). Supporting personal digital storytelling: From people to

software. Retrieved July 8, 2008 from

http://smartech.gatech.edu/bitstream/1853/3731/1/04-22.pdf

McGivney, V. (1993). Women, education and training: Barriers to access, informal starting

points and progression routes. National Institute of Adult & Continuing Education and

Hillcroft College. Retrieved July 20, 2008 from

http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/15/5f/e1

.pdf

Mahoney, P., Williams, L. M., and West, C. M. (2001). Violence against women by intimate

relationship partners. In C. M. Renzetti, J. L. Edelson, & R. K. Bergen (Eds.),

Sourcebook on violence against women, pp. 143-178. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mason, S. (2003). Self-employment policies from the perspective of citizenship, gender and

ethnicity. *International Review of Sociology, 13*(1), 219-234.

Meadows, D. (2003). Digital storytelling: Research-based practice in new media. *Visual

Communication*, *2*(2), 189-193.

Miller, W. L., and Crabtree, B. F. (2004). Depth interviewing. In S. N. Hesse-Biber and P. Leavy (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice*, pp. 185-202. New York: Oxford University Press.

Morrow, N. (1997). Language and identity: Women's autobiographies of the American immigrant experience. *Language & Communication*, *17*(3), 177-185.

Phillion, J. (2003). Obstacles to accessing the teaching profession for immigrant women. *Multicultural Education*, *11*(1), 41-45.

Pitt, A. J. (2003). *The play of the personal: Psychoanalytic narratives of feminist education*. New York: Peter Lang.

Pont, B., and Sweet, R. (2006). Adult learning and ICT: How to respond to the diversity of needs. In *ICT and learning: Supporting out-of-school youth and adults*, pp. 43-70. Paris: Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.

Rhee, J. (2006). Re/membering (to) shifting alignments: Korean women's transnational narratives in US higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *19*(5), 595-615.

Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Rossiter, M. (1999). A narrative approach to development: Implications for adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *50*(1), 56-71.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Spigelman, C. (2001). Argument and evidence in the case of the personal. *College English, 64*(1), 63-87.

Statistics Canada (2007). "Portrait of the Canadian population in 2006." Retrieved March 23, 2007 from www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/analysis/popdwell/NatlPortrait1.cfm

Stroobants, V. (2005). Stories about learning in narrative biographical research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *18*(1), 47-61.

Volman, M., Van Eck, E., & Ten Dam, G. (1995). Girls in science and technology: the development of discourse. *Gender and Education, 7*(3),283–292.

Wajcman, J. (1991). *Feminism confronts technology*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: Free Press.

Whitehead, J. M. (1996). Sex stereotypes, gender identity and subject choice at A-level. *Educational Research, 38*(2), 147–160.

Yakushko, O., & Chronister, K. M. (2005). Immigrant women and counseling: The invisible others. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *83*(Summer), 292-298.