Learning through ‘Womanist’ lens

Annual Learning and Teaching Conference
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Session content

• What is ‘Womanist’ learning?
• How might it be delivered and applied?
• How can it benefit all learners?
Lifelong Learning and the voice of the older black woman

Developing Black feminist thought involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals (Collins: 2000:17)

Dr Jan Etienne, Birkbeck University of London
Background

- Acknowledging the experiences and contributions of older black women
- Where am ‘I’ in the learning discourse?
Racism in the UK

Dr Jan Etienne, Birkbeck University of London
Challenging discrimination

• Discrimination has continued to haunt certain ethnic groups from generation to generation, making dedication to formal learning beyond basic schooling highly problematic in the lives of black women in particular (Goulbourne and Chamberlain, 2001; Reynolds, 2005).
The work ethic
Political and social activism of older black women learners

• What role might exist for the older black woman in helping others escape poverty while at the same time developing her learning? Exploring the political and social activism of older black women may shed light on this question
Learning and representing
Understanding ‘Womanist’ learning

• Another school of thought
• *Feminism from a black woman’s perspective*
• Own voice
• Cultural heritage
• Repeated patterns of oral communications
• Reflecting back
• Musings on contemporary social life
• Alternative strategies for learning
Learning in Womanist Ways

• The nature of their polyrhythmic realities
• A story of ‘Speaking to represent’ reveals that the Caribbean roots of the women is not always clear in the ‘middle class’ voices of the participants until, through passion and excitement the women revert to displaying their polyrhythmic realities and make use of the language of ‘back home’ as they engage with Caribbean patois.
Building stronger local communities

• Black women ‘have known that their lives in some ways incorporated goals that white middle-class women were striving for, but race and class privilege, of course, reshaped the meaning of those goals profoundly’ (Smith, 2000: 21). Womanist learning provides an opportunity to value the power of experience in helping to build strong local communities.
Womanist learning for all

• Historical context for all students
• Other experiences / other stories
• A platform for older learners
• Beyond boundaries
• Valuing variety of contributions
• Significance of legacy
• Resilience
• Where am ‘I’ in the learning discourse?
Learning in Womanist Ways

• Polyrhythmic spaces of learning
• Social networks where, in their familiar communities of social practice’ the women talked ‘labrish’, made ‘commess’, cussed and scolded, challenged, joked and reflected on stories of ‘back home’
Polyrhythmic realities

- Reflected in the swift emotional transitions from sadness and upset to happiness and hope
- The disorder and constant interruptions and impatient chatting across each other
- The triviality in the ways the women address serious issues such as racism
The book

• This book uses a contemporary narrative approach to give a theoretical and conceptual account of the learning of older black women who are volunteering in their local communities

• It demonstrates the various benefits of learning in womanist ways

• Womanist learning for: inclusion; critical consciousness; entering the mainstream; social participation; emancipation

Dr Jan Etienne, Birkbeck University of London
Learning and older black women

Stories of

• Missed opportunities
• Learning inside community settings
• Second chance learning
• Engagement in ‘Widening participation’ programmes
• A different ‘life experience’
• A desire to make a difference
Learning opportunities for Older black women in the study

• Mentoring in the community
• Promoting cultural heritage and identity
• Civic, political engagement and participation
• Community teaching
• Involvement in Social housing management
• Support for a wider ‘troubled community’
Black Matriarchal learning hubs: emancipated spaces for learning elders

• In contemporary settings, the women were learning together, following their own agendas and taking charge as they made decisions on what they wanted to learn and what they needed to know. They are part of a newly emancipated, empowered group of learning elders. Independence and control over learning thus became the important difference, enabled in lifelong learning settings.

• Prior educational contexts had denied such independence or control.
Matriarchal Learning hubs: Black feminist learning spaces

• An exploration of feminist learning spaces and relationships in the older African Caribbean community

• An insight into the nature of ‘challenge for learning’ in older African Caribbean women communities

• A useful learning tool for acknowledging the active participation of a group of adult learners who are often associated with deteriorating health, poverty and isolation?
Applying Womanist learning

• All areas of the curriculum
• Narrative research
• Critical race theories
• In group work settings
• Seminars
• Reading groups
Womanist learning for all: One size fits all?

• The ‘formidable attitudes and the originality of West Indian colloquialisms’ can generate confidences
• Can inspire others
Key source

- Etienne, J (2016) *Learning in Womanist Ways: Narratives of first-generation African Caribbean women*, London, Trentham Books, IOE/UCL Press [j.etienne@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:j.etienne@bbk.ac.uk)

- [https://www.google.co.uk/#q=jan+etienne+first+generation+african+caribbean](https://www.google.co.uk/#q=jan+etienne+first+generation+african+caribbean)

- [www.learninginwomanistways.com](http://www.learninginwomanistways.com)
Other references (1)


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