

FOSTERING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING  
IN GROUP PROGRAMS FOR ABUSED WOMEN

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MASTER OF ADULT EDUCATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

Transformative learning is changing the way educators work with learners in diverse learning environments. This thesis examines the process of designing group programs to foster transformative learning for abused women who access government-funded counseling services in a northern community. This study focused on matching the program design and facilitator approaches to the participants' readiness for change. The program design utilized various rational/analytical and holistic/intuitive teaching strategies and approaches that reflected both the holistic nature of transformative learning and the diverse make-up of the learning groups. The facilitators acted as midwife/teachers and mentors in a connected learning environment to support, challenge, and empower the women to work toward transformative learning. The group participants were selected using an assessment tool to determine their readiness for change. The program content focused on relevant topics of immediate concern to abused women. However, the group dynamics and group process were the essential elements that supported group learning and fostered transformation. The thesis offers recommendations for adult educators working in similar settings. One of the recommendations is to design different types of programs to support and motivate women at different stages in their change process.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Transformative learning is a movement, a philosophy, a theory, and a practice in the field of adult education. It is changing the way educators work with learners, by combining excellence in education with the ethic of care. Adult educators are interested in knowing how to foster transformative learning in diverse educational settings. For example, practitioners who work with abused women are interested in fostering transformative learning to help women to move on in their lives. Woman abuse is widespread in Canadian society. Statistics Canada (2000) reports that 9% of Canadian women who were married or living in a common-law relationship experienced some type of violence by an intimate partner in the past 5 years. Because domestic violence is so pervasive in society, educators encounter abused women as learners in many educational settings, including literacy programs, college courses, job training workshops, and therapeutic programs. Some of these learners may be experiencing abuse in their intimate relationships. Other women may take courses as part of their process of leaving abusive partners.

This thesis describes my experience in fostering transformative learning in women who have experienced abuse in their intimate relationships. Based on the findings, I provide practical suggestions, teaching strategies, and facilitator approaches that adult educators can use in group programs for women in transition. This thesis also explores my personal and professional transformative learning journey during this study as some extraordinary women shared their stories about their transformative learning process during the group programs. Their stories describe the process of learning, growth,

and change that is enabling these women to end the cycle of violence in their lives. My experience in this study suggests that fostering transformative learning requires not only theoretical knowledge and practical skills but also creative energy and emotional stamina.

### **Background to the Study**

I work as a counselor and co-facilitator in a program for abused women in a northern Canadian city. The Women's Program is part of the integrated support services offered for victims and offenders by the Family Violence Prevention Unit, a branch of the Department of Justice. These services are available to all people throughout the region; however, distance is a barrier for those living in outlying communities. The population of the region is comprised of 70% non-Native and 30% Native peoples. The client population of the Women's Program reflects the cultural make-up of the general population.

The Women's Program offers individual and group counseling services to women who are experiencing physical, mental, psychological, or sexual abuse within their intimate relationships. The services focus on safety concerns, power and control issues, relationship problems, and personal growth. The Women's Program adheres to a feminist philosophy that is grounded in a political and social analysis of violence against women. This philosophy favors an egalitarian relationship between counselor and client. The client is seen as possessing the personal strengths and resources necessary to make her own life choices. Many of the women are making significant changes that are aimed at breaking the cycle of abuse for themselves and their children. Most women access the services voluntarily through self-referral or through referral by family, friends, and community agencies. A few women attend by court order. All of the clients receive

individual counseling to address specific needs and concerns. In addition, some women are invited to attend a group program as an adjunct to this counseling process.

Group programs have been an essential element of the Women's Program since its inception in 1985. The 10-week group programs are offered three or four times each year, for 8 to 12 participants per group. The other feminist counselors/group facilitators and I believe that group programs for women are powerful catalysts for consciousness-raising, social awareness, and learning for growth. From our perspective, the group process provides an opportunity for women to break their silence, find their voices, and speak their truth about the abuse in their lives. We believe that women experience validation, support, connectedness, and safety in a group of caring, respectful women. In our view, circles of women have the power to transform lives.

I have been working in the Women's Program for 4 years--from 1996 to 1998 on a contract basis, since 1998 as a full time counselor and co-facilitator. During the 2 years that I was working as a contract facilitator, I noticed that our group programs varied in their effectiveness in fostering learning, growth, and change for the participants. For example, in some groups, most of the participants completed their program, worked cooperatively and respectfully, and provided mutual support for one another. I believed that these group programs supported individual learning and change. The facilitators expressed satisfaction working with these groups. However, in other groups, some participants lacked commitment to completing their program and they were adversarial, disrespectful, and unsupportive. I believed that these group programs did not support individual learning and change. The facilitators expressed dissatisfaction working with these groups. At that time, my colleague and co-facilitator was responsible for planning

the programs, selecting the participants, and evaluating the outcomes. Although I was concerned about the perceived variations in program effectiveness, in my role as a contractor I was not in a position to analyze, evaluate, or modify the group program. When I accepted my current position as a counselor and co-facilitator in the Women's Program, I became responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating the group programs, and for selecting the participants.

### **The Problem**

When I embarked on this study, I had many questions, some ideas, and no answers. I identified three problem areas in our existing programs: participant selection, program design, and facilitator approaches.

First, I was troubled by my perception that our group programs varied in their effectiveness in supporting women's learning. I speculated that participant selection was influencing program effectiveness. From my past experience of co-facilitating the group programs, I believed that participants who were actively engaged in changing their lives kept their commitment to complete their program. In my view, these women were not only ready to learn and willing to collaborate but also anxious to make connections and able to support others. I also believed that some participants in past groups were not ready to make changes in their lives. In my view, these women often lacked commitment and were disruptive, disrespectful, and adversarial in the group. They seemed to be living in a state of constant crisis that precluded their ability to learn from the group experience. Either their attendance was sporadic or they dropped out early in the program. I questioned their readiness to participate in a group learning program. I wondered how to

establish criteria that counselors could use to assess client readiness for group participation.

Second, I questioned whether a transformative dimension could be added to the existing group program. I thought that the collaborative and connected nature of our existing group program supported abused women wherever they are in their learning process. However, I wondered whether the addition of transformative learning strategies could empower abused women to grow, change, and move on in their lives.

Finally, I wondered how to foster transformative learning by adapting my facilitator roles and approaches. I questioned how to adapt my helping relationship effectively to meet the changing needs of the women in the groups. I wondered which roles to play at different times during the 10-week group program. I questioned how the co-facilitators could use different roles effectively at various times to support different learning needs among the participants.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the design features, teaching strategies, and facilitator roles that foster transformative learning in group programs for abused women who are ready to grow and change. During the study, my primary goal was to apply various principles from adult education, transformative learning, feminist education, motivational counseling, and feminist counseling in my practice and to observe which were the most useful for fostering transformative learning. My second goal was to examine how participant selection, based on apparent readiness for change, influences the group's transformative learning. My third goal was to enhance my skills as a facilitator and counselor in fostering transformative learning for women in transition.

During the study, I modified and enriched an existing group program for women who were experiencing abuse in their intimate relationships. I evaluated the success of the modified program by measuring the rate of program completion, and by determining participant satisfaction through post-group interviews. I anticipated that a higher percentage of participants would complete group programs that meet their immediate needs for knowledge, support, and empowerment at critical times during their change process. I also anticipated that women who complete effective group programs would express satisfaction with their own change process, with the role of the program, and with the facilitator and other participants in that process. I also evaluated facilitator satisfaction by reviewing my teaching log. I anticipated that my log would reflect not only my level of satisfaction with the program design, facilitator approaches, and participant outcomes but also the level of satisfaction expressed by my co-facilitators.

For this study, I examined relevant literature, analyzed past group programs, and reviewed past participant records. Then, I developed screening criteria for group participation and planned, implemented, facilitated, and evaluated three 10-week group programs. Finally, I interviewed group participants, kept a teaching log, and engaged in critically reflective dialogue with colleagues.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The study was completed between June 1998 and July 1999. During that time, I facilitated three 10-week group programs involving a total of 22 women. The 2-1/2 group sessions were held weekly in the group room at the Family Violence Prevention Unit. All of the participants had experienced abuse in their intimate relationships. They represented

a wide range of ages, income levels, and educational backgrounds. There were both non-Native and Native participants, reflecting the cultural make-up of the community.

The scope of my study was limited by four factors. First, the study was limited to modifying and enriching the existing group program for abused women. Designing new programs was not an option because of staffing limitations, budgetary restraints, caseload demands, and program responsibilities. Second, the mandate of the Women's Program defined the client base for the study. Our group programs were available only to clients of the Women's Program who were actively engaged in counseling related to abuse in their intimate relationships. Third, the demographic representation of the Women's Program limited the scope of the study. Whereas our services are available to all women in the region, only Caucasian and First Nation women living in the city access the services. There is a noticeable absence of women who come from other ethnic backgrounds and women who live in outlying communities. Finally, staff turnover in the Women's Program affected the validity of my study. I collected, analyzed, and evaluated my data because I did not have a consistent co-facilitator to work with for the study groups.

### **Assumptions**

As a feminist counselor and educator, I assume that a group process for women provides an effective learning environment for consciousness-raising, awareness raising, and experiential learning. I assume that women will experience validation, support, connectedness, safety, equality, and respect when they participate in a circle with other women. I assume that group programs are particularly helpful for abused women. I believe that participating in the group process provides an opportunity for abused women to break their silence about the abuse, to be heard and believed, to share their knowledge,

to break the isolation associated with abuse, and to experience the support of other women.

As a counselor, I also assume that building trust between the counselor and the client is an essential component of the helping relationship. In the Women's Program the counselors are also the facilitators in the group programs for their clients. I assume that this trust relationship empowers women to enter the group learning environment.

Finally, I assume that participating in a transformative group learning program fosters transformative learning for abused women. I also assume that women who are actively engaged in the process of changing their lives are more committed to participating fully in a group program that is designed to support their learning, growth, and change.

### **Definitions**

Several terms used throughout this thesis require definition. I use the term transformative learning to refer to a complex, multidimensional, holistic process that occurs when adults examine, challenge, and revise their core beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors in the face of dilemmas in life. In my view, adults choose to engage in the transformative learning process at their own time, to their own depth, and in their own unique way. This process involves intense emotions when adults grieve for previously accepted beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.

In this thesis, I use the term transformative group learning to describe learning within a group but focused on individual change through self-awareness, critical reflection, collaboration, and consciousness-raising.

In this thesis, the change process refers to the complex, multifaceted process that adults engage in when they change behaviors, attitudes, values, or beliefs.

The term woman abuse is defined in its broadest sense, encompassing psychological, verbal, physical, and sexual forms of violence, all of which have destructive repercussions, aimed at lowering the victim's self-esteem. Violence is perceived as learned behavior and violent persons are held responsible for their violent acts. Woman abuse is seen as a social phenomenon that is grounded in the dynamics of power and control in society and in families.

### **Plan of Presentation**

In chapter 2, following this introductory chapter, I review the literature that informs this study. The relevant literature pertains to transformative learning, fostering transformative learning, transformative learning in groups, and fostering transformative learning in therapy groups for women.

In chapter 3 I describe the three phases of my study: planning, implementation, and evaluation. The planning sections of this thesis describe the program design and participant selection processes as well as my facilitator strategies. The implementation sections describe participants, flow of the sessions, and activities for each group. The evaluation section describes the program completion rates, participant interviews, and my teaching log.

In chapter 4 I integrate my findings in the study into a broader perspective that other practitioners can apply. First, I discuss four aspects related to fostering transformative learning in group programs for abused women. I discuss designing an effective transformative learning program, selecting participants using a transtheoretical

change model, facilitating transformative learning in group therapy programs, and empowering women to work toward transformative learning. Next, I discuss my personal and professional transformative learning journey during this study. I describe my learning about challenge and empowerment, philosophy of practice, facilitation style, group process, and power dynamics. Then, I draw some conclusions related to fostering transformative learning in group programs for women. Finally, I make some recommendations for future studies in this emerging area of adult education practice.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Fostering transformative learning in group programs for abused women requires the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical strategies from several disciplines. This review of the literature reflects my search for a theoretical model to guide my practice as a transformative learning practitioner and for practical tools to enhance my effectiveness as a group facilitator for women's therapeutic groups. My search focuses on the current literature of transformative learning, within the context of group learning, feminist education, and counseling. First, I look at the broad perspectives of transformative learning theory. Second, I review literature on practitioners' strategies for fostering transformative learning, such as critical thinking and mentoring. Third, I examine literature about transformative learning in therapy groups. Finally, I review the literature about fostering transformative learning in therapy groups for women, with an emphasis on abused women as learners.

#### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning theory explains the process of learning for growth toward maturity that may occur for adult learners and adult educators (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). This theory provides a unifying philosophical foundation to inform practice for educators in diverse settings. In this section, I explore transformative learning from the perspectives of two leading theorists in the field, Jack Mezirow and Patricia Cranton. I then explore the contribution of feminist pedagogy to transformative learning. I also examine recent research studies that inform current practice in the area of transformative learning.

### **Major Principles of Mezirow's Theory**

Mezirow is regarded as the founder of the transformative learning movement. His many publications (e.g., 1978, 1985, 1988, 1990a, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998) reveal the evolution of his complex and comprehensive theory of transformative learning and provide theoretical foundations to inform the practice of transformative learning. He emphasizes meaning creation, perspective transformation, critical reflection, rational discourse, and social action as major principles.

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning centers on the process of meaning creation and re-creation. He draws on socialization theory to explain how people acquire a framework of assumptions that guide their perception, comprehension, problem-solving, decision-making, and action in everyday life. In his view, these culturally acquired assumptions form a frame of reference that adults use to define their life-world. He believes that the frame of reference for interpreting meaning is composed of two dimensions. The first dimension, meaning perspectives, refers to "broad, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting" (1997, p. 5) that provide enduring "principles for interpreting" (1990c, p. 2). The second dimension, meaning schemes, refers to constellations "of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shape a particular interpretation" (1997, p. 6). These "rules for interpreting" (1990c, p. 2) are continually changing as everyday insights reveal distortions in values, feelings, attitudes, and concepts. Mezirow (1996) explains that one "may 'try on' a different point of view but not a habit of mind" (p. 168).

According to Mezirow, adults engage in perspective transformation when they transform meaning and develop "more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and

integrative perspectives” (1990c, p. 14) by critically examining their frames of reference. He describes two different paths toward perspective transformation: accretive and epochal. Accretive transformations occur through cumulative changes in related points of view. Epochal transformations involve “a profound insight into the premises or presuppositions which have distorted or limited our understanding, often triggered by a disorienting dilemma, and involving a broader view of the origin, nature, and consequences of our assumptions” (1994, pp. 229-230). Epochal transformations are “less common and more difficult” (1997, p. 7).

Mezirow (1991) describes the process of perspective transformation as “a sequence of learning activities” (p. 193), rather than invariable developmental steps. The phases of perspective transformation involve a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, and critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions. Individuals recognize that others share their discontent, explore options for new roles and relationships, and plan a course of action. They acquire knowledge and skills for implementing this plan. They try new roles and relationships, and build competence and self-confidence. Finally, they reintegrate these roles and relationships into their life context on the basis of conditions dictated by a new perspective.

Mezirow (1991) recognizes that perspective transformation is a difficult process that requires both emotional strength and an act of will. He explains that the process “typically involves difficult negotiation, compromise, stalling, backsliding, self-deception, and failure” (p. 171) at two points in particular. The first difficult point occurs at the beginning of this process, when learners expose their established ideas to critical analysis. The second difficult point occurs later, when their insight demands action.

Mezirow points out that this is the time when the will to move forward plays an important role: “Challenges to established perspectives are painful; they often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self” (p. 168).

Mezirow (1991) defines learning as a complex, multifactorial process of “construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience as a guide to awareness, feeling, and action” (p. 35). He describes two distinctive domains of learning with different purposes. The first domain, instrumental learning, involves learning to control and manipulate the environment or other people. In this domain, truth is established empirically. The second domain, communicative learning, involves trying to understand what others mean. In this domain, validity is established by appealing to authority, tradition, force, or discourse to find “a tentative best judgment among those whom we believe to be informed, rational, and objective” (1997, p. 6). Mezirow points out that unexamined culturally acquired assumptions may limit learning because “we have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration--aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken” (p. 5).

Mezirow (1997) describes four processes of adult learning. The first process is to elaborate, expand, and intensify an existing point of view by seeking further supportive evidence. The second way adults learn is to establish new points of view by creating new meaning schemes. The third learning process is to transform a point of view by critical reflection on distorted assumptions. This type of learning fosters transformation by accretion. The fourth learning process is to transform habits of mind by critical self-reflection in response to disorienting dilemmas. This type of learning results in epochal

transformations. According to Mezirow, only the third and fourth types of learning are transformative.

Mezirow (1990b) believes that critical reflection is vital for survival as autonomous adults in modern democratic societies because it “is the way we control our experiences rather than be controlled by them, and it is an indispensable prerequisite to individual, group, and collective transformation, both perspective and social” (p. 375). Adults critically reflect on the validity of their prior learning when they require guidance with their actions or have difficulty understanding a new experience. He (1991) explains, “Reflective learning can be either confirmative or transformative. It becomes transformative when assumptions are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise unjustified” (p. 111). Transformation of meaning schemes occurs through critical reflection on assumptions related to content and processes. Transformation of meaning perspectives occurs through critical reflection on assumptions related to premises. Mezirow (1991, 1997) identifies some educational approaches that foster critical reflection, which include critical incidents, metaphor analysis, consciousness-raising, role-play, group projects, and participation in social action.

According to Mezirow (1991, 1998), engaging in the process of rational discourse fosters critical thinking, emancipatory learning, and perspective transformation. He recognizes that communication and rational discourse are often distorted in the real world by unequal degrees of power and influence based on economics, education, politics, race, sex, and class. He (1997) delineates a set of ideal conditions that he considers essential for optimal participation in rational discourse that include having full information, being

freed from coercion, participating equally, reflecting critically on assumptions, being open to other perspectives, and making a tentative best judgment to guide action.

Mezirow (1991) believes that perspective transformation fosters autonomy, participative democracy, moral decision-making, and social action. He stresses that social action is an integral part of the process of transformative learning when sociocultural assumptions are challenged and revised. He (1995) believes that all adult educators have a responsibility to support educational and social initiatives that foster an emancipatory, participative, democratic society.

### **Cranton's Contribution to Transformative Learning Theory**

Cranton (1994) understands working toward transformative learning as a complex, multidimensional process. She integrates the philosophy, principles, process, and language of transformative learning into her perspectives on teaching and learning. Her recent texts and articles provide clear explanations of theoretical information and practical suggestions for applying this theory to practice. Her conversational style makes Mezirow's complex principles accessible to educators and learners. She believes that "transformative learning is one of the critical goals of adult education" (p. 4).

Cranton (1992, 1994) introduces three practical models that clearly describe the transformative learning process. Her Model for Working with Adult Learners (1992, p. 23) guides educators in understanding the process of learning for change. She points out that "both educator and learners have the potential for experiencing changes in knowledge, values, behavior, developmental stage, assumptions, and beliefs" (p. 22). Some characteristics of learners and educators may influence the learning process, such as personality type, culture, philosophy, experience, and life phase. The learning process

may change other characteristics such as, autonomy, values, experience, and life stage. She explains that “the adult educator works with individuals to stimulate, facilitate, encourage, support, and challenge people to change and grow” (p. 63).

Cranton’s (1992) second model, Transformative Learning: The Process (p. 147), depicts the complex, multifaceted process of transformative learning. She explains that the transforming process begins with a learner who has a value system and a set of assumptions that form his or her perspective on life. People, events, or changes in context may challenge an individual’s basic assumptions. A strong challenge may stimulate a person to reflect on his or her assumptions. The reflection process leads to awareness and examination of assumptions, their sources, and their consequences. When the validity of one’s previously accepted assumptions is questioned, the individual is engaging in critical self-reflection. If the learner concludes that the assumptions are valid or justified no change will occur. However, transformative learning occurs when invalid assumptions are rejected or revised. Cranton explains that “changes in assumptions lead to changes in an individual’s perspective, the way he or she sees the world. And that almost inevitably results in action based on the changed perspective” (p. 149).

Cranton’s (1994) third model is her Taxonomy of Processes for Working Toward Transformative Learning (p. 66). She recognizes that learning, reflection, and perspective transformation are complex, interrelated, multidimensional processes:

Learners engage in content, process, or premise reflection within the psychological, sociolinguistic, and epistemic meaning perspectives. Each type of reflection can also occur as a component of instrumental, communicative, or emancipatory learning. Emancipatory learning can apply to each meaning perspective. The process of reflection and hence of transformative learning will be different across perspectives and across learning domains. (p. 64)

Cranton's taxonomy incorporates domains of learning, types of reflection, and domains of meaning perspectives. This classification system provides a visual representation of the "continuum of complexity" (p. 69) involved in transformative learning.

Cranton (1994) believes that individuals work toward transformative learning in different ways. In her view, this process is not sequential, hierarchical, or consistent across learners. Several factors influence the length, sequence, and appearance of the process, such as learner empowerment, psychological type, trigger events, support from others, and self-concept. She (1998) recognizes that educators are also engaged in the process of working toward transformative learning. She encourages educators to develop a personal style of teaching that reflects their philosophy of education, personality type, and teaching preferences. Such a process provides a framework for making consistent, informed decisions about program planning, implementation, and evaluation. She believes that "teacher self-awareness may be one of the most significant factors involved in teacher excellence" (p. 208).

Cranton (1998) speaks with authority, clarity, and confidence developed over a decade of personal and professional experience in fostering transformation. A central concept in her philosophy of practice is her belief that "just as human beings differ from one another in their values, beliefs, past experiences, so too do they differ in the way they teach and learn. No one way is superior to another" (p. 67). She (1994) describes a comprehensive integrative approach to fostering transformation that involves three critical aspects: empowering learners, stimulating transformation, and providing support.

Cranton (1994) believes that "learner empowerment is a product of transformative learning; however, it is also critical to beginning and maintaining the process" (p. 165).

Early in the process, learners are empowered through freedom to participate in discourse, feeling supported and comfortable, and participating in decision-making. The educator acts as a facilitator and co-learner, diminishes positional power, and uses personal power appropriately. Cranton explains that “personal power has its sources in expertise, friendship, loyalty, and charisma” (p. 151). As the process continues, learners are empowered to engage in critical self-reflection through questioning assumptions, consciousness-raising, and challenging assumptions. The educator assumes the role of provocateur during this stage. As learners engage in the painful process of revising their assumptions, the educator assumes the roles of counselor, friend, supporter, and resource person. Increased learner empowerment and autonomy are the intended outcomes. However, educators have to maintain a delicate balance between support and challenge as they foster the learner’s empowerment for transformative learning.

The second critical aspect of fostering transformative learning is stimulating critical self-reflection and working toward transformation. Cranton (1994) identifies teaching strategies that foster this process, including critical questioning to stimulate content, process, and premise reflection; consciousness-raising activities, such as role-plays, simulations, life histories, and new knowledge to increase self-awareness; journal writing to stimulate learner self-analysis; and critical incidents to raise awareness of underlying assumptions and beliefs. She explains that “the process of critical self-reflection will be different for different people and that learners will respond to the various strategies in their own ways” (p. 189).

The third critical aspect of promoting transformative learning is providing support. Cranton (1994) believes that “the educator must do everything he or she can to

ensure that learners have support in negotiating the difficulties they may encounter” (p. 191). Ensuring support involves not only fostering healthy group interaction, handling conflict, and encouraging learner networks, but also being authentic, giving advice, and supporting learner action. Each educator will develop his or her own personal style of supporting learners. She explains that “trust, respect, openness, and genuine caring for the learner are the key ingredients of providing support and assistance” (p. 205). Her guidance is intended for practitioners who are applying Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning in diverse learning environments.

### **Feminist Pedagogy’s Contribution to Transformative Learning Theory**

Feminist educators have contributed significantly to the discussion on the process of learning for growth, development, and transformation among women. One of the most significant feminist theories is that of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997). Belenky et al. present a theory of women’s psychology, development, and ways of knowing that has been changed, expanded, extended, and transformed for over a decade. They describe five positions from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority. These positions are silence, receptive knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing. Belenky et al. describe the potential for a developmental sequence as women move from silence toward constructed knowing. In a later reflection on this description, Goldberger (1996b) describes these perspectives as a constellation of various strategies that an individual has in her repertoire to use in different contexts. Feminist educators continue to debate whether or not these positions represent a developmental sequence, whether women hold

one or more positions in different areas of their lives, and what factors determine positionality.

Belenky et al. (1997) identify the first position as silence. They describe these women as selfless, voiceless, and dependent on external authorities to define truth. They have little awareness of their intellectual capacities, do not see themselves as learners, and are unaware of the power of words to transmit knowledge. Gilligan (1993) points out that women lose their voice when they choose silence over violence and when others devalue and ignore their belief in the ethic of care. Goldberger (1996b) similarly argues that some women choose silence as their preferred strategy. She believes that these women often have a sense of knowing, a sense of self, and are contributing members of a learning community. Schweickart (1996) concurs. She observes that attentive and thoughtful silence may reflect intellectual engagement, receptive attention, wisdom, and autonomy. Goldberger and Schweickart also point out that the meaning of silence differs in different cultures.

Belenky et al. (1997) describe the second position as receptive knowing. These knowers are concrete, dualistic, and believe that there is one right answer for each problem. They perceive authorities as the source of truth. They learn by listening to others. They strengthen their sense of self by empowering others through helping, listening, and understanding. They rely on others for knowledge, direction, and care. Goldberger (1996a) believes that some women choose to listen and receive knowledge as their preferred strategy.

Belenky et al. (1997) define the third position as subjective knowing. Subjective knowers believe that truth is personal, private, intuitive, and resides within the individual.

Often these women have been jolted out of their passive silent state by recent changes in their personal lives. This position is characterized by strong emotions as women begin to shape and direct their world, assert their own authority, act on their inner voice, and change the structure of their lives. For subjective knowers, the search for truth is a magical, mysterious process of finding what works best for them. They distrust external authority, logic, and books. They trust maternal authority of female peers with similar experiences--such as, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and female therapists. These sympathetic, nonjudgmental authorities provide reassurance, validation, and confirmation. Goldberger (1996a) identifies the process of body knowing as a valued form of subjective knowing in many cultures.

The fourth position (Belenky et al., 1997), procedural knowing, involves acquiring and applying procedures to obtain and communicate knowledge. There are two complementary approaches to procedural knowing, separate and connected. Most people use a mixture of both types of procedures. Procedural knowers examine the world from different perspectives, explore alternatives, and search for truth. They seek teachers, counselors, and supportive knowledgeable people to help them challenge their old ways of knowing. They are learning "to get out from behind their own eyes and use a different lens" (p. 115). Clinchy (1996) describes the processes of procedural knowing as transformative procedures. Separate knowing involves examining arguments with a critical eye using rational, analytical, objective, impersonal approaches including logic, proof, debate, and critical thinking. Connected knowing involves examining arguments with an empathic receptive eye using subjective, collaborative, relational approaches including understanding, believing, and feeling. She observes, "Both separate and

connected knowing achieve their full power when practiced in partnership with other like-minded knowers” (p. 233).

Belenky et al. (1997) identify the fifth position as constructed knowing. From this perspective, individuals reclaim the self by integrating knowledge from internal and external sources. They engage in self-examination by posing questions, evaluating assumptions, and exploring ideas. They gain a unique and authentic voice, self-awareness, and self-confidence. Constructed knowing is “the opening of the mind and the heart to embrace the world” (p. 141). Goldberger (1996a) describes constructed knowing as flexible, responsive, and responsible. It is grounded in connection, inclusiveness, comprehensiveness, and collaboration. She concludes, “Once one attains a constructed knowing perspective the world can never look the same” (p. 357).

Other feminist educators (e.g., Maher & Tetreault, 1994, 1996; Tisdell, 1998) explain that structural systems of power and positionality affect women’s learning, for example, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and ableness. Tisdell points out that instructor positionality remains relatively unexamined in the literature: “Yet the race, gender, class, or sexual orientation of instructors certainly has an influence on teaching and learning, on instructors’ and students’ construction of knowledge, and on classroom dynamics in any adult education situation” (p. 147).

### **Studying the Theory**

The publications on transformative learning do not reflect adequately the many theorists, researchers, and practitioners who are examining, questioning, researching, evaluating, and applying Mezirow’s complex theory of transformative learning. These adult educators are contributing to a growing body of theoretical and practical knowledge

in the area of transformative learning. Presently, most of the empirical research studies remain as unpublished theses, dissertations, and proceedings that are not easily accessible to other adult educators. However, Robertson (1996) and E. W. Taylor (1997) have published critical literature reviews.

Robertson (1996) identifies exemplary role images in the area of transformative learning that “influence practice powerfully” (p. 41). These exemplary educator roles include Belenky et al.’s (1997) midwife, Brookfield’s (1990b) skillful teacher, Daloz’ (1986) mentor, and Mezirow’s (1991) emancipatory educator. Robertson argues that educators of transformative learning currently receive inadequate preparation and support to assume competently these idealized roles in their educational relationships.

E. W. Taylor (1997) provides a comprehensive critical literature review of 39 empirical studies of transformative learning. These studies confirm the essential aspects of Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation, reveal the limitations in his emphasis on rationality, and reflect the broad applications for transformative learning in practice. The research indicates that the rational, analytical perspective is “just one modality of the many that are central to the transformation of meaning structures” (p. 52). A more holistic perspective recognizes the importance of affective learning, non-conscious learning, relationships, and the collective unconscious. Taylor identifies the need for future research initiatives aimed at investigating holistic perspectives, understanding universality and difference, fostering transformative learning, and exploring longitudinal perspectives.

Similarly, feminist educators (e.g., Gouthro, 2000; Michelson, 1996; Miles, 1996; Tisdell, 1998; Schlattner, 1994; Schweickart, 1996) critique Mezirow’s emphasis on

rationality and critical reflection for transformative learning. Gouthro advocates a holistic approach that links “theory with practice, knowledge with action” (p. 58) to prepare learners for the complex challenges within a globalized society. Michelson recognizes that “embodied and emotionally rooted knowledge” (p. 450) provide important evidence about the world. Similarly, Schlattner argues that the whole human being is involved in constructing and transforming meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. These feminist critiques offer a new and emergent perspective on transformative learning.

Courtney, Merriam, and Reeves (1998) delineate a process for meaning-making that expands current thinking “beyond Mezirow’s linear, step-wise model” (p. 67). They undertake a qualitative research project to examine how meaning is constructed in the lives of those diagnosed as HIV-positive. They propose that receiving a potentially terminal diagnosis presents a powerful disorienting dilemma that triggers the meaning-making process that is central to transformative learning. The researchers found that the initial reaction period involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. The cognitive responses include shock or mental numbness. The affective responses include anger, panic, depression, devastation, and relief. The behavioral responses include screaming, crying, talking, heavy drug use and sexual activity, and practical activities. During this crucial time, lasting from 6 months to 5 years, individuals are attempting to explain what is happening using old perspectives, assumptions, and ways of coping. Individuals begin to revise the old or integrate a new way only when they realize that these old assumptions no longer work. Usually some catalytic experience instigates movement beyond the initial reaction. These catalytic experiences are unique to each person, may be external or internal, and involve a state of readiness for transformational

learning. External catalytic agents include support from family, friends, and support groups. Internal catalytic experiences include spiritual awakening, declining health, and awareness of the need to change. The catalytic events help individuals to acknowledge and accept the need for change so that they can enter into the meaning-making process. The meaning-making process initially involves taking stock, adjusting perception, and changing activities; after this, respondents assimilate their new discoveries and roles; finally, they begin to make meaningful contributions, have a heightened sensitivity to life, and engage in service to others. Courtney et al. propose that the process uncovered in their research “is a likely response to events that threaten one’s survival” (p. 82). They also argue that “it is only by looking at a life-threatening situation that the *fundamental* or *essential* components of the meaning-making process would be revealed” (p. 82). They suggest that educators and other helping professionals can use this holistic, transpersonal process of meaning-making to “maximize their roles as facilitators of change in people’s lives” (p. 83). Now, I examine the literature on fostering transformative learning.

### **Fostering Transformative Learning**

Many adult educators have studied the process of fostering transformative learning in diverse adult education settings. In this section I examine their use of critical thinking, mentoring, and other strategies for fostering transformation through rational and intuitive processes.

#### **Critical Thinking**

For over a decade, Brookfield has been developing practical strategies and techniques that educators can use in the classroom to foster critical thinking and transformative learning. His texts and articles (e.g., 1990b, 1995a, 1995b, 1997) provide

not only informed rationales and detailed guidelines, but also practical advice and personal examples to assist educators in adapting his strategies to any learning environment.

Brookfield (1995b) describes critical thinking as a complex, perplexing, context-specific, and culturally bound process. He identifies five phases in this process: experiencing a trigger event, doing a critical self-appraisal, identifying and challenging assumptions, imagining and exploring alternatives, and integrating new or revised perspectives. He explains that “sometimes this integration involves transforming attitudes and assumptions. At other times it entails confirming, with a renewed sense of conviction, existing stances” (p. 27). He argues that positive (peak experiences) or negative (traumas or tragedies) events in adults’ lives may trigger this process. He claims that practical techniques can encourage learners’ development at each phase in the development of critical thinking. Techniques that encourage learners to examine and challenge assumptions include critical questions, critical incidents, and role-play.

Brookfield (1990b) describes critical incidents as “brief written reports compiled by students about their experience of learning. These reports describe events that are recalled vividly and easily because of their particular significance for students” (p. 31).

Techniques that encourage adults to imagine and develop alternative ways of thinking include brainstorming and esthetic triggers such as drama, poetry, songwriting, fantasy, drawing, and photography.

Brookfield (1995b) recognizes that skilled helpers may provide crucial assistance to those who are engaged in the process of becoming critical thinkers. He explains that these educators, therapists, and friends act as “mirrors who help us interpret and question

our ideas and actions from a new viewpoint” (p. 29). He cautions helpers to act with care and sensitivity during the “psychologically explosive” (p. 30) process of questioning assumptions and exploring alternative ideas. Brookfield (1990a) explains that “educators who foster transformative learning are rather like psychological and cultural demolition experts. . . .They must ensure that when the foundations of these structures are shaken, the framework of the individual’s self-esteem is left relatively intact” (pp. 178-179). In his view, the ability to balance support and challenge is crucial throughout this process.

Brookfield (1995b) advises educators to provide a learning environment that fosters critical thinking. Such an environment encourages diversity and divergence, welcomes flexibility of format and direction, and values risk taking and spontaneity. Educators should model openness and critical thinking. They can support learning by building trust, affirming self-worth, and listening attentively. Educators should not only mirror assumptions and motivate change but also evaluate progress and create resource networks.

Brookfield (1995b) stresses that critical thinking is crucial for understanding the workplace, politics, media, and personal relationships. He explains, “As critical thinkers we are engaged in a continual process of creating and re-creating our personal, work, and political lives. We do not take our identities as settled; rather, we are aware of the scope for development in all areas of life” (p. 254). In his view, thinking critically in one’s relationships with children, spouses, and friends fosters the development of “genuinely democratic, reciprocal relationships” (p. 227) that are grounded in informed commitment.

Brookfield (1995a) challenges critically reflective educators to develop a philosophy of practice and a guiding vision that reflects their ideological beliefs, supports

their democratic values, and acknowledges their authentic voice. He believes that “for teachers, the discovery, honoring, and expression of an authentic voice are genuinely transformative processes” (p. 46).

### **Mentoring**

Daloz (1999) explores fostering transformative learning through the art of mentoring. He views mentoring from a broad, holistic perspective that encompasses the educator, learner, and society. He explains, “it is richly textured rather than finely tuned teaching that allows the most room for growth” (p. 240). Daloz (1986) stresses that excellence in the art of teaching is an act of care that requires skill, sensitivity, and wisdom. He believes that educators “do not simply hone minds, we help people to name their wholeness” (p. 152).

Daloz (1986) uses the metaphor of the transformative learning journey to describe the complex process of education for growth and change. The educator accompanies the learner as mentor and guide on this journey. His guiding principles for mentors focus on engendering trust through listening, seeing the learner’s growth, and encouraging the emergence of voice. Daloz explains that introducing conflict is a way of challenging assumptions and contributing new ideas. Mentors emphasize positive movement through praise, encouragement, and reinforcement. They help the relationship grow deeper and remain balanced. Mutual commitment, shared humanity, equality, and dialogue characterize this intensely personal and profoundly powerful relationship. He (1999) explains:

Like guides, we walk at times ahead of our students, at times beside them, and at times we follow their lead. In sensing where to walk lies our art. For as we support our students in their struggle, challenge them toward their best, and cast

light on the path ahead, we do so in the name of our respect for their potential and our care for their growth. (p. 244)

Daloz (1999) believes that effective mentors foster transformative learning by providing support, challenge, and vision. Mentors support learners' growth through a complex process of listening, structure, advocacy, affirmation, and sharing. Challenge is equally important in the nurturing relationship. Mentors set tasks, encourage reflection, engage in discussion, and offer alternative perspectives. They set high standards and challenge students to challenge themselves. Mentors provide the vision of the possible by acting as models for learners. Daloz explains that "we need other people to show us, to accompany us, to hold the hope and steady our faith that we will make it" (p. 244). Educators should model curiosity for learning, offer a map for the journey, suggest new language to describe ideas, and provide a mirror to extend learner self-awareness. Effective educators adjust their roles and strategies to match learners' needs on different legs of the journey as they examine existing assumptions and explore new perspectives. Throughout the journey, dialogue helps learners to explore and express new ideas. Daloz (1986) suggests that mentors "toss little bits of disturbing information in their students' paths . . . that raise questions about their students' current worldviews and invite them to entertain alternatives, to close the dissonance, accommodate their structures, think afresh" (p. 223).

Daloz (1986) understands the process of transformative learning as a series of incremental transformations as learners move toward perspectives that are more inclusive, differentiated, and compassionate. He paints a picture of "climbing along a ridge with a number of ascending peaks" (p. 136) to explain how adults may experience similar but unique transformative learning journeys:

Virtually everyone ascends the first few, but as the climb continues, more and more people remain along the way, choosing their own favored peak for its unique view. While it is true that later peaks may be higher and one can see more broadly from them, it is unwise to presume that the view from one is more pleasing or in any absolute sense “better” than another . . . . It depends, after all, on what you want to see . . . . For there is something within us that must grow and those among us who will ascend. We must honour that -- in others and in ourselves. (p. 136)

However, some adults realize that the risks associated with transformative learning are too great so they “just refuse to grow” (1988, p. 7). Mentors gain humility and wisdom through experiences with these adult learners.

### **Other Strategies for Fostering Transformation**

A number of innovative adult educators have been exploring ways to foster transformative learning in their specific areas of expertise. M. C. Clark (1993) explains, “Transformational learning has changed the landscape of adult learning and . . . it is having a discernible impact on practice” (p. 55). Transformative learning practitioners are contributing their experience and insight to a growing body of knowledge in the current literature. This literature reflects the complex multidimensional nature of transformative learning. Cranton (1997) identifies two complementary transformative learning processes emerging in the literature: “the rational, analytical procedure by which learners critically reflect on their basic assumptions and beliefs, and the holistic, intuitive way of delving into change through the imagination and the soul” (p. 1). Although some practitioners are integrating these complementary, interconnected processes to foster transformation, others focus on one process or the other.

Contributors who focus their attention on the rational processes in transformative learning provide practical techniques, strategies, and tools that educators can use. For example, Candy (1990) introduces the repertory grid as a useful, versatile instrument to

identify and analyze the learner's personal construct system. This strategy fosters self-awareness, perspective transformation, and individual and collective action. Deshler (1990a) describes conceptual mapping as a practical technique that can be applied in formal or informal education settings. This simple process provides an opportunity not only to identify and examine assumptions, connect meanings among concepts, and reveal omissions, but also to explore alternatives and validate learning. He explains that transformative learning is most likely to occur when concept mapping focuses on concerns that learners recognize as important, puzzling, or constraining. Deshler (1990b) also describes the process of metaphor analysis that facilitates emancipatory education and transformative learning when adults examine the influences that have power over their lives. In his view, "creating metaphors is an act of naming the world and thus is an act of power" (p. 311). Dialogue in classroom settings, small informal groups, and one-to-one counseling sessions enhance this learning process. Kitchener and King (1990, 1994) introduce their reflective judgment model to describe seven sequential stages in the development of epistemic assumptions. Individuals have epistemic assumptions and typical reasoning abilities reflective of their stage of development. Educators can use their model to design developmentally appropriate transformative learning experiences that promote growth. Peters (1990) offers his action-reason-thematic-technique that educators can apply to foster critical reflection on the content, processes, and premises in a problematic situation. Similarly, Pilling-Cormick (1997) offers her self-directed learning perception scale that educators can use to stimulate critical reflection, encourage discussion, and foster transformation.

Contributors who focus their attention on intuitive processes in transformative learning seek to expand the dimensions of the transformative learning experience. For example, Grabove (1997) introduces the concept of “depth transformation” (p. 91) to the literature. She believes that cognitive learning processes and emotional learning processes are interconnected “layers that work in tension” (p. 95) in transformative learning. She explains that the cognitive, analytical, rational processes uncover meaning, whereas the emotional, intuitive, creative processes add depth to the experience. She explains:

The transformative learner moves in and out of the cognitive and the intuitive, of the rational and the imaginative, of the subjective and the objective, of the personal and the social. In seeming paradox, the value of the imagination and the power of the emotion exist within the rational notion of transformation, and learners rely on analysis to make sense of their feelings, images, and intuitive descriptions. Within each perspective, we discover other perspectives. (p. 95)

Grabove observes that effort and courage are required to facilitate the risky process of transformative learning.

Similarly, Dirkx (1997) views adult learning from a holistic perspective that “requires that we care for and nurture the presence of the soul dimension in teaching and learning” (p. 80). Learning through the soul honors the realm of one’s unconscious being that represents “the source of life itself” (p. 84). Dirkx explains that the soul is nourished through story, song, myth, poetry, and the concreteness of one’s everyday life. The challenge for educators is to “awaken soul in teaching and learning” (p. 84) through instructional methods such as imagination, stories, myths, and ritual. Soul learning is nurtured through profound connections between teachers and learners; attention to the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical aspects of the learning environment; and making “room for grief work, for passions of fear and sorrow, for dreams and desires”

(p. 85). Dirkx believes that nurturing the soul in adult learning fosters self-knowledge and transformation that is “informed by a sense of mythos, as well as logos” (p. 87). Soul learning adds a deeper dimension to transformative learning.

Similarly, Scott (1997) focuses on depth transformation. She employs analytical depth psychology as well as critical social theory in her discussion of the grieving process in perspective transformation. She explains that critical social theory focuses on reason, intellect, ego-control, rationality, dialogue, and critical reflection to explain perspective transformation. Critical theory views grieving as a conscious, rational process of “letting go of frames of reference that have been outmoded or uncritically assimilated” (p. 45). In this view, transformation results in a change in the way one makes meaning at the level of the brain. The goal of transformation from this perspective is social change through social action. Critical reflection is central to the determination of truth in this process. In contrast, Scott explains that analytical depth psychology focuses on personal extrarational processes accessible through images in dreams, slips of speech, and the collective unconscious. Facilitating transformation from this perspective involves bodywork; ego quieting; internal work with images, dreams, and fantasies; discernment; and soul work. When meaning perspectives are challenged, individuals experience grieving as an existential phenomenon involving “loss of connection to the soul” (p. 45). This intensely personal process of descending into grief involves profound emotional experiences and hard, painful soul work: “A reintegration of the body and mind is soul work” (p. 49). Scott explains that the goal of transformation from the perspective of depth psychology is fundamental personal transformation that fosters action for social change.

Other practitioners recount their personal and professional learning journeys.

J. Clark (1997) recounts the story of her personal quest for understanding of the “hidden patterns of daily life” (p. 13) that block or awaken her voice, creativity, and imagination. She uses the language of metaphor, myth, stories, philosophy, art, and literature to describe her personal journey of transformation. Cohen (1997) describes his experience of integrating emancipatory learning principles and transformative learning processes into a vocational-learning environment. Similarly, Foster (1997) integrates soul learning and grief work into second language learning which has “tremendous potential for transformative learning” (p. 39). van Halen-Faber (1997) introduces narrative processes such as storytelling, critical incidents, practice teaching logs, and learning journals to assist student teachers in finding their authentic voices as learners and teachers. The body of literature that informs practice is expanding rapidly as experienced transformative learning practitioners increasingly publish their insights.

### **Transformative Learning in Groups**

Many educators (e.g., Imel, 1996; Rose, 1996) believe that adults learn best in groups. In this section I review the nature of group learning, transformative learning in groups, the transtheoretical change model, and using change models in therapy groups.

#### **Group Learning**

Learning in groups is a widespread practice in adult education. Recently, some authors have been examining the validity of this practice. Imel (1996) advocates learning in groups as a major theme in the literature of adult education. She explains, “With little support from research, learning in groups has been accepted as part of the woof and warp of adult education, with groups woven throughout many practice settings” (p. 91). Similarly, Rose (1996) challenges the proponents of group learning to reflect on how and

why they use group learning in their practices. She wants to know whether it is “an ideological position, a method of learning, or a tool for affective change” (p. 12).

Armstrong and Yarbrough (1996) examine group learning theory and explore group learning process. They explain that “group learning occurs when a group of individuals learn in concert with and through each other” (p. 35). Interdependence is critical to this process. They identify five stages in the process of group development, with corresponding tasks for each stage of group learning. First, members get acquainted in the politeness stage. Next, during the focus stage, group members negotiate what they want to learn and plan their learning work. Then, in the conflict stage, individuals struggle to find their place and groups struggle to find their identity. Fourth, during the stage of solidification, the group becomes cohesive and functions effectively. Finally, in the performance stage, the group becomes productive and efficient. Armstrong and Yarbrough explain that the learning group is influenced by a complex array of characteristics of its members, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, and geography. The members’ perception of their context plays an important role in effective group learning. They conclude, “Learning groups do not function in a vacuum. They are socially and institutionally situated” (p. 39).

Similarly, Heimlich (1996) stresses the need for educators to understand group dynamics and group process. He provides practical advice on constructing learning activities for group learning. Because every group has a unique character, he suggests that educators construct each learning activity with “the concepts of process, skill, content, and outcome in mind” (p. 46). The same activity can be used to teach different content. However, educators should construct each learning activity to include some

elements of conflict, cooperation, and challenge as motivators. Learning activities should also address multiple learning styles and maintain group focus. Heimlich suggests using activities such as discussion, games, role-play, simulation, and projects in group learning. Some rules of thumb include establishing ground rules, creating a climate for learning, and ensuring group participation. He concludes, “Effective group learning emerges from using the group as a learning unit and respecting both the psychological and sociological processes of the teaching-learning exchange” (p. 48).

Similarly, Imel (1996) describes the complex nature of learning in groups as a continuum with “support for individual learning at one end and support for the group learning as an entity at the other end” (p. 92). Imel and Tisdell (1996) observe that in a well functioning group, members build and maintain relationships and cohesiveness, and help the group accomplish its tasks. They describe one model of group development as forming, storming, norming, and performing; they describe another model of group development as orientation, exploration, normalization, production, and termination. Imel and Tisdell explain that facilitators affect learning by attending to group process and by challenging learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Learner performance is enhanced when the learning groups are small and there is diversity among members. They challenge educators to consider how power dynamics and conflict “based on structural systems of privilege and oppression such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation” (p. 20) are manifested and managed in the learning group.

Similarly, Vella (1995) emphasizes the importance of understanding group process and group dynamics when facilitating group learning. Drawing on her experience as a community educator, she offers practical advice for program planners and provides

principles for effective group learning for facilitators. She stresses that program planners must answer the questions who, why, when, where, what, what for, and how. She (1994) suggests that facilitators attend to factors such as safety, sequence, praxis, and reinforcement. She stresses the importance of accountability, clear roles, and teamwork in all educational programs. Vella explains that effective adult learning requires not only relevancy of content, immediacy of application, and respect of individuals but also group factors of dialogue and affirmation. She believes that dialogue, humor, and energy support learning. Vella, Bernardinelli, and Burrow (1998) introduce the accountability process as a systematic way to prepare objective, flexible, comprehensive evaluation plans for group learning programs. This process is a valuable tool that educators can apply in planning and evaluating new or existing group learning programs.

### **Transformative Learning in Groups**

Cranton (1996) and Imel (1996) describe three distinct types of group learning: cooperative, collaborative, and transformative. Each type of group learning meets different learner needs, interests and contexts, leads to different kinds of knowledge, and requires different educator roles. Imel (1996) views group facilitation as “an art rather than a science” (p. 94). She explains that facilitators must adjust their roles to support the goals, purposes, and characteristics of each unique learning group. For example, cooperative group learning focuses on sharing information and expertise to accomplish a task and to acquire instrumental knowledge (Cranton, 1996). These learning groups support individual learning by emphasizing content more than process. The educator is the expert who plans, controls, and evaluates the learning experience. Collaborative group learning is a communicative learning process in which individuals work together to

construct and validate their knowledge of each other and their social world. Group development and process contribute to the acquisition of meaningful new perspectives. These learning groups foster individual and group learning by balancing content and process.

In contrast, Cranton (1996) points out that transformative group learning leads to emancipatory knowledge as individuals engage in critical reflection to examine and revise their underlying expectations, assumptions, and perspectives. This type of group learning is prompted by a life experience or dilemma, supports perspective transformation, promotes empowerment and self-awareness, and fosters individual and social change. Supporting learning in these groups requires emphasizing process more than content. Transformative group learning occurs in many contexts, including counseling groups, literacy education, professional development workshops, support groups, and community action groups. The educator's role varies over time in transformative group learning. Initially, the educator establishes a comfortable, collaborative atmosphere, maintains personal power, gives up positional power, and participates equally in discourse. Next, the educator provides challenging activities and experiences that stimulate reflection, critical questioning, and consciousness-raising while ensuring ample support for learners. The educator also encourages support networks, handles conflict with care, and supports learners as they adjust to change. Throughout this time the educator should remain authentic and trustworthy. As Cranton points out, "It is much easier to write about the educator's roles in transformative group learning than it is to implement them in practice. . . . Perhaps the roles evolve best with confidence in what one is doing and experience in doing it well" (p. 31).

### **Transtheoretical Change Model**

Ideas from clinical psychology provide practical guidance for practitioners who want to understand and create conditions that promote beneficial change. For over 2 decades, Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1992) have been studying the underlying structure of change. Prochaska et al. (1994) offer a transtheoretical change model that provides an overall theory and fundamental principles to explain the change process. They identify six stages, nine processes, and hundreds of techniques involved in a spiraling change process (see Appendix A for a graphic tool that illustrates this process). Their model is based on over 50 empirical studies involving thousands of successful self-changers, and a comparative analysis of over 400 major systems of psychotherapy. The transtheoretical change model has been applied by clinicians in a wide variety of settings in health promotion, psychological counseling, and addiction treatment. Prochaska et al. recognize that their model has revolutionized the science of change. They conclude, “Our model has proven to be effective with every behavior we have studied thus far, not simply with one or two specific problems” (p. 241).

Prochaska et al.’s (1994) six stages in the spiral of change are pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination. Each stage is equally important, takes place over time, involves energy and dedication, and entails the completion of a series of tasks before the individual can progress to the next stage. According to these researchers, matching challenges to the stage of change maximizes success: “Our research has consistently shown that people who try to accomplish changes they are not ready for consistently set themselves up for failure” (p. 39). The spiral model recognizes that most individuals who are able to change themselves successfully recycle

several times before they succeed. Understanding the process of change helps individuals to gain control of the cycle, and to move through it more quickly, efficiently, and with little pain.

There are nine powerful processes that individuals who are able to change themselves successfully employ during the change process. Prochaska et al. (1994) describe these processes as consciousness-raising, social liberation, emotional arousal, self-evaluation, commitment, countering, environmental control, rewards, and helping relationships. Each process involves a broad strategy comprising specific techniques. A key element in the transtheoretical model is matching the appropriate process to the specific stage of change. Prochaska et al. describe effective approaches that clinicians can use in the helping relationship at each stage in the change process. They explain, "Successful self-changers report that they value their helping relationship most during the stages of contemplation, preparation, and action" (p. 141).

Those at the pre-contemplative stage have no intention of changing their behaviors; however, techniques aimed at consciousness-raising and social liberation provide valuable education and support. During this stage, an effective helping relationship offers non-judgment and empathic listening. Developmental forces and meaningful events such as marriage, childbirth, promotions, retirement, and illnesses may provide the motivation to move to the contemplation stage. During the contemplation stage, individuals are thinking seriously about change. This stage may last for months to years because of the anxiety and resistance involved in the change process. Emotional arousal and self-evaluation are important processes during contemplation. An emotionally charged event may trigger an evaluation of the pros and cons of change.

During contemplation, an effective helping relationship provides warmth, support, empathy, and feedback for solving problems and making decisions. During the preparation stage, individuals make plans for taking action. They continue the process of self-evaluation by weighing the pros and cons of change in the decisional balance. When the pros outweigh the cons, the individual is ready to make the commitment to take action. During preparation, effective helpers provide ongoing support and feedback to assist realistic action planning and problem-solving.

The action stage takes months of hard work and determination. The process of countering is essential during this stage as individuals begin to replace negative responses with healthy behaviors. Environmental control is also important to restructure the environment and to reduce recurrence of the problem behavior. During the action stage, the process of reward reinforces behavioral change. The helping relationship focuses on providing support, encouragement, friendship, affirmation, and validation during this stage. Maintenance involves renewed commitment to creating a new lifestyle as well as careful attention to potential hazards that could lead to relapse. During this stage, the helping relationship continues to provide support, encouragement, and validation. In the stage of termination, all of the hard work is rewarded with a new self-image, a healthy lifestyle, and solid self-efficacy. Even at this stage, the potential exists for relapsing and recycling. Ensuring long-term success requires ongoing awareness of potential risks. Prochaska et al. (1994) conclude, "Our model can benefit individuals in any stage of a problematic behavior, from those who don't want to change to those who have spent years hoping to change...someday" (p. 15).

### **Using Change Models in Therapy Programs**

The transtheoretical change model is changing the way counselors and therapists work with clients individually and in groups. Prochaska et al. (1994) criticize the action paradigm of most therapeutic change programs. They explain that “fewer than 20% of a problem population are prepared for action at any given time. And yet, 90% of behavior change programs are designed with this 20% in mind” (p. 15).

Similarly, Miller and Rollnick (1991) offer practical guidance in planning effective therapeutic interventions using the stages-of-change model. They focus on the role of the therapist as guide and companion on the journey toward positive behavioral change. They describe client-centered motivational strategies for interviewing that support the change process. They believe that “each person possesses a powerful potential for change. Your task as a therapist is to release that potential, to facilitate the natural change process already inherent in the individual” (p. 62). Individuals usually access therapeutic programs at critical decision-making times, when internal or external triggers such as life transitions or shocking events have started a change process. Motivational interviewing strategies are useful at all stages of change. During the stages of pre-contemplation and contemplation, strategies focus on building motivation. During the preparation, action, and maintenance stages, the strategies focus on strengthening commitment. A therapist style, based on empathy, warmth, and genuineness, not only promotes decision-making and supports commitment but also increases motivation and fosters successful change. Miller and Rollnick explain that to increase motivation the therapist needs to give clear advice, provide choices, give feedback, and clarify goals. The therapist may also need to remove barriers, decrease desirability, and practice

empathy and active helping. They conclude, "Change is best accomplished, we believe, when the client's own motivations and decisional powers are awakened, and his or her own resources are tapped" (p. 190).

Similarly, DiClemente (1991) describes how therapists can use motivational strategies to help clients to change successfully. He focuses on assessing the stage of change and applying appropriate motivational strategies to help people move to the next stage. He describes the therapist as a "midwife to the process of change" (p. 191).

DiClemente suggests using a sensitive, empathic manner to motivate pre-contemplators who are characterized by reluctance, rebellion, resignation, and rationalization. Clients at the contemplation stage are open to change but need information and incentives to foster decision-making and commitment. Therapists can help these clients weigh the pros and cons of change in the decisional balance. The preparation stage is the one in which to make realistic plans and solid commitments to change. Therapists help by exploring the plan and focusing on details. The action stage involves 3 to 6 months of hard work and commitment to implement the plan. At this stage, therapists can help clients to increase their self-efficacy by affirming and supporting their sense of success. DiClemente points out, "Clients in the action stage often use therapy to make a public commitment to action; to get some external confirmation of the plan; to seek support; to gain greater self-efficacy; and finally to create artificial, external monitors of their activity" (p. 199).

During the maintenance stage, the new behavior is becoming firmly established. Clients seek therapy during this stage when they fear relapse. Therapists can help by providing feedback, reassurance, and education about the change cycle. DiClemente concludes that integrating motivational strategies with the stages-of-change model "treats the client as a

fully functioning, managing partner in the process of change” (p. 201). These therapeutic strategies mirror the facilitation strategies identified by Vella (1994). For example, they all advocate for safety, respect, support, and authenticity. They stress relevant content, immediate application, and constructive feedback. In the next section, I look at the contextual factors when women are the persons learning for change.

### **Fostering Transformative Learning in Therapy Groups for Women**

In recent years, the adult education literature increasingly informs the practice of fostering transformative learning in therapy groups for women. This literature focuses on women as learners, abused women as learners, and therapy groups for abused women.

#### **Women as Learners**

Understanding women as learners requires knowledge of how women learner, how learning environments affect women’s development, and how educators can facilitate women’s learning. Current understanding of women’s development as learners is based on findings by Gilligan (1993), Belenky et al. (1997), Clinchy (1996), and Goldberger (1996a). Gilligan (1993) believes that moral crises can precipitate growth and change toward moral maturity. In her view, moral maturity involves the use of both the ethic of justice and the ethic of care for moral decision-making. The ethic of justice focuses on autonomy, separateness, independence, fairness, and responsibility to self first. The ethic of care focuses on compassion, caring, tolerance, non-violence, and responsibility to others first. Her research shows that women typically use the ethic of care to describe, understand, and solve moral dilemmas.

Feminist educators, who discuss learning environments for women’s development, focus on connected learning and the emergence of an authentic voice.

These educators agree that connected learning fosters development for women. Belenky et al. (1997) describe a connected educational environment that provides structure, freedom, collaboration, support, and care. They explain that women are drawn to knowledge that is practical, applicable, and grounded in their own experience. Women need to know that they have something good inside them, that they already know something, and that they can be trusted to know and learn. Belenky et al. conclude, “Every woman, regardless of age, social class, ethnicity, and academic achievement, needs to know that she is capable of intelligent thought, and she needs to know it right away” (p. 193). MacKeracher, Wall, and Doucet (1993) assert that programs for women should focus on continual integration of relevant knowledge through dialogue and interaction. Women learn best through recognition, relationships, connections, and mutuality. These educators explain that women appreciate sharing information in the group context, developing supportive networks, and gaining self-awareness and self-esteem. Clinchy et al. (1985) likewise stress that women need time and opportunity to explore their current experience as well as to validate their existing knowledge. In their view, a caring, egalitarian environment supports women’s learning. K. Taylor (1995b) agrees that a learning environment that encourages self-direction, reflection, choice, and conversation supports women’s development. Similarly, Taylor and Marineau (1995) point out that “learning environments that intentionally support and acknowledge development are bridges toward change” (p. 11).

Effective learning environments for women’s development promote the emergence of an authentic voice. Gilligan (1993) explains that voice is the core of the self, and to have voice is to be human. In her view, the emergence of voice reflects

women's development toward moral maturity. For Belenky et al. (1997), acquiring voice reflects the emergence of a sense of self, mind, and knowing. They explain, "Once a woman has a voice, she wants to be heard" (p. 146). K. Taylor (1995a) agrees that women become stronger "as their voices grow stronger and clearer" (p. 7). Similarly, Maher and Tetreault (1996) examine voice as a form of personal expression of a woman's gendered self, her multiple identities, and her private and public self. Marineau (1995) agrees that women "find and fashion their voice" (p. 43) as they develop their sense of self. She stresses that women need to learn to listen to their own voices and to the voices of other learners. The classroom can be a relatively neutral environment to examine the complex power relations in groups and society (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). However, educators must be sensitive to the learning needs of women whose voices may be repressed in the learning environment by culture, language, race, or color (Gajdusek & Gillotte, 1995).

Feminist educators suggest that the most effective educator roles for teaching women are midwife, guide, mentor, and connected therapist. Belenky et al. (1997) explain that the concept of midwife assists students "in giving birth to their own ideas" (p. 217). The midwife preserves newborn thoughts and provides a culture for growth, all the while encouraging students to speak in their own voices. She creates groups where members support and nurture each other's thoughts. Stanton (1996) describes this educator role:

As the midwife/teacher image dramatically conveys, education is relational--a relationship that involves knowledge, attentiveness, and care; care directed not only at disciplinary material but to who students are and what they can become. It involves responsiveness and a stance of hopefulness. (p. 45)

Tarule (1996) describes the educator as a guide who promotes the collaborative construction of knowledge through dialogue. Guides give up the role of expert so that authority can be lodged in group discourse. Bloom (1995) explains the multiple roles that mentors play in supporting women's development. At times mentors stand behind students to provide support. They may walk ahead as guides to show students the way. They may stand face-to-face with learners to listen, question, and make connections. Mentors may walk beside students as companions, allies, and sister learners. Bloom concludes that mentors play an important role when they invite women "to participate in the pleasure of learning" (p. 71). Mahoney (1996) describes the role of the connected therapist in supporting women's development. The connected therapist provides a secure compassionate helping relationship based on authenticity and trust. The therapist honors the uniqueness of clients' experiences. Mahoney describes this helping relationship as "a dynamic dance of two beings in search of a changed life for one of them" (p. 141). Now I examine the literature on abused women as learners.

### **Abused Women as Learners**

Understanding abused women as learners requires knowledge of the profound impact that violence and abuse have on learning. Goldberger (1996b) explains that "the dynamics of power and status are often controlling factors in how one knows and what one knows" (p. 14). Belenky et al. (1997) note that women who are silenced or receptive knowers often share a common history of social, economic, and educational deprivation, and frequently live in violence, abuse, and isolation. Elliott and Williams (1995) explain that "any form of violence can have a significant negative impact on a woman's education" (p. 2). Some of these effects include self-blame, tiredness, lack of trust, and

difficulty in taking risks. Rundle and Ysabet-Scott (1995) agree that current or past violence create barriers to learning; for example, negative self-image, inability to concentrate, sense of detachment, panic attacks and flashbacks, and concern for safety. They assert, "It is important to women that barriers to learning caused by violence be identified, legitimized and understood" (p. 9). Similarly, Horsman (1999) agrees that abuse does not make women abnormal, but it does create barriers to learning because violence has an impact on the whole being. She points out that survivors of past abuse may experience fear, shame, anger, humiliation, and grief in the classroom, whereas women experiencing or escaping current abuse may struggle with fear, crises, pain, practical problems, and escalating violence. These educators agree that these potential barriers to learning can be overcome.

Women who are familiar with violence bring knowledge, strengths, and sensitivities to the learning environment. According to Horsman (1999): "Trauma survivors are the canaries in the mine who remind us that violence is toxic to us all" (p. 293). Belenky (1996) agrees that women come to the classroom with strengths to celebrate, share, and build their new learning upon. Similarly, Rundle and Ysabet-Scott (1995) explain, "Women can learn, grow, be free, if only there is someone to see our pain without defining us by it and believe in our strength without demanding it" (p. 11).

Horsman (1999) believes that violence is so widespread that the impact of abuse must be recognized in all educational programs. She challenges educators to address violence as a social problem, to recognize the impact of violence on learning, and to help survivors learn successfully. She believes that abused women benefit from a layered, integrated curriculum that acknowledges all aspects of the person. In her view, the spirit

thrives in a respectful learning environment that draws on learners' strengths as survivors, builds self-esteem, fosters self-worth, and rebuilds hope. The mind works best in a creative, relaxed, playful atmosphere. Providing a safe, comfortable, connected learning environment where learners can express emotions and regain a sense of personal power honors the emotional and physical needs of learners. Similarly, Elliott and Williams (1995) stress, "Safety is the overwhelming concern of all survivors" (p. 41). Their practical suggestions for creating a hospitable learning environment focus on physical, emotional and mental safety for learners.

Horsman (1999) suggests that educators apply strategies that focus on three crucial issues for abused women: exercising control, building connection, and creating meaning. In her view, these learners may express their need to exercise control in their lives but need support to set goals and take control of their future. She (1997) explains, "A combination of boundaries, structure and freedom . . . may be a crucial, but difficult balance to find" (p. 11). Survivors experience life in extremes, so the idea of regular, steady, daily effort that gradually leads to change is foreign to them. Mentors can help these learners explore the process of successful learning. Learning how to remain sufficiently present to learn and remember is essential for survivors who use dissociation as an ongoing way to escape pain. Nyquist (1998) describes one survivor's struggle to remain present in the face of her fear and pain. Horsman (1999) explains that abused women may also experience a myriad of ongoing health problems related to physical violence that may hamper concentration, attendance, presence, and learning. Educators can encourage women to exercise control by attending to their physical needs in the classroom.

Building connection in the classroom is a complex process for abused women. Horsman (1999) explains that establishing trust in others and themselves requires time, patience, and clarity. Educators can provide opportunities to share stories, explore similarities and differences, and break “the profound shame and silence around violence” (p. 150). Horsman challenges educators to make violence visible in the classroom, to raise awareness of violence as a social problem, and to model respectful non-violent interactions. Belenky (1996) agrees that connected group learning environments encourage marginalized women to create nurturant family groups and support networks.

Creating meaning is the third crucial issue for women who have experienced violence. Horsman (1999) explains that these learners need “opportunities to find language, to name their experiences, to develop and articulate their own meanings of their lives, to have those meanings read or heard, to learn they are not alone and that shared meaning is possible” (p. 156). Similarly, Gaber-Katz and Horsman (1991) stress that learners need to “create language that represents their experiences” (p. 64). Belenky (1996) agrees that connected midwife teachers can empower marginalized women to gain a voice and to develop their powers of mind.

### **Therapy Groups for Abused Women**

The literature to guide practitioners who facilitate therapy groups for abused women is very limited. Nevertheless, Eberhardt’s (1994) two-volume guidebook contains group learning designs that can be used, adapted, restructured, or expanded to meet the needs of different groups of women. She focuses on general cultural and social issues related to gender; however, she does not address specific issues of concern to abused

women. She provides structured exercises about topics such as consciousness-raising, self-discovery, assertiveness, sexuality, and leadership.

Pressman (1989) argues that “feminist therapy principles are especially relevant, appropriate, and essential to address the many issues of wife abuse and serve the needs of battered women” (p. 45). She provides general principles to guide practice rather than specific strategies for facilitators to use. The feminist perspective focuses on eliminating authoritarian behavior in therapy, empowering women to gain control of their lives, and helping women to become aware of their unique strengths. Feminist therapy groups are committed to supporting emotional well-being, enhancing women’s power, and appreciating women’s competence and strength. These groups focus on raising consciousness regarding power and control issues, and raising awareness of the impact of social, political, and economic norms on women. Similarly, Paquet-Dechy, Rinfret-Raynor, and Larouche (1992) agree that group programs are an effective way to raise awareness, build self-esteem, and break isolation for abused women. Pressman (1989) suggests that the most effective groups for abused women are 12-week programs facilitated by two female therapists. In her view, these groups need to be closed so that the same women are involved throughout the program. MacLeod (1990) agrees that abused women benefit from groups that are facilitated by trained counselors.

Similarly, Sinclair (1985) brings a feminist perspective to her practical manual for facilitators of therapy groups for abused women. She offers guidance for crisis intervention as well as short-term and long-term counseling. She believes that short-term counseling, for 3 to 4 months, is sufficient for most abused women to make the desired and necessary changes in their lives. She believes that a combination of individual and

group sessions is the best way to facilitate their change. During the initial phase of counseling (one to six individual sessions), the counselor establishes credibility, assesses needs, and identifies coping skills. During the middle phase, women attend a closed, 10-week group program that focuses on problem-solving and education. During the ending phase (one to three individual sessions), the counselor and client review her progress, evaluate her changes, and set goals for her future.

Sinclair (1985) believes that most assaulted women can benefit from a support group, whether they have a long history of abuse, are ambivalent about their relationships, or are separating from abusive relationships. She finds that the most effective groups have a mix of women at various stages of moving toward independence. Women act as role models, motivators, and resources for one another. She believes that only women who may feel extremely threatened by a group or those who may be disruptive, need to be screened out of group programs.

Sinclair (1985) describes the 10-week group program in detail. She finds that during Sessions 1 to 4, women struggle with dependency, fear, and pain; they also begin to break down their sense of isolation. The leaders assume the following responsibilities: provide structure; demonstrate confidence, assertiveness and care; play a visible role; and encourage connection between group members. During Sessions 5 to 8, group members express anger, rage, and aggressiveness as they move toward independence. Leaders not only monitor safety and support emotional expression, but also channel energy into positive action and guide problem-solving activities. Leaders withdraw their control of the group during this phase. During Sessions 9 and 10, leaders support goal setting and closure.

Women who engage in long-term counseling focus on moving to a more independent life position, developing a sense of self-worth, and choosing to no longer be a victim of violence (Sinclair, 1985). Group programs for these women focus on resolving anger and guilt, assertiveness training, grieving losses, assessing changes, and defining future relationships. Brown (1991) agrees that women may choose to address other issues in long-term counseling and group programs when the threat of violence is no longer their primary concern.

### **Summary of the Literature**

Innovative practitioners are applying the principles of transformative learning in diverse learning environments. Fostering transformative learning in group programs for abused women requires integration of theoretical knowledge and practical strategies from several disciplines.

The literature of transformative learning provides the theoretical foundation and philosophical framework to guide practitioners working in diverse settings. Mezirow's (1978) intricate theory of perspective transformation has evolved into a comprehensive explanation of the way that adults create and transform meaning. Developing superior perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative, prepares individuals for survival as autonomous adults in modern democratic societies. Cranton's (1994) clear explanations and practical models make Mezirow's transformative learning theory accessible to practitioners. She understands working toward transformative learning as a complex, multidimensional process that involves both the rational domain and the intuitive domain. Feminist educators bring women's perspectives to the literature of transformative learning. They illuminate structural systems of power and positionality

that affect learning. They advocate a holistic approach to transformative learning that offers intuitive and rational strategies in a collaborative, caring atmosphere. Theorists, researchers, and practitioners are contributing to a growing body of knowledge in the field as they confirm and expand Mezirow's theory.

Publications by experienced adult educators suggest strategies, techniques, and approaches that practitioners can adapt to their learning environment to foster transformative learning. Brookfield (1990a) believes that critical thinking is central to the process of challenging and revising assumptions to transform perspectives. Daloz (1999) explains how mentors combine excellence in teaching with the ethic of care to foster transformative learning. Other innovative educators suggest both rational approaches and intuitive approaches that foster transformation.

The literature about transformative learning in groups provides valuable information about the process of group learning, the use of groups in adult education, the types of group learning, and the roles of educators. Effective practitioners adjust their goals, strategies, and roles to meet different needs of learners in cooperative, collaborative, and transformative group learning. Transformative learning in groups involves the skillful balance of support and challenge to foster growth, development, and change.

The literature of clinical psychology provides practical guidance for therapists who want to understand and promote beneficial change for individuals and groups. Effective practitioners act as guides and companions on the journey toward positive behavioral change. They use appropriate motivational strategies to support individuals at each stage in their change process. The therapeutic strategies suggested by DiClemente

(1991) and Miller and Rollnick (1991) are similar to the facilitation strategies described by Vella (1994).

Fostering transformative learning in therapy groups for women requires an understanding of women as learners, abused women as learners, and therapy groups for abused women. Connected learning environments support women's development, empowerment, and voice. Effective educators act as midwives, guides, mentors, and connected therapists for women learners. Abused women bring knowledge, strengths, and sensitivities to the learning environment. Practitioners can support these women by taking a holistic approach to learning and teaching that acknowledges the impact of violence on their whole being. Therapeutic groups for abused women generally apply a feminist perspective that focuses on equality, empowerment, consciousness-raising, and sociopolitical awareness. Educators act as role models and advocates for these learners.

The literature reflects the quest for understanding the process of change by theorists, researchers, and practitioners who work in diverse fields of study. In the next chapter, I describe how I integrated theoretical knowledge and practical strategies from several disciplines to foster transformative learning in group programs for women. In my practice, I work with abused women who are questioning their assumptions about intimate relationships, exploring alternative perspectives, and working toward ending the cycles of violence in their lives. They are engaged in the complex, multifaceted process of working toward transformative learning.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PROGRAM FOR ABUSED WOMEN**

In this chapter I describe the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a group program designed to foster transformative learning among women who are experiencing abuse in their intimate relationships. The first section of this chapter describes planning the program, including program review, program design, and participant selection. The second section describes my strategies and roles as a facilitator, including short illustrative explanations of how I applied each strategy. The next section describes the implementation process for each group, including a profile of participants, flow of the sessions, and participants' activities that further illustrate selected strategies. The final section describes evaluating the program using data from program completion, participant interviews, and my teaching log.

#### **Planning the Transformative Learning Group Program for Abused Women**

When I accepted my full time position as a counselor and co-facilitator in the Women's Program in April 1998, I became responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating the group programs for women. I decided to focus my attention on designing an enriched group program to foster growth, change, and transformation for abused women. This study is the result of that undertaking.

#### **Program Review**

The first step in the study involved examining the existing group program by analyzing the program design and the participant profile. I analyzed the design of the existing program by reviewing the facilitators' notes from the previous 12 groups offered

between June 1995 and June 1998. I wanted a thorough understanding of the philosophy, focus, content, and resources of the existing program as a basis for designing an enhanced program. The facilitators' notes revealed that, although facilitators and participants had changed, all 12 groups shared a common philosophy, focus, and process. A feminist philosophy was evident in the emphasis on consciousness-raising regarding women's rights, power and control dynamics in relationships, effects of abuse on women and children, and empowering women to exercise choices in their lives. The focus of the groups was evident in the topics, content, and resources outlined in the facilitators' notes.

All 12 groups focused on issues of immediate concern to women who were experiencing abuse in their intimate relationships. The issues that were addressed frequently included understanding abuse, recognizing abusers, expressing emotions, acknowledging feelings, improving communication, building healthy relationships, setting boundaries, mobilizing anger, increasing self-esteem, and planning self care. The emphasis on group process was evident in the sequencing of the topics and the methods that various facilitators used. All of the facilitators used group discussion, videos, and handouts.

I analyzed the profile of the women who participate in our group programs by reviewing the client records of the 108 participants who attended the previous 12 groups. Reviewing the client records provided me with some insight into the complexity of the women's lives and the diversity of the participants who attend our groups. I gathered information regarding age, cultural group, dependent children, abuse profile, referral source, and program completion. I learned that group participants range in age from 16 to 69 years; represent two cultural groups, Caucasian and First Nation; and have from 1 to 7

dependent children. Most of the women have experienced several types of abuse, including physical, emotional, psychological, social, financial, and sexual abuse. Most women access our services voluntarily through self-referral or community referral. A few women attend by court order.

I analyzed program completion in the previous 12 groups as a baseline for assessing the effectiveness of my program design. I examined program completion by cultural group and age to assess whether or not the existing program was meeting the needs of women of all ages and both cultural groups. This analysis revealed that 72.2% of the group participants completed their program. I noted that 76.1% of the Caucasian women and 66.6% of the First Nation women completed their programs. Most of the women in the groups were between 20 and 49 years of age. All of the women above 50 years of age completed their program, whereas none of the teenaged women completed theirs. My analysis of program completion by cultural group and age is summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

My program review confirmed the need to design a group program that appeals to women across generations and developmental stages. In addition, the program must address the needs of both Caucasian and First Nation women. I noticed that all of the women in past programs were facing complex problems in their lives, for example, legal concerns, financial worries, parenting issues, housing crises, addiction recovery, and past abuse. However, I realized that the women who did not complete their program were experiencing current violence, frequent crises, ongoing safety concerns, or actively abusing substances. This program review also confirmed the need to plan an enhanced

program that matched program design and facilitator approaches to the participants' readiness for change.

**Table 1. Completion of Program by Cultural Group**

Cultural Group	No. of Participants	No. Completing Program	% Completing Program
First Nation	45	30	66.6
Caucasian	63	48	76.1
Total	108	78	72.2

**Table 2. Completion of Program by Age**

Age in Years	No. of Participants	No. Completing Program	% Completing Program
16-19	3	0	0
20-29	22	16	72.7
30-39	49	36	73.5
40-49	29	21	72.4
50-59	4	4	100
60-69	1	1	100
Total	108	78	72.2

## **Program Design**

The second step in the study involved designing the transformative learning group program. The general planning process provided the design, structure, resources, and strategies for the three 10-week group programs described in this study. I developed program objectives, identified program ideas, determined program format, designed instructional plans, and gathered resource materials. The detailed planning for each group program occurred in response to expressed needs of the group members. Each of the three study groups developed a unique character that evolved during their 10-week program. My co-facilitator and I met weekly to plan specific content, prepare resource material, discuss group process, identify appropriate approaches, adjust our facilitator roles, and evaluate program effectiveness.

Group process is a critical factor in transformative group learning. As each group formed into a working unit, I used a variety of collaborative activities to foster critical reflection, encourage critical discourse, and generate knowledge and wisdom within the group. I used activities such as discussion, critical incidents, art projects, and role-play. I supported and challenged the women to examine, question, and revise their assumptions regarding crucial issues in their lives. For example, a discussion about the effects of violence on children raised questions about the social welfare system. A critical incident related to a court appearance led to a discussion about judicial views on child custody, paternal access, and maintenance enforcement. An art project about healthy and unhealthy relationships generated questions about women's roles in society. A role-play about setting boundaries revealed sociocultural pressures for women to be caregivers and caretakers. The enhanced group program challenged participants to reflect critically on

issues of immediate concern to abused women and to take action toward personal and social change.

### **Participant Selection**

While I was designing the group program, I collaborated with my colleague in the Women's Program to develop criteria for group participation that counselors could use to determine client readiness for group programs. These criteria are: participation in long term individual counseling with Women's Program counselors; awareness of the dynamics of family violence through education during counseling sessions; movement past denial and minimization of the violence in her life; no active substance abuse; and commitment to attend the 10-week group program. I used these criteria to construct an assessment tool, which I used to select the women who participated in the three study groups (see Appendix B).

All of the participants in the study groups were attending counseling in my practice in the Women's Program. I used the assessment tool as an interview guide when I was working with my clients to determine readiness for the program, to identify learning needs, and to determine potential barriers to program completion. For example, when I asked women about their support networks, I could assess their readiness to engage in the change process and their helping relationships to support their learning and growth. Discussing the clients' abuse profiles and learning styles helped me to plan appropriate activities to meet the diverse and immediate needs of group members. By discussing legal issues and practical concerns, the client and I could identify potential barriers to program completion and explore possible ways to reduce these barriers.

All of the women who were invited to participate in the study groups were committed to moving on in their lives. They made the commitment to participate in the group program as part of their process of growth and change. None of the participants were abusing substances. The make up of each of the study groups reflected the same complexity and diversity noted in previous groups.

### **My Strategies and Roles as a Facilitator**

In this section, I describe six general strategies that I used in my group program to foster transformative learning. The strategies are creating the learning environment; attention to group dynamics; fostering empowerment; challenging assumptions; rational approaches; and intuitive approaches. Within these strategies I attempted to find the delicate balance between content and process, structure and flexibility, work and play, and external knowledge and internal knowing. I also maintained a teaching log to record my reflections on this balance, among other things.

#### **Creating the Learning Environment**

Creating a comfortable environment conducive to adult learning involved attention to physical space, emotional safety, and a non-threatening learning environment. All of the sessions were held in the group room at the Family Violence Prevention Unit. My co-facilitator and I provided a welcoming, casual environment by greeting each woman by name and engaging her in conversation. Coffee and tea were available throughout the session. We sat in a circle to encourage equality, interaction, and participation. To ensure physical safety for these women, we locked the building's exterior doors during sessions, and provided safe transportation to and from the group

sessions. The women arranged childcare, and their costs were reimbursed by the Women's Program.

Providing emotional safety was also an important aspect of creating the learning environment. We promoted respectful communication by facilitating the development of guidelines that set clear boundaries for each group. For example, each group decided how to support someone who was crying during a session. We encouraged respectful communication and equal participation by ensuring that each woman had an opportunity to speak during discussions. For example, if a woman was dominating a discussion, we asked her to allow others to speak. If a woman was quiet, we asked her opinion about an issue. Finally, we provided emotional support and encouragement for each participant by validating her experience, honoring her strengths, and celebrating her progress. We also encouraged the participants to develop support networks by connecting with other women in their group.

Providing a non-threatening learning environment included paying close attention to the diverse learning abilities and styles of women in the groups. We used a variety of activities, approaches, and strategies to engage all of the participants in all aspects of the program, including, brainstorming, storytelling, and videos. We were aware that women in the groups had diverse educational backgrounds. Whereas some participants had university education, others had limited literacy skills. For this reason, we focused on dialogic techniques for the educational content of the sessions and provided supplementary reading materials. We also provided opportunities for women to practice new skills in a safe environment. For example, they practiced assertive communication and boundary setting during their sessions.

### **Attending to Group Dynamics**

Attending to group dynamics involved attention to facilitator roles, awareness of power dynamics, and maintaining facilitator authenticity. As a facilitator, I played several roles in the circle of women. I was not only a guide for their learning journey, but also a midwife as they gave birth to their own ideas. For example, during a discussion about new legislation regarding domestic violence, I acted as a resource by providing information and clarifying options. Then, I became a provocateur by posing questions about the implications of this legislation. Next, I modeled critical thinking as we examined the benefits and drawbacks of this legislation. Finally, I encouraged expression of ideas by validating contributions and naming strengths. During the program my co-facilitator and I adjusted our roles in response to the needs of the participants and the groups. Early in the group process, we played the roles of counselor, facilitator, guide, resource, supporter, and friend to provide structure, safety, and guidance. Later in the group process, we added the roles of midwife, model, provocateur, and co-learner as the group members developed connections and confidence.

Maintaining awareness of power dynamics between the facilitators and the group, between the co-facilitators, and among the group members was an important part of attending to group dynamics. In the weekly planning meeting, my co-facilitator and I discussed our use of personal and positional power as well as the power dynamics among group members. We shared responsibility for the group content and process. We communicated by maintaining eye contact during the session. We met during the coffee break to discuss issues of mutual concern arising during the session. In this way, we modeled equality and respectful communication.

Throughout the program, I consciously used my positional and personal power to foster empowerment. Early in the group process, I maintained both positional and personal power to provide structure, safety, and guidance. For example, in the first session, I provided a structure for introducing group members. Using this structure, I introduced myself first so that the women could follow my example. I also described the format for the sessions so that the participants would know what to expect. As the group developed, I consciously gave up positional power and maintained personal power. For example, the group members determined the content for later sessions. I stepped back from the leadership role while continuing to provide support and guidance. In this way, the group could take over the responsibility for directing the group process and responding to the needs of its members. By experiencing their power, group members practiced new skills and gained confidence in their ability to exercise choice and take control of their lives.

Maintaining facilitator authenticity was an important aspect of attending to group dynamics. Establishing and maintaining trust is a key element for counselors and facilitators who work with abused women. I knew that the women in this circle would expect their guide to “walk her talk.” My co-facilitator and I demonstrated authenticity by allowing our humanity to show in many ways during the group sessions. We were truthful when we did not know the answer to pressing questions. For example, when one woman asked how she could stop caring about her abusive husband, I replied that I did not know. We revealed our views on social issues that we were passionate about. We shared personal experiences with growth and change, when appropriate to illustrate a point.

### **Fostering Empowerment**

Fostering empowerment was a central focus throughout the group program. Prior to entering the group setting, I focused on empowering women during individual counseling sessions by listening to their stories, validating their experiences, and developing a trust relationship. As they gained confidence, they were motivated to enter the group program to have the support of other women. During the group program, I fostered empowerment by supporting the participants as they engaged in the group process, were heard and validated by other women, and established a support network. For example, I encouraged each group to exchange telephone numbers for mutual support. I also expressed delight when one group made plans to attend the rodeo to celebrate the completion of their program. After the group program, I fostered empowerment by recognizing their progress, celebrating their success, exploring their options, and validating their choices. For example, during the post-group interviews I outlined each woman's progress and praised her learning. Then, we explored her options and set new goals to support her ongoing growth.

### **Challenging Assumptions**

The group setting provided a safe environment for these women to challenge the sociocultural assumptions that perpetuated the cycles of abuse in their lives. Women's experiences and assumptions are confirmed in a group program through support and validation. However, these experiences and assumptions must be challenged for revision and transformation to occur. As a facilitator, I was continually striving to provide sufficient support and challenge for participants to question their foundational beliefs and values. In my role as empathic provocateur, I posed questions that challenged socially

accepted ideas to stimulate critical dialogue and to encourage critical self-reflection. For example, asking why women stay in abusive relationships opened the discussion about socially defined roles and expectations of women. Asking what women learned about anger as children provided an opportunity to explore previously unexamined beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and fears. Asking why there are different rules for men and women in relationships challenged foundational beliefs about rights and equality. For some women, this was the first time their views had been acknowledged and valued. My co-facilitator and I modeled critical reflection by posing problems, by examining ideas, and by exploring perspectives. For example, we questioned whether the new family violence court would reduce domestic violence by providing immediate consequences and treatment for offenders. We also questioned whether victims were well represented by community justice initiatives that moved sentencing out of the courtroom into the community.

### **Using Rational Approaches**

The rational approaches that I used to foster transformative learning included critical incidents, problem posing, brainstorming, role-play, and intentional activities to model critical thinking and critical reflection. My co-facilitator and I used an informal type of critical incident technique during every group session to identify issues of concern, pose questions, and stimulate discussion. Each group session began by each woman talking about her week and raising issues of concern. This was an opportunity for the women to describe critical incidents from their lives, to receive feedback from the group, and to solve problems with the help of other group members. For example, one woman described her daughter's anger when she returned from a visit with her father.

The group suggested ways that this mother could explain the reasons for the separation and new living arrangements.

Analyzing these critical incidents provided an opportunity for participants to engage in rational discourse that strengthened their analytical abilities when viewing incidents in their lives. For example, at the beginning of one session, one participant expressed her rage toward her husband who had been incarcerated the previous weekend for a serious offence. The group validated her feelings and explored how she could explain the situation to her young children. On another occasion, a woman expressed her dismay that her violent ex-husband had purchased the house next door. She described her plan to sell her home immediately and move into an apartment with a controlled access for safety. After expressing their concern, the group explored her legal and safety options and celebrated her ability to take decisive action. At the beginning of another session, a woman described her fear that her ex-partner was stalking her. The group decided to alter the planned session in order to devote more time to analyzing this issue, which they deemed to be of more critical and immediate concern to the group. The group worked together to create a safety plan for the woman and her child.

Problem posing was another rational approach that the facilitators used during all of the programs. We posed how, what, and why questions during group discussions and brainstorming exercises. These questions were designed to stimulate analytically critical dialogue. For example, during one discussion session, some of the women expressed anger and helplessness with their partners' drug and alcohol addictions. My co-facilitator asked how a woman could be a caring person without being a caretaker. Her question

brought the group back to a rational discussion of positive choices they could make in their interactions with others.

Brainstorming was a third rational approach used throughout all of the programs to stimulate discussion, explore ideas, name assumptions, and build group knowledge. This approach enabled all of the women to engage in discussion in a non-threatening way. For example, during a discussion on anger, we asked the group to brainstorm the behaviors that are passive, assertive, and aggressive. Everyone in the group contributed suggestions. The group generated an extensive list to help them identify these behaviors in themselves and others. The women were pleased and surprised to see how much they knew about this topic.

Finally, role-play was a rational approach that provided opportunities for participants to practice new skills in a safe environment. I used this approach only when the group was extremely comfortable together, and when they agreed to the activity. Some women enjoyed having a playful opportunity to try new skills and to receive feedback from other group members. For example, in one group, a woman agreed to role-play a situation that occurred with her abusive mother. After the role-play, she asked for feedback about setting clear boundaries in that situation. The group analyzed the relationship issues and suggested practical strategies she could use on her next encounter with her mother. Other women panicked at the idea of participating in a role-play. For example, I suggested a role-play to explore boundaries issues with another group and the women were so fearful that this approach would have been counterproductive.

### **Using Intuitive Approaches**

To value the intuitive, as well as the rational dimensions of learning, I included approaches such as storytelling, metaphor analysis, journaling, art projects, writing and poetry, and creative visualization. Storytelling was a valuable tool to use because the oral tradition is so strong in both First Nation and Caucasian culture in my region. The entire group process centred on talking together in a circle of women. The informal relaxed group setting encouraged women to tell their stories, to share their traditions, to explore their processes, and to describe their experiences. During a 10-week program, even the quietest women became comfortable and confident enough to speak. For example, during a discussion of child rearing practices, one very quiet First Nation woman described the beautiful ceremony that marked her son's passage from infancy to childhood. All of the women listened carefully to the details of the ceremony and thanked her for sharing her traditions with the group. The group setting provided a safe, relaxed, supportive environment for women to tell the story of the abuse in their relationships. One woman shared her story of 35 years of abuse in her marriage. The women commended her on having the courage to leave her abusive marriage and build a new life on her own.

The second intuitive approach that I used was metaphor analysis, to explore complex ideas and apply concepts to daily life. When the women engaged in dialogue, or told their stories, they often used metaphors to express their thoughts and explore their feelings. Some women in the groups were able to paint pictures in words that made sense to the rest of the group. As a facilitator, I used those metaphors and images to expand, deepen, and broaden discussions. For example, one group explored the metaphor of the

butterfly to discuss growth, change and transformation. Afterward, I summarized their discussion and used their images to explain this complex process.

The third intuitive approach that I used was journaling, to encourage critical reflection and to capture intuitive learning. Early in each of the study group programs, I suggested journaling as a tool for learning and growth through self-exploration. Over the years I had noticed that some women have kept journals all their lives to explore ideas, monitor progress, catalogue events, and express feelings. Those women continued to use their journals throughout their journey of healing from abuse. Some women shared poems or thoughts from their journals during their group sessions. I have noticed that women who have never used journals or diaries were unlikely to adopt the habit during their group programs, even when they hear how helpful the process is for others. There was no pressure on them to use writing as a healing tool.

The fourth intuitive approach that I used was art projects, to appeal to creative aspects in the participants, to stimulate feelings, to encourage reflection, and to add variety and playfulness to the program. During the group programs, the women worked in small groups to create collages about healthy and unhealthy relationships. They used color, drawings, words, and pictures to explore and express their feelings. They also made masks to explore and express how their anger looked on the inside and the outside. As they explained their masks to the rest of the group, they shared deep feelings and emotions. The masks also reflected each woman's unique perspectives and experiences.

The fifth intuitive approach that I used was writing and poetry. I used readings, poetry, affirmations, and literature during the programs to explore ideas, stimulate discussion, and offer alternatives. I read excerpts from books or readings to stimulate

group discussion. At the beginning of each session, I read a poem or reading related to the work for that evening. For example, I read a passage that described the process of moving from surviving to thriving. I also invited participants to share meaningful readings and poetry with their group. For example, one woman shared helpful passages from her book of daily readings. Another woman wrote a poem to express her gratitude for the support she received from the women in her group.

The sixth intuitive approach that I used was creative visualization, to encourage spiritual exploration, teach relaxation tools, and model self-care approaches. I realized that some women might find this technique threatening, so it was only used with unanimous agreement of the group members. On one occasion I used creative visualization to explore forgiveness of self and others.

### **Keeping a Teaching Log**

During the implementation process, I recorded my reflections in a teaching log. I made weekly entries as a tool for critical reflection on my teaching and learning throughout this study. I recorded insights gained through collaboration with my colleague in the Women's Program. For example, during the planning phase of the study, we explored the possibility that the need for variety and innovation meets the needs of the facilitators rather than the needs of the participants. I wrote:

The facilitators are like the rocks on the riverbank and the participants are like the driftwood passing by in the river. In our need for variety, we must never assume that the women know all about the basics. Remember not to go too fast, too soon.

I also recorded insights gained through co-facilitating groups with colleagues. I wrote:

“Flexibility and adaptability are the key to effective group facilitation.” My insights gained from listening to the women in the group sessions were also important notations in

my log. I wrote, “When we were talking about what helps women make change in their life, one essential ingredient was a person who listened and believed their story at a time when they needed to speak and be heard.”

In my teaching log, I documented the flow of the sessions and the response of the participants. For example, I noted that the women were eager to participate in each step of the learning process. I wrote, “They have done their own work, been supportive, respectful, caring, and honest with each other. They have celebrated each other’s success and supported growth and change. They trusted the process.”

I also recorded difficulties encountered during the study. One area of frustration was the lack of a consistent co-facilitator due to staff changes in the Women’s Program. I wrote:

Change, disruption, volume of work, and personal styles of dealing with stress are certainly factors that affect the facilitation team. In theory, there is structure and form to program planning and delivery. In reality the program planning must be very flexible and the facilitator must be very resilient and adaptable.

In the next section, I describe how my co-facilitators and I applied various strategies during the study group programs to foster transformative learning among the participants.

### **Group 1 Implementation Process**

For the first group program, seven women participated (five Caucasian and two First Nation women). They ranged in age from 24 to 45 years. They had experienced all types of abuse in their intimate relationships, including physical, psychological, emotional, verbal, sexual, and financial. Six of the seven women completed the program. One woman left the community and therefore did not complete the program.

### **Participant Profile for Group 1**

Each of the seven women had a unique set of experiences and perspectives to contribute to the group. Rather than describe all seven participants in a sentence or two each, here I give a slightly deeper profile of two participants for illustrative purposes. The names I have used in the study are fictitious.

Jessica represents the spirit of the women in the first group program. She completed both the first and second groups. She is a strong, determined, 42-year-old First Nations woman who is making dramatic changes in her life, as she follows her path of healing from past physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and from past alcohol and drug addiction. She is a single parent, raising her 8-year-old granddaughter. She is focused on providing a clean, sober, stable, loving, safe home for this child, who has been in her care since birth. She explained that “wanting a different lifestyle, wanting to live my life instead of surviving,” was the catalyst for her ongoing change process. At this time in her life, she was willing to take risks, to seek help, to learn trust, to feel emotion, and to push her edges as she “faced and dealt with personal issues regardless of how hard it was.” From the group leaders, she needed “understanding, support, and to know that I am only human.” From the group members, she needed “understanding, and support, but also to know that I was not alone in my emotions.” She brought experience, wisdom, honesty, and clarity to the group process. She is continuing on her journey of learning, growth, and change. She is a social activist and spokeswoman, who advocates for the rights of women and children in her First Nation community. She is an HIV/AIDS educator in the broader community. She said, “You have to want to change and then the result is your reward—Happiness, Love, Respect, Life.”

Gwendolyn also represents the attitudes of this group of women. She is a 45-year-old Caucasian woman who left her 26-year abusive marriage when her two children reached adulthood. She realized that her life was out of control, that she was doing everything, taking the blame for everything, and trying to keep an angry partner happy. She realized that she deserved a peaceful life. She explained, "I have good qualities, feelings, and need things for myself." She started taking care of herself by horseback riding, reading, saying no, seeking counseling, and attending this group. In the group program she learned about patterns, feelings, and needs; set goals; and learned "to like myself and trust myself." She said that the group members provided support, non-judgmental sharing of feelings, and ways of getting better. She enjoyed the "diversity in the group related to age, culture, place on the relationship continuum, some in relationship, some in and out, and some out." In her view, the leader supported her change process by providing acceptance, information, support, a safe place to meet, and validation of the abuse. Her confidence and happiness have continued to grow, and she has found a new, caring, supportive partner.

### **Flow of the Sessions**

At the beginning of the first session, I introduced myself and asked each woman to introduce herself and explain why she was attending the group. I did not have a co-facilitator for this program. As a group, we brainstormed group expectations and guidelines for their program. We generated a list of topics that group members wanted to work on during their sessions. This group decided to focus on understanding abuse, exploring relationships, expressing emotions, resolving anger, and promoting self-care. Then I asked each woman to create a collage to identify her personal goals for the

program. While they were cutting and pasting, they had an opportunity to become acquainted. When they were finished, I asked each woman to explain her collage. The session closed with a check out, giving each participant time to express how she was feeling at the end of the first session.

This group quickly formed into a hard working, committed, and connected group of women who supported and challenged one another in respectful ways. They enjoyed the process of questioning and challenging their current beliefs, values, and attitudes. During the second session, we explored myths and realities in relationships and trusting your inner wisdom. After reading a story about trusting your inner wisdom, I posed questions for the group to explore. What makes it difficult to trust our inner wisdom? What have you learned about the roles and expectations of women? What conflicting messages have you received from family, friends, church, culture, and media?

Throughout their program, they participated actively in all of the discussions, activities, and art projects. I acted as a guide, resource, support, and co-learner during their learning process. During Sessions 8 and 9, the women made and decorated masks to explore their anger. As they worked on their masks, they shared stories, experiences, learning, and wisdom. They discussed issues in depth, including healthy and unhealthy expressions of anger, helping children express anger, triggers and traumas that elicit anger, and letting go and forgiveness. To close each session, one of the women read a poem or reading that she chose to share with the group. During the last session, we explored the process of change, and explored their hopes and dreams for the future. We celebrated the completion of their program by sharing food, acknowledging strengths, and honoring their growth.

This group of women developed a support network that extended beyond their group sessions. This program was extended to 12 weeks at the request of the group members. They were so reluctant to see their program end that three of the six participants chose to attend the second group program.

### **Activities Illustrative of Creating the Learning Environment and Using Intuitive Approaches**

In this subsection, I describe how I created the learning environment and used intuitive approaches to foster transformative learning in this group of women. To create a relaxed non-threatening learning environment, I greeted each woman by name when she arrived for each session, welcomed her to the group, and directed her to the group room. I arranged the seats in a circle, made coffee and tea, and made sure the exterior building doors were locked for safety. The women were reimbursed for their child care expenses. Transportation was provided if needed. All of the sessions followed a format that included a check in, some working time, and a check out. I included a variety of activities to appeal to women of different ages, both cultures, and different learning styles. For example, in this group I used discussion, brainstorming, videos, handouts, stories, and art projects. During the program, we revisited their goals to ensure that all of their issues were addressed to their satisfaction.

I used intuitive approaches throughout this group program. All of these women were creative and enjoyed sharing their skills and knowledge with the other group members. Early in the program, I suggested that creative projects could be a way to explore their process of learning for growth and change. I provided a handout with some suggestions of creative ways to express themselves, including quilting, drawing, writing,

and photography. I asked them to share their project and their process with the group later in the program. In one of the sessions, a participant shared her sketchbook and gave a beautiful drawing to each group member. Another woman made a crocheted heart-shaped tree ornament for each person. A third woman brought hand crocheted hats and a story about learning to crochet as a child. A woman brought a photo of a memorial quilt that she and her sisters made to honor their brother who died of AIDS. Another woman wrote a poem of thanks to the group members. Their projects reflected their creativity and uniqueness.

### **Group 2 Implementation Process**

For the second group program, seven women participated in the group, three Caucasian and four First Nation women. They ranged in age from 29 to 45 years. They had experienced all types of abuse in their intimate relationships, including physical, psychological, emotional, verbal, sexual, and financial. All of the women completed the program. Three of these women also had completed the first group program.

#### **Participant Profile for Group 2**

Again, rather than describe all seven participants briefly, I present a slightly deeper profile of two participants for illustrative purposes.

Robin is representative of the women in the second group program. She is a 30-year-old First Nation woman who completed the program as part of her process of moving on in her life following a 10-year abusive marriage. She was experiencing depression, grief, and hopelessness. She explained, "My whole life was crisis, I didn't even know there was another side to life." From the group members, she received support, suggestions, alternatives, tools, information, and explanations. She enjoyed their

honesty, and hearing their experiences and solutions. She said that she liked “knowing I wasn’t a crazy person all alone.” From the facilitators, she received safety, support, ideas, feedback, and information. She focused on intuitive, spiritual, holistic approaches to foster her growth, including art, photography, writing, ritual, symbols, and reflection. She explained, “I am worth it. I know there is a better life. I am a good person. I have a good heart. That keeps me going.” She has continued her process of learning, growth, and change. Now she has a rich, peaceful life with her new caring, respectful, loving partner. She says that this new life is full of “excitement and adventures instead of crisis.”

Veronica also represents this group’s unique character. She is a 38-year-old single Caucasian woman who is the mother of three teenaged boys. She completed the second and third group programs. She is adapting to life following 20 years of abuse in her marriage. She explained, “My life had been taken away from me. I needed someone to throw me a life line and pull me in, to give me hope and encouragement or I would not have put any more energy into life.” There were many things she appreciated about the group process. She enjoyed sharing experiences, sharing knowledge, learning options, and trying new things. She appreciated checking reality, breaking isolation, and meeting new people. She began taking control of her life. She appreciated the diversity of women in her groups, and especially enjoyed meeting other social activists. She needed the facilitators to listen well, explore underlying issues, discuss healthy solutions, and model different options. This determined woman is a social activist, politician, and spokesperson who wants to “help others come out of their prisons too.”

### **Flow of the Sessions**

During this program, I co-facilitated the group with a colleague who did not work in the Women's Program. My co-facilitator assisted with the group sessions but she did not have time available for preparation or feedback because of her busy work schedule. As a result, I was responsible for program planning, participant selection, and group preparation. Throughout the program, I introduced a variety of approaches to foster learning and meet the diverse needs of the group members.

During the first session, we asked the group to develop goals and guidelines, identify personal goals, and decide on the direction and content of their group program. This group wanted to acquire concrete skills that they could apply immediately to solve problems in their lives. They wanted to focus on the change process, assertiveness, anger, boundaries, guilt and forgiveness, problem solving and decision-making, and self-care. We revisited their goals later in the program to ensure that all of their issues were being addressed. During the second session, I introduced my graphic tool for understanding change (see Appendix A) as a concrete tool to guide their learning journey during their program. They appreciated this rational approach to understanding a complex multifaceted process. One woman said that realizing how far she had come already helped her to keep firm boundaries with her ex-husband. Another woman said that she could identify exactly where she was in her healing from substance abuse. A third woman said that having the tool allowed her to be kinder and gentler with herself about the duration of her change process. The group agreed that understanding the change process gave them a sense of achievement and choice. In a later session we referred to this graphic tool to discuss the importance of helping relationships at different stages in the

change process. At that time, we also explored each person's unique timing, readiness, and triggers for change.

By the fifth session, this group was comfortable enough together to participate in role-play activities to explore healthy boundaries and assertiveness. In the ninth session, the group focused on personal choice, decision-making and problem solving. The group members worked together to solve problems of immediate concern in their lives. For example, the group helped a woman who was struggling with debts left by her ex-husband. The women applied their combined wisdom to solving her problem. My co-facilitator and I acted as guides and provocateurs during this problem solving process.

This group also developed a support network that extended beyond their group sessions. The feedback from the participants reflected their gratitude for the support and validation they received from others during their program.

### **Activities Illustrative of Fostering Empowerment and Using Rational Approaches**

Here I describe how I used empowerment in this group program. I fostered empowerment by drawing on the unique strengths that each participant brings to the group setting. For example, one of the participants was ordered by the court to attend the program. She was on probation and had community hours to complete as part of her sentence. She was also an AIDS educator in the community. I invited her to complete some of her community hours by conducting a group session on HIV/AIDS. I asked her to focus on health issues for women, and the impact of sexual abuse, sexual assault, and infidelity on abused women. She gave a thorough, practical presentation and provided excellent resource material for the group members. She thanked me for giving her the opportunity to share her knowledge and expertise with her group. She explained that

helping others was the best way for her to stay focused on her healing path. The group members expressed their appreciation for her willingness to share her knowledge and expertise. They explained that her presentation provided important information for making healthy choices in their sexual relationships.

Next, I describe how my co-facilitator and I used the rational approaches of critical incident, brainstorming, and role-play in this group program. During the session on boundaries and assertiveness, we asked each woman to describe an incident when she had difficulty setting and maintaining clear boundaries. For example, one woman described a situation with a family member who frequently left her children with the participant for extended periods of time while she was drinking. The group brainstormed ways to assertively set and maintain boundaries in this situation. After she practiced her skills using role-play, the group provided feedback and further suggestions. At the end of the session, we asked each woman to practice her new assertiveness skills during the coming week. We started the next session with feedback about their experiences using these new skills. For example, a woman reported assertively setting boundaries with her abusive mother for the first time.

### **Group 3 Implementation Process**

In the third group there were 13 participants, 9 Caucasian and 4 First Nation women, ranging in age from 18 to 52 years. The participants in this group represented the full spectrum of women who access our programs. They represented both cultures, spanned five decades, and had 23 children. They were students, homemakers, unemployed, and professional women. The common threads were a history of abuse in their intimate relationships and the determination to end the cycle of violence for

themselves and their children. All of the women completed their program. In addition, one of these women completed the first group program and another woman completed the second group program.

### **Participant Profile for Group 3**

Here I introduce two of the participants who represent the unique set of experiences and perspectives of the women in this group.

Lee is a dynamic, vocal 35-year-old First Nation woman. She is a professional woman and mother of two young boys. She ended a 10-year verbally, emotionally, and psychologically abusive marriage following a physical assault. She identified the triggers for her change process as “lack of joy, anger, abandonment, confusion, sadness of family and friends, and my children’s pain.” She wanted to have peace, serenity, joy, self-esteem, and control of her life. She took a proactive, holistic approach to her learning process by applying numerous tools, strategies, and approaches on a daily basis. She regularly used journaling, music, aroma therapy, talking, exercise, networking, goal setting, and reflection. During the group program, she worked on her rage by building a beautiful wooden box to contain her anger. From the leaders, she explained that she needed “safety, honesty, insight, maintenance of chaos, experience in facilitating.” From the group members, she needed “validation, ideas, acceptance, non judgment, safety, support.” She concluded, “Growth is personal, change is ours. Group will not make it happen, I will, but group is a place to share with others so the process will continue.” After completing the program, she became involved in a new potentially abusive relationship, despite her awareness of some warning signs and familiar behavior patterns.

Sally also represents the spirit of this unique group of women. She is a determined 52-year-old Caucasian, professional woman. She attended the program for support in starting a new life after 32 years of violence and abuse in her marriage. Initially, she was embarrassed and devastated to find herself before the court, on probation, and under a peace bond, when her ex-husband charged her with assault and harassment. However, this humiliating experience ended her marriage as well as her denial and minimization of the extent of the violence and abuse she had been enduring. She immediately sought counseling, stopped drinking, and started changing her life. She realized “that as long as I stay in my present situation, I will stagnate my life and not grow any more.” For her counseling and group work “changed my whole thinking process. I was not alone, like I thought I was.” She explained that the group leaders supported her change process by their “non judgmental attitude, acceptance of my behavior, and support of the decisions I make now.” She appreciated the support, validation, reality checks, shared stories, and laughter in the group. She said that she gained the motivation, confidence, and “strength to make my life happier, healthier, and better.” During the program, she decided to leave all the “bad memories behind” and make a new life for herself in another province. When she was re-established, she sent a card of thanks for my helping her to make significant changes in her life.

### **Flow of the Sessions**

My co-facilitator for this group was a colleague who had recently started working as a counselor in the Women’s Program. She was an experienced counselor and group facilitator who was familiar with motivational counseling approaches and strategies. She was enthusiastic about the opportunity to apply her knowledge, skills, and experience in

our group program with women. We discussed theoretical ideas, collaborated on appropriate approaches and strategies, shared responsibility for group activities and process, and provided feedback and constructive criticism on facilitation roles and styles. We met weekly for joint planning, mutual support, and constructive feedback.

The size and intensity of this group presented different challenges for us as facilitators. First, the larger group size affected the amount of time each participant had to speak about issues of immediate concern. For example, we ensured that each participant had sufficient time to check in each week. This process used all of the available time in some sessions. The larger group also increased the number of complex issues to be addressed during each session. We provided guidance and maintained focus. Second, the intensity of this group was evident from the beginning. There were several dynamic women who engaged in animated dialogue throughout the sessions. They were eager to engage in critical discourse, to explore sociocultural assumptions, and to broaden their perspectives. For example, one evening there was a lively discussion about why women stay in abusive relationships. One vocal young woman argued that women should just leave. A quieter older woman described why she had remained for many years. Both women broadened their perspectives. As facilitators, our role was to clarify and summarize the insights gained from this valuable discussion. For this group, the sessions were characterized by intense emotional expression, including rage, grief, confusion, and joy. My co-facilitator and I ensured safe expression of these powerful emotions. For example, rage was especially frightening, both for those who were expressing this intense emotion and for those who were witnessing it. Our strategy was to provide concrete tools for expressing anger in healthy ways. One concrete tool was an anger log that women

used to record and analyze incidents that triggered their anger. We also normalized and validated rage as a powerful motivator for personal and social change.

The flow and content of the sessions were similar to the other study groups. However, the power of group process was more evident throughout this program. The first session focused on introductions, group guidelines, personal goals, and content areas. They identified similar topics to the other groups, including abusive relationships, healthy relationships, setting boundaries, assertive communication, understanding anger, co-dependent behavior, and self care. In the second session, we used small groups for the collage activity because of the size of this group. These women participated enthusiastically in this artistic activity. During the third session, the women expressed their rage at the legal system and engaged in heated discussion. My co-facilitator and I clarified information, dispelled myths, and provided practical tools. I appreciated her ability to remain grounded, clear, and detached. By the fifth session, these women had developed a strong support network that extended beyond their group program. For example, they maintained telephone contact, formed social groups, and offered emotional support. They continued to debate, rage, cry, and laugh throughout the remaining sessions. My co-facilitator and I consciously stepped out of the way as the group members shared their wisdom and learned from each other. We acted as guides, coaches, midwives, and co-learners throughout this group process. For example, as a co-learner I gained valuable insight into the distinction between caring and caretaking.

## **Activities Illustrative of Awareness of Power Dynamics and Challenging Assumptions**

In this section, I describe how we used awareness of power dynamics and challenging assumptions in this group program to foster transformative learning. Awareness of personal and positional power is essential for a facilitator in therapy groups with abused women. These women have been silenced, punished, and humiliated by people who exercise power and control over their lives; thus, as facilitators we needed to be mindful of our positional power afforded by education, socioeconomic status, race, and position. We also needed to be aware of our personal power in the helping relationship. In this program, my co-facilitator and I modeled equality in relationships, respectful communication, and participatory democracy. For example, during the fourth session, this group took power over process decisions from us. We asked them to divide into small groups for an activity. The group refused. They said, “No. We want to stay together.” We honored their request. As facilitators, we felt that this solidarity reflected the strength of the trust relationship established during individual and group counseling. They felt confident as a group to question our authority and to know that there would be no negative consequences.

Challenging assumptions was also an integral component of this group program. The group sessions were lively, passionate, and vocal as these women raged, cried, laughed, and argued. They validated, challenged, and supported one another in caring, respectful ways. They shared stories, knowledge, strategies, feelings, experiences, and creativity. They formed a support network that extended far beyond their group program. Some of these women formed lasting friendships and continue to support each other

during difficult times. All of the participants were changing their lives and some of them were determined to change society. Several channeled their energy into social action. For example, one woman ran for political office. We all learned valuable lessons and experienced a sense of the power within this circle of strong, passionate women.

Implementing these study group programs enhanced my skills as a transformative learning practitioner. For example, the study provided the opportunity to integrate change theory into my practice. In each group, I used my graphic tool to educate women about their change process. As I gained experience and understanding, I was able to explain the stages, processes, and techniques more clearly. Implementing the study also provided the opportunity to customize activities that foster transformative learning. For example, I used art projects differently in each study group. In the first group, I used several individual art activities as tools for critical self-reflection. In the second group, I used fewer art projects because the group put greater value on dialogue. In the third group, the art projects had a powerful impact on group process.

### **Evaluating the Group Program**

During this study I modified and enhanced each group's program by matching the program's design and my facilitation approaches with participants' needs within their transformative learning process. I evaluated the effectiveness of my efforts by measuring the participants' program completion rate, by conducting post-group participant interviews, and by reviewing my teaching log.

### **Program Completion**

Assessing the rate of program completion provided an objective method for evaluating the effectiveness of my group program. I expected that a higher percentage of

participants would complete group programs that met their immediate needs for knowledge, support, and empowerment at critical times during their transformative learning process. I assessed enhanced effectiveness of the modified program by comparing the completion rate of the group programs to the completion rate of the previous group programs (discussed earlier in this chapter). I examined completion rate by cultural group and age to determine whether or not the modified program was meeting the needs of all ages and both cultural groups. This analysis revealed that 96.3% of the participants completed the study group programs compared to 72.2% in the previous group programs. The completion rate for First Nation women increased to 100% in the modified program compared to 66.6% in the previous programs. For Caucasian women completion increased to 94.4% from 76.1% in the previous groups. When I assessed completion rate by age, I noted that the only teenaged woman completed the study program, whereas none (of three) had completed previous programs. This analysis of completion rate by cultural group and age is summarized in Table 3 and Table 4.

All 27 participants in this study met the criteria for group participation. At the beginning of their program these women were already (a) in long term individual counseling, (b) aware of power dynamics of family violence, (c) able to tell their stories without minimization and denial, (d) not abusing substances, and (e) willing to commit to the program for 10 weeks. In prior programs, no criteria were applied to determine group readiness in participants. By applying criteria and using an assessment tool, I could identify clients who were ready to engage in the group process. The increased completion rate in the study program reflects the participants' satisfaction with a group program designed to meet their specific needs at critical stages in their change process. This study

indicates that program completion is related to group readiness rather than to age or cultural group.

**Table 3. Completion of Study Group Programs by Cultural Group**

Cultural Group	No. of Participants	No. Completing Program	% Completing Program
First Nation	9	9	100
Caucasian	18	17	94.4
Total	27	26	96.3

**Table 4. Completion of Study Group Program by Age**

Age in Years	No. of Participants	No. Completing Program	% Completing Program
16-19	1	1	100
20-29	6	5	83.3
30-39	13	13	100
40-49	6	6	100
50-59	1	1	100
Total	27	26	96.3

### **Participant Interviews**

Conducting post-group participant interviews was an important component of evaluating program effectiveness. At the beginning of each group program, I explained

that I was attending university to study adult education and that I was conducting a study as part of my educational program. I explained that I was trying to improve my abilities as a group facilitator and to improve our group programs for women who were engaged in changing their lives. All of the women were invited to contribute to this study by participating in a post-group interview about their change process, and the role of the group program in that process.

As part of the educational component in the group programs, I introduced my graphic tool to teach the participants about the change process (see Appendix A). In the section about the implementation of the second study group, I explained how I used this teaching tool. In this diagram, change is represented as a spiral process involving six stages, progressing from precontemplation toward termination. At each stage, helpful processes that foster change and hindrances that block change are summarized. This practical graphic tool helped the women to understand the complex, multifaceted change process and to apply this knowledge in their lives. For example, one woman identified her progress in changing her behaviors when she was angry.

In preparation for their post-group interview, they received an interview guide designed to help them reflect on their ongoing change process (see Appendix C). The questions in the interview guide were intended as a tool for critical self-reflection. The questions focus on the change process as a uniquely personal, ongoing process involving triggers, tools, motivation, and choice. The questions guide critical reflection on the factors that help or hinder the change process, and the role of counseling, group process, and group programs in this process.

I conducted the interviews during June and July 1999, following the completion of the study group programs. Of the 22 individuals who participated in the study programs, 18 contributed interviews to this study. There were 5 women who completed two groups. They were enthusiastic about having the opportunity to participate in my education. Due to staffing changes and pressures during this study, I did not have a colleague in the Women's Program who could conduct these interviews. As a result, I felt that my primary responsibility was to respect the confidential client-counselor relationship by conducting the interviews myself. I understood that my involvement could create bias because of my personal and professional investment in the outcome of this project. I also understood the potential for women to temper any criticism of their group program because they might want to please their counselor and facilitator. However, I thought that these 18 women were confident enough to express their feelings honestly. I interviewed the women informally using the interview guide. I taped some of the interviews for ease of recording. Some of the women came to their interview with their thoughts already written on their interview guide.

During the interviews, the women expressed pride in their learning and growth during their group program. One woman explained, "I like myself more these days. I am looking forward to the new challenges, to not feeling overwhelmed and defeated any more." The women interviewed were aware of their unique change process, including duration, strategies, and techniques. For example, the youngest group member expressed the "hope that change is possible and that I don't need to continue the cycles of abuse any longer to learn. I can make different choices." These women were also aware of the event that triggered their current change process. For example, escalating violence and death

threats triggered one participant to seek help and make changes in her life. During the interviews, the women expressed satisfaction with their increasing confidence and assertiveness. A woman explained that attending the program renewed her determination to complete her college program. The participants expressed gratitude for the validation, support, networks, connections, and learning they experienced in their group. A woman said, "Everyone in that group had great wisdom. I will take what I heard from these ladies to the grave with me." Another young woman said, "When I looked around the circle, it gave me hope that I could become a human being, with all of the emotions, and especially with joy and laughter." During the interviews, the women acknowledged the role of the facilitators and group program in supporting their process of learning, growth, and change. As one woman explained, the facilitators helped her change process by providing "a good ear and the ability to ask the tough questions and never make me feel bad for how I felt." "Another woman said, "The dynamics of the two of you was very empowering to the rest of us. I felt very allowed to be happy, to be sad, to be confused. I felt welcomed into the group." The comments of these women reflected the power of group programs to foster learning, growth, and change for women in transition.

Each of the 18 women who chose to contribute to this study had a story to tell. Unfortunately, space does not permit the inclusion of all of the stories of the women who participated in the post-group interviews. The stories of the six women who were profiled in the participants' subsection for each group reflect the complexity, diversity, strength, and wisdom of the women who attended these group programs. Their stories reflect that healing from woman abuse is both universal and unique, because the experience of

woman abuse crosses all generations, cultures, religions, socioeconomic status, and educational levels.

### **Review of My Teaching Log**

My teaching log provided a valuable tool for critical self-reflection on my practice throughout this study. During the first group program, I had a colleague in the Women's Program but I facilitated the group alone. My colleague and I met weekly for mutual support, encouragement, and collaboration in our counseling practice. She brought her insight and experience to our discussions about program design, group process, and facilitation methods. However, she could not provide specific feedback on my group program or facilitator approaches. I used my teaching log to reflect critically on my practice. For example, I reflected on the need to be able to "think on my feet" and quickly modify my plans to meet the immediate needs of the group.

During the second group program, I co-facilitated with a colleague who did not work in the Women's Program. Due to the demands of her regular job, my co-facilitator was unavailable for constructive feedback, critical reflection, or program planning. Thus, my teaching log was an essential tool for critical self-reflection. After one session, I commented on my reluctance to confront a woman who had breached group confidentiality. I also criticized my slow reaction time when there was an emotionally charged situation during a session.

During the third group program, my teaching log reflected the benefits of working collaboratively with an experienced co-facilitator. Although this colleague was new to the Women's Program, she was an experienced counselor and group facilitator who was familiar with strategies and approaches to foster growth and change in adults. She was

enthusiastic about the opportunity to apply her knowledge, skills, and experience in our group program with women. We discussed theoretical ideas, collaborated on appropriate approaches and strategies, shared responsibility for group activities and process, and provided feedback and constructive criticism on facilitation roles and styles. These interactions confirmed my learning and renewed my energy. At the end of the program, I wrote, “As co-facilitators, we trusted each other, were in close communication, were cooperative and supportive, and were confident in our content areas. I feel confident, self assured, and knowledgeable now.”

Reviewing my teaching log provided insight about my personal and professional transformative learning journey throughout the study. I discuss my learning in detail in chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of designing and implementing a transformative group learning program for abused women. To fulfill my learning goals, I modified and enriched an existing collaborative group program by adding transformative learning strategies and approaches. In this chapter, I discuss fostering transformative learning in group programs for abused women and describe my personal and professional transformative learning journey during this study. After this discussion, I provide conclusions and recommendations for practitioners interested in applying similar strategies and approaches in programs for abused women.

#### **Fostering Transformative Learning in Group Programs for Abused Women**

Throughout this study I focused on the role of transformative group learning programs in fostering growth and change for abused women. In this section, I discuss designing an effective transformative learning program, selecting participants using the transtheoretical change model, facilitating transformative learning in group therapy programs, and empowering women to work toward transformative learning.

#### **Designing an Effective Transformative Learning Program**

I knew from the outset that designing an effective transformative learning program requires an understanding of transformative learning as a complex, generic process. For over 20 years, theorists and practitioners in the fields of adult education, feminist education, and clinical psychology have been exploring learning for growth, development, and change. To facilitate the process, I familiarized myself with the adult educators (e.g., Brookfield, 1995a; Cranton, 1994, 1996; Courtney, et al., 1998; Mezirow,

1991, 1997) who describe a sequence of learning activities that occurs when a disorienting dilemma triggers adults to examine, challenge, and revise their perspectives. I used their literature, as well as that of feminist educators (e.g., Belenky et al., 1997; Clinchy, 1996; Gilligan, 1993; Goldberger, 1996a; Schweickart, 1996; Tisdell, 1998), to identify a sequential process to describe women's development of self and voice. According to Belenky et al., emotional arousal propels women forward in this process. Similarly, clinical psychologists (e.g., Prochaska et al., 1994) identify a sequential process involved in changing problem behaviors, and acknowledge emotional arousal as an important motivating factor in this complex process. Understanding that adults may access learning programs at critical times in their transformative learning process helped me to design a program that acts as an effective catalyst for change. For example, the women who participated in the study groups recognized that they were engaged in a complex learning process. They accessed the program when they were emotionally aroused to end the abuse in their lives. One participant observed, "Once you start going through that process, it feels so good you just want to keep going." Their commitment to continuing their change process indicates the effectiveness of this program as a catalyst at a critical point in their transformative learning process.

As the facilitator, I was aware that designing a flexible, responsive program that meets the immediate needs of the participants requires an understanding of transformative learning as a uniquely personal process for adults. As Daloz (1999) explains, "It is richly textured rather than finely tuned teaching that allows the most room for growth and learning" (p. 240). Each woman in the study groups was working toward transformative learning in her own time and her unique way. In the post-group

interviews, participants expressed their gratitude for the support, caring, validation, and acceptance they received from other group members and from the facilitators. As one woman observed, "Growth is personal, change is ours. Group will not make it happen, I will, but group is a place to share with others so the process will continue." In my teaching log, I wrote, "Peers play an essential role in learning by validating experience, checking reality, affirming growth, breaking denial, and contributing practical wisdom and tools." The participants' willingness to explore their unique change process indicates that the program effectively fostered learning for change.

From my past experience facilitating women's groups, I knew that designing an effective program requires an understanding of transformative learning as a holistic, multidimensional, and emotionally painful process. Dirkx (1997), Grabove (1997), and Scott (1997) agree that the process of perspective transformation involves hard, painful soulwork and intense grieving as adults revise basic assumptions and question foundational beliefs. Brookfield (1995b) warns educators to act with care and sensitivity to ensure that learners' self-esteem remains intact when their foundational structures are shaken. Understanding these aspects of transformative learning helped me, as the educator, to plan a program that not only fosters depth transformation but also provides emotional safety for participants. Consistent with Michelson's (1996) feminist perspective, I took a holistic approach to fostering depth transformation by using both rational approaches and intuitive approaches in the group programs. For example, critical incidents and brainstorming focused on the role of the mind in transformative learning, whereas art projects and storytelling addressed the spirit. Throughout the program, my co-facilitators and I balanced support and challenge to provide emotional safety for the

women as they examined and revised their perspectives regarding family and relationships. The participants expressed intense emotions, including rage, fear, sadness, and joy. One woman expressed her gratefulness for the group's "acceptance of my emotions--anger, fear, pain, love." The willingness of group members to participate in group activities indicates that the program was effective in balancing both challenge and support to foster depth transformation.

To design an effective transformative group learning program, I had to balance the content and process to support individual and group learning. Imel (1996) explains that the balance between content and process changes along a continuum of learning as the emphasis moves from individual learning toward group learning. Following Cranton's (1996) recommendations, my program design emphasized group process to support transformative group learning. For example, although I prepared content for each session, it was frequently necessary to set my agenda aside to focus on issues of immediate concern to the group members. As Cranton explains, transformative learning groups work toward a common goal by engaging in critical reflection on their expectations, assumptions, and perspectives of the world around them. In the study groups, all of the participants were working toward the common goal of ending the cycles of abuse in their lives. Their willingness to engage in critical reflection on assumptions during the group process indicates that the program design was effective in supporting transformative group learning.

### **Selecting Participants Using the Transtheoretical Change Model**

Transtheoretical change theory provided me with practical guidance in selecting participants for group programs. Prochaska et al. (1994) identify six stages in the

complex process of change, moving from precontemplation toward termination. In their view, this process is sequential but not linear. They explain that most individuals recycle through this spiral process several times before successfully changing a problem behavior. They believe that matching challenges to the stage of change maximizes success. Initially, I thought that the group program would be most effective if all of the participants were in the action stage of the change process. I developed my criteria for participant selection to identify women who were at the action stage. However, as I gained experience applying this theory in my practice, I realized that my criteria actually selected participants who spanned the stages of contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance but screened out precontemplative clients. Rather than act as a hindrance, this diversity among the participants enhanced the learning process. For example, women at different stages shared their tools, strategies, techniques, and experiences. Women who were farther along in their process could see their progress. Women who were beginning their process expressed hope that change was possible. The common factor was their commitment to their change process. In my teaching log I commented that all of the women were “committed to working on their own healing and growth.” The increased rate of program completion reflected the effectiveness of selecting group participants using the transtheoretical change model.

The graphic tool (see Appendix A) that I developed to explore the change process with learners draws on the ideas of authors such as Mezirow (1991), Miller and Rollnick (1991), and Prochaska et al. (1994), as well as my own experience. Prochaska et al. (1994) believe that understanding the process of change helps individuals to gain control of the cycle, and move through it more quickly, efficiently, and with less pain. My

experience in my group program supports this view. I used this graphic tool to help participants to identify their progress and their process. For example, one woman expressed her satisfaction with having a tool that described her personal experience. She exclaimed, "I am going to pack this sheet with me wherever I go. They keep asking me where I am in my healing and now I can point to this model and say, 'I'm right here!'" Their eagerness to understand their progress and process indicates the value of providing a practical visual tool to explain a complex theoretical process.

The transtheoretical change model helped me, as a practitioner, in planning an effective therapeutic intervention to motivate my female clients at different stages in their change process. DiClemente (1991), and Miller and Rollnick (1991) identify motivational strategies that support clients throughout this process. In my program, I focused on promoting decision-making and strengthening commitment to foster successful change for women in the stage of contemplation, preparation, action, or maintenance. For example, a woman who was contemplating living with a new partner asked for help evaluating the wisdom of her decision. Another woman, who was preparing to end her relationship, asked for help to weigh the pros and cons in the decisional balance. A woman in the action stage of developing healthy emotional expression told the group of her plan to reward her efforts with a weekend retreat. In a group session, a woman in the maintenance stage renewed her commitment to continue setting clear boundaries with her family members. The participants' willingness to embrace their change process indicates the effectiveness of using the transtheoretical change model to plan effective motivational interventions by therapists.

### **Facilitating Transformative Learning in Therapy Groups**

To facilitate transformative learning in therapy groups, I attended closely to the complex nature of learning groups. Armstrong and Yarbrough (1996) explain that the learning group is defined by the complex array of characteristics of the group and its members, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, and geography. For example, the study groups included women who differed in age, race, and socioeconomic status. Cranton (1992) identifies a complex array of characteristics that learners and educators bring to the learning environment, including personality type, culture, and experience. She explains that the learning process may change learner characteristics such as autonomy and values. In her view, the facilitator stimulates and encourages people to change and grow. For example, both the women in the study groups and the facilitators brought their personalities, culture, and experience to the learning environment. All of the participants brought their experience of spousal abuse, whereas the facilitators brought their experience working with abused women. By participating in the program, the women gained autonomy and examined values. By facilitating the program, my co-facilitator and I gained self-confidence and enhanced our skills.

Facilitating this type of learning group also required me to have an understanding of the complex webs of belonging that, according to Daloz (1988, 1999), may enhance or hinder growth for adults. The women who attended my program were enmeshed in complex family, relational, and community networks that influenced their choice to change and grow. For example, one mother of five children was committed to changing her way of expressing anger toward her family. Another woman experienced pressure from her extended family to reconcile with her abusive partner. As a facilitator, I

maintained an atmosphere of openness, welcome, and support that encouraged women to access programs as often as needed, and for as long as required. This approach acknowledges the complex factors that influence women's choice to change and grow.

In my therapy groups, I attended to group dynamics, group development, and group process. Following Vella's (1994, 1995) principles for effective facilitation, I focused on relevancy, immediacy, respect, and inclusion in my study groups. For example, providing a safe, respectful, and affirming atmosphere fostered the women's participation in discussions and activities. Similarly, Heimlich (1996) suggests that facilitators construct learning activities to address the unique character and needs of the learning group. For example, in my program I honored the unique character of each study group by planning specific activities and content to address relevant issues of immediate concern to the group members. I fostered group development by providing introductory activities as the groups formed, challenging activities as they worked together, and celebratory activities as the groups reached closure. According to Imel and Tisdell (1996), facilitators affect learning by attending to group process and by challenging learners to take responsibility for their own learning. For example, the women in the study groups were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning by contributing their experience, knowledge, and skills in the group. Comments in my teaching log reflected my satisfaction with group process and group development during these programs. I noted that during the first 3 weeks, the groups formed into cohesive working groups. During that time, the facilitators provided the structure and safety necessary for trust to develop. By the fourth week, all of the groups began to take power and responsibility for the direction of their program. They continued to work cohesively

for the next 6 weeks. All of the groups found closure difficult, because they did not want the group support to end. At the end of the first group program I wrote:

I have a sense of warmth, pride and gratitude as we complete this group. The women have been so eager to participate in each step of the learning process. They have done their own work, been supportive, respectful, caring and honest with each other. They have celebrated each other's success and supported growth and change. They trusted the group process.

My thoughts about the second study group were also positive: "I have really enjoyed the entire process of working with these hardworking women intent on their growth and change. The group was stable, committed, participatory, supportive, respectful, and encouraging." Finally, reflecting on the third study group, I wrote, "I have never enjoyed a group as much as I did this one. There were 13 dynamic, growing, evolving women who really worked hard. They were challenging, supportive, caring, vociferous, assertive, emotional, dynamic, and powerful."

Another ability that I needed to have was the ability to adjust facilitator roles to the needs of the learning group. Cranton (1996) and Imel (1996) view group facilitation as an art rather than a science, requiring educators to adjust and balance their roles to support the goals, purposes, and characteristics of each unique learning group.

Facilitating groups for abused women requires an understanding of the role of the educator as a midwife and as a mentor. Both of these roles describe a teacher/learner relationship based on trust and care. Authors, such as Belenky et al. (1997), regard the educator as a midwife who preserves newborn thoughts and provides a culture for growth. For Stanton (1996) the midwife/teacher brings knowledge, attentiveness, and care to the educational relationship. Similarly, as a midwife/teacher and connected therapist, I could identify each woman's strengths, support her growth, and nurture her

newborn thoughts. At times, my co-facilitator and I acted as resources by providing clear factual information in educational sessions. We were coaches when we provided guidance as the women learned and practiced new skills. We were helpers when we adjusted our facilitator approaches to the immediate needs of the group members. My experience during this study confirms that the art of the midwife/teacher is balancing when to teach, how to coach, and what to celebrate.

On other occasions I acted as a mentor. For example, I embarked on a learning journey with each woman in the study groups. At times I acted as a guide by providing a safe learning environment and by sharing my personal experiences. My co-facilitator and I were models when we demonstrated critical thinking and respectful communication. We were co-learners when the women shared their wisdom. At times, we acted as provocateurs when we posed problems and encouraged critical reflection on psychosocial and cultural assumptions. As explained by Bloom (1995), Daloz (1999), and Tarule (1996), the art of the mentor is recognizing when to walk ahead as a guide, beside as a companion, and face to face as a provocateur. The participants' willingness to engage in the group process indicates the effectiveness of my balancing the challenging and supporting roles in the teacher/learner relationship.

All of the abused women in my group program brought sensitivities to the learning environment. Facilitating transformative learning in therapy groups requires constant awareness of the vulnerability of the participants. Elliott and Williams (1995), Horsman (1999), and Rundle and Ysabet-Scott (1995) agree that violence creates barriers to learning because it has an impact on the whole being. Horsman maintains that survivors of historical or current abuse experience intense emotions in the classroom,

such as fear, anger, shame, and grief. My co-facilitator and I maintained awareness of the dynamics within the group at all times to promote emotional safety for all participants. For example, in one session, several women expressed their anger toward their partners and toward the justice system. They were loud, intense, and vocal. For other women in the group, their angry voices triggered fear responses. Some women withdrew into silence and one woman dissociated. Although it was important to provide an opportunity for healthy expression of anger by some of the women, it was also essential to ensure that the other group members recognized that these women's anger did not pose a threat to them. Check-out provided an opportunity for each participant to express how she was feeling at the end of this session. My co-facilitator and I offered clarification, feedback, support, and containment.

I came to realize in this group, that to be effective in facilitating transformative learning in therapy groups, I needed confidence and skill in adapting a variety of strategies and approaches to the specific needs of group members. As Michelson (1996) suggests, I took a holistic approach that used various rational approaches and strategies, such as critical incidents and problem posing, as well as various intuitive approaches, such as storytelling and art projects. Women appreciated being introduced to a variety of activities that they could use to continue their personal learning journeys. For example, one woman wrote in her journal, another made drawings and puppets, and a third built a wooden box to contain her feelings. Similarly, Cranton (1994, 1996) stresses that there is no one way to teach or learn. Horsman (1999) maintains that all programming should integrate approaches that acknowledge the spirit, emotions, body, and mind. She explains

that abused women engage in complex layers of hidden and visible learning as they learn to exercise control, build connections, and create meaning.

One of the most important skills that I needed to work with abused women in this situation was an understanding of feminist therapy principles. According to Eberhardt (1994), Pressman (1989), and Sinclair (1985), this knowledge is very important. During the group sessions, I used feminist therapy principles to raise awareness of sociocultural issues related to abuse. For example, during one session, I posed questions to stimulate critical discourse about justice issues, such as the impact of the new domestic violence act on abused women's access to support services. These discussions enhanced the women's power by raising their awareness of their legal rights. The participants' active participation in the study group program indicates the value of offering an integrated program in learning groups for abused women that acknowledges all aspects of their being and reflects feminist perspectives.

### **Empowering Women to Work Toward Transformative Learning**

Empowering women to work toward transformative learning was a key focus for me in this study. Cranton (1994) maintains that learner empowerment is not only a product of transformative learning but also a critical factor in beginning and maintaining this process. At the beginning of the process, learners are empowered through participation in decision-making and discourse. A learner/teacher relationship grounded in friendship and loyalty helps learners to feel supported and comfortable. During the transformative learning process, learners are empowered through revision of assumptions, educator support, learner networks, and taking action. Cranton maintains that learner empowerment and autonomy are also the product of working toward

transformative learning. For example, early in the group process, women were empowered by engaging in decision-making and discourse in a safe learning environment. As the group developed, women were empowered by participating in challenging activities, by receiving validation, and by developing support networks. Completing their group program empowered women to make positive changes in their lives. The participants understood and honored their progress in the change process. They recognized options, exercised choices, and experienced success.

The women in my study groups experienced empowerment, growth and voice. Connected learning fosters women's empowerment, supports women's development, and encourages women's authentic voice. For example, in her post-group interview one woman observed, "The groups helped me to open up my shell a little bit. Sharing my experiences and hearing about others' experiences helps you to look at things from a different angle." Another woman explained, "In the group I opened up, laughed, talked, cried, and faced my fears and anger." The participants' increased confidence and positive action indicates that the program empowered women to take charge of their lives.

### **My Personal and Professional Transformative Learning Journey**

Completing this study enriched and deepened my experience in the art of teaching. Throughout this study, I engaged in a personal and professional transformative learning journey that focused on challenge and empowerment, philosophy of practice, facilitation style, group process, and power dynamics.

### **Challenge and Empowerment**

Completing this study has been both challenging and empowering. The most challenging aspect of the study was to integrate knowledge from diverse areas of study

into my practice as a transformative learning practitioner. Cranton (1992, 1998) and Mezirow (1991) agree that drawing on knowledge from different disciplines broadens educators' perspectives. Designing the study group program required the integration of knowledge from adult education, feminist education, clinical psychology, and feminist counseling. After completing a comprehensive review of the literature, I applied the theory in my practice. I also brought my experience as a health educator and women's counselor to the task of facilitating the study groups. As Brookfield (1990b, 1995a) and Cranton (1992) point out, adult educators come from diverse backgrounds and practice in diverse settings. Completing this study provided an opportunity to enhance my skills as a facilitator and to apply my knowledge as an educator.

My experience during this study supports Cranton's (1994) view that empowerment is a critical factor in beginning and maintaining the transformative process as well as a product of this process for educators and learners alike. First, I was empowered by acquiring theoretical knowledge early in the study. Next, I was empowered by applying this knowledge with positive effects in my program. Finally, I was empowered by seeing the learning and growth in the participants as a result of my program. In their post-group interviews, the participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in a program designed to meet their needs at a critical time in their learning journey. They appreciated the role that my co-facilitator and I played in their growth. By completing this study, I have met challenges and gained empowerment. I have acquired an authentic voice as a community educator and women's advocate.

### **Philosophy of Practice**

Completing this study afforded an opportunity to develop my personal and professional philosophy of practice that combined excellence in education with the ethic of care. Schweickart (1996) describes this philosophy of practice: “The one caring must maintain a dual perspective—one part devoted to the appreciation of the situation of the cared-for, another grounded in her own cognitive and moral values” (p. 320). As Cranton (1998) explains, “Developing a personal philosophy of practice provides the grounding for all other planning” (p. 70). Similarly, Brookfield (1995a) stresses the importance of developing a guiding vision that reflects the educator’s ideological beliefs. My experience developing a theory of practice reflects Cranton’s (1992) description of the process of working toward transformation for educators. First, during the planning stage, I made my assumptions about education explicit and considered the sources of those assumptions. For example, as a feminist counselor I assumed that group programs provided the validation, connection, and support that would be particularly helpful for abused women. Next, implementing the study provided an opportunity to observe the consequences of my assumptions and to question their validity. For example, I examined my assumption that women who were actively engaged in the process of changing their lives would be committed to participating fully in a group program designed to foster their learning, growth, and change. Finally, implementing and evaluating the study allowed me to act on my revised assumptions. For example, I assumed that my criteria for group participation identified women in the action stage of change. Observing the participants during the first study group revealed that the women were in the stages of contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. During the remaining study groups,

I adjusted my helping relationship to support and motivate women who were engaged in each of these stages of the change process.

My program design reflected my philosophy of education, personality type, and teaching preferences. Developing a philosophy of practice provides a framework for making consistent, informed decisions about program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Cranton (1998) maintains that teacher self-awareness is essential for teacher excellence. For example, acting as a midwife and mentor honored my personal style and expressed my authentic self. During the study groups I strived for excellence in education that was grounded in an ethic of care. As Schweickart (1996) suggests, caring for the women in my study groups required “an attitude of receptive attention or engrossment toward the one cared-for” (p. 319). Brookfield (1995b) stresses that becoming critically reflective is not only crucial for good teaching but also for teachers’ survival. He maintains that critical reflection minimizes our risk when acting for change. For example, as a feminist educator, I raised women’s awareness of social issues regarding abuse and encouraged them to participate in action for social change. However, as a Department of Justice employee, I could not express dissatisfaction with judicial rulings or teach strategies for social action in my program. Developing a philosophy of practice helped me to balance my ideological values and my ethical principles.

### **Facilitation Style**

Completing this study helped me to recognize my authentic facilitation style. My style reflects a holistic approach that acknowledges the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of learners. Similarly, Elliott and Williams (1995) and Horsman (1999) recommend this approach. For example, women came to the therapy groups with hopes,

fears, and expectations. They hoped to end the violence and change their lives. They feared exposing their vulnerabilities and sensitivities to others. They expected to learn new skills and explore new ideas. My co-facilitator and I tried to be cognizant of each woman's needs mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually during the group sessions. In my teaching log I noted, "Facilitators working in this type of therapy group program must be flexible, adaptable, and resilient. They must be able to think on their feet. Group members bring issues to group and ask questions that demand answers."

My facilitation style draws on the midwife/teacher role suggested by Belenky et al. (1997) and Stanton (1996). The women understood the nature and boundaries of my helping relationship when I described myself as a midwife who would be a resource and coach throughout their group program. In this role, I not only educated women about healthy relationships, personal development, and self-care but also nurtured their growth and encouraged their authentic voices. For example, during her post-group interview, one woman described her group experience as a powerful "birthing process." She recalled, "The pain was so raw--it was open, it was fresh, it was oozing, but it wasn't bad."

My facilitation style also draws on the role of mentor and guide described by Daloz (1999). I accompanied the women in my study groups on a unique learning journey. The counselor/client relationship, lasting from 6 months to 2 years, was based on trust and authenticity. As a trusted guide, I modeled respectful communication and healthy lifestyle choices. For example, during all of the group sessions, my co-facilitator and I modeled respectful communication by encouraging group discussion and by sharing responsibilities. In a group session about self-care, we modeled healthy lifestyle choices when I described how a kayak trip renewed my energy and she described how a yoga

retreat fed her spirit. One woman commented that she received encouragement from the facilitators “through relating their experiences on how they live a healthy life.” Another women commented that the facilitators “modeled different options.” A third woman thanked us for providing “guidance and direction.”

My facilitation style was affected by changes in the facilitation team during the program. Due to staffing changes in the Women’s Program, I facilitated the first group alone, and the second and third groups with different co-facilitators. This inconsistency not only reduced collaboration about program planning but also reduced feedback about group process. As Brookfield (1990b) points out, “Skillful teachers are critically responsive teachers. Although they are sensitive to contextual factors such as organizational necessities . . . they have a clear rationale for their practice” (p. 196). Throughout the program, I focused on delivering effective client programs and adapting to the different personalities and styles of my co-facilitators. In my teaching log I noted, “In theory, there is structure and form to program planning and delivery. In reality, this process must be very flexible and the facilitator must be resilient and adaptable.”

### **Group Process**

Group process, in this study, was shown to be a powerful tool for group learning. Cranton (1996) maintains that the emphasis in transformative learning groups should be on process rather than content. In my teaching log, I reflected on the importance of group process in my program: “Facilitators must let go of the need to teach specific content for learning to occur in these groups.” Vella (1994a) provides principles for effective group learning that educators can apply to any informal community-based learning environment. Her principles encourage the educator to trust group process and group

development while remaining responsive to the learners' needs. Applying her principles in my program helped me to provide learning opportunities and to support the emerging group process. For example, in my teaching log I repeatedly commented on the need for my co-facilitator and me to "step aside," "step back," or "stay out of the way" in order to support the group's process and development.

Completing this study encouraged me to reflect critically on group process and group development. The study reinforced my assumption that group programs are particularly helpful for abused women, because this program provided an effective learning environment not only for consciousness-raising and experiential learning but also for transformative learning. The women in the study groups experienced validation and support in a safe, respectful, connected learning environment; this helped them to challenge assumptions and fostered their sense of empowerment. The small size (7 to 13 members) and diverse nature of these groups encouraged individual participation and thereby promoted group process and group development. For example, within the first 3 weeks, each group formed into a hard working learning group intent on sharing knowledge, solving problems, and providing support. According to Imel and Tisdell (1996), small diverse groups tend to be more productive and enhance learner performance. Similarly, Eberhardt (1994) points out that "8 to 15 persons in a group plus facilitators will allow an ideal variety of perceptions and attitudes" (volume 1 - p. 182).

The group process was fueled by powerful emotions as women challenged their assumptions about love, family, and relationships. In my teaching log I wrote:

The group is very supportive, cohesive, caring, and gentle with one another. There is a lot of trust, compassion, and sharing of experience and learning. There is a lot of room for growth and a lot of support of women being just where they are in

their uniqueness. I am delighted and encouraged by the intensity and passion in the room.

These women were engaged in the emotional process of soul work and grief work that fosters depth transformation as described by Dirkx (1997), Grabove (1997), and Scott (1997). In the post-group interviews, each of the women described how the group process supported her learning, growth, and change. For example, one woman identified how the group process (sharing experiences and knowledge, learning about options, trying new things, facing fears) helped her take control of her life. When the time came for the study groups to end, the participants had formed support networks to maintain their connections with one another. Their reactions indicate that group process provides essential support and effective connections for abused women.

### **Power Dynamics**

Completing this study deepened my understanding of power dynamics and positionality in the learning environment, which feminist educators, such as Tisdell (1998), caution educators to be aware of. Cranton (1994, 1996) suggests that the educator can use personal and positional power effectively in transformative learning groups. She suggests that educators begin by giving up positional power (authority and control) while maintaining and using personal power (expertise, authority, and loyalty) to encourage equal participation in discourse and promote learner decision-making. Later, after establishing a comfortable, collaborative atmosphere, the educator provides challenge and support as learners critically examine their perspectives. Similarly, I used my personal power early in each group program to establish trust and safety for the participants. Later, when the women were comfortable in the group, I drew on this trust relationship to challenge and motivate the participants. I also held positional power not

only as a counselor and facilitator but also as an educated, Caucasian woman. I sought to reduce my positional power by sitting in the circle, participating in check-in, and being approachable and friendly. As the study groups progressed, my co-facilitator and I provided opportunities for participants to exercise power by allowing them to identify relevant issues and appropriate activities. The women contributed their experience and expertise to discussions and activities. My co-facilitator and I modeled healthy attitudes by ensuring that power was shared among the participants and us. In the group setting, the participants progressively practiced assertiveness and experienced empowerment. Similarly, Maher and Tetreault (1994, 1996) suggest that the classroom can be a relatively neutral environment to explore the complex power relations in groups and society.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the findings of this study, several generalizations may be made which may be of interest to other adult educators working with women who have experienced abuse in their intimate relationships. I offer these generalizations here in the form of six conclusions.

1. Women who have experienced abuse engage in the complex, multidimensional process of working toward transformative learning through the mind, body, emotions, and spirit. Theorists working in adult education, feminist education, and clinical psychology recognize this holistic process. Each woman in this program engaged in this process in her own unique way and in her own time. Transformative group learning programs can act as a catalyst at critical times in the transformative learning process.

Programs that provide support, challenge, and empowerment can foster growth, development, and change for women.

2. Transformative group learning programs are effective when the program design and facilitator approaches match the participants' readiness for change. Women at all stages of the change process can benefit from group programs designed to address their specific needs. Prochaska et al.'s (1994) transtheoretical change model is a practical tool that counselors and facilitators can use to assess readiness for change. In my study, women who were in the contemplative, preparation, action, or maintenance stages benefited from participating in a transformative group learning program. Women who are in the precontemplative stage might benefit from a different program designed specifically to meet their needs.

3. Transformative learning educators can benefit from developing a philosophy of practice that reflects their authentic self. This philosophy provides a framework for making ethical, consistent, and informed practice decisions. Developing skills as a critically reflective and intuitive practitioner is crucial for educators. Engaging in critical self-reflection ensures teacher authenticity and maintains awareness of the use of personal and positional power. Developing intuitive skills involves receptive attention to the needs of learners. Working with abused women in therapy groups involves the integration of theoretical knowledge from adult education, feminist education, clinical psychology, and feminist counseling. Practitioners also need practical skills in program planning and group facilitation.

4. Transformative learning educators can benefit from developing a facilitation style that reflects their philosophy of practice, personality, and personal style. In

transformative learning groups, facilitators may need to adjust their roles in response to the needs of the participants. The roles of midwife/teacher and mentor can be useful to foster transformative learning among abused women. These roles combine the ethic of care with the search for educational excellence.

5. Transformative learning educators require skill and confidence in adapting a variety of strategies and approaches to their practice setting. Responding to the changing needs of group participants in therapy groups requires creativity and flexibility. During this study, several strategies and approaches fostered transformative learning for abused women in the group program. These strategies include creating a learning environment, attention to group dynamics, fostering empowerment, and challenging assumptions. A holistic approach, involving the use of both rational and intuitive approaches, was effective in fostering transformative learning. The rational approaches include critical incidents, problem posing, brainstorming, role-play, critical thinking, and critical reflection. The intuitive approaches are storytelling, metaphor analysis, journaling, art projects, writing and poetry, and creative visualization. Rational approaches may include intuitive elements and intuitive approaches may include rational elements.

6. Learners and educators both experience empowerment by engaging in the transformative learning process. Empowerment is not only a product of transformative learning but also a factor in beginning and maintaining this process. Connected learning and teaching provides the balance of support and challenge that empowers women to work toward transformative learning.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the preceding conclusions, I offer six recommendations for fostering transformative learning in group programs for abused women.

1. I recommend that transformative learning practitioners integrate knowledge from adult education, feminist education, clinical psychology, and feminist counseling to design transformative group learning programs for abused women. When practitioners have these broader inclusive perspectives, they should be able to design more effective group learning programs.

2. I recommend that transformative learning programs be designed with attention to matching program design and facilitator approaches to participants' readiness for change. I advocate the transtheoretical change model as a practical tool that facilitators and counselors can use to assess participants' stage in the change process. I recommend that practitioners offer different programs for women at different stages in their change process. Specifically, I recommend that women who are in the contemplative, preparation, action, or maintenance stages of change attend a program designed to motivate and support individuals in all of these stages. However, I recommend that women in the precontemplative stage attend a program with a different program design as well as different facilitator approaches. This attention to design and assessment could enhance the effectiveness of group programs in fostering transformative learning.

3. I recommend that transformative learning practitioners develop a philosophy of practice to guide consistent, informed, and ethical decision-making in their practice. A teaching log is a practical tool for critical self-reflection on practice and for generating intuitive knowledge. A teaching log helps educators to maintain trustworthiness,

authenticity, and responsiveness. This attention to developing an authentic voice should promote excellence in teaching.

4. I recommend that transformative learning practitioners act as midwife/teachers and mentors to combine excellence in education with the ethic of care in their programs for women. Adapting one's facilitator roles to meet women's needs should enhance program effectiveness.

5. I recommend that facilitators use a variety of strategies and approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners in transformative learning programs. Facilitators in these programs can reflect the holistic nature of transformative learning by applying both rational and intuitive approaches in creative and flexible ways to support group development and group process. This attention to the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the learners should enhance program effectiveness by fostering transformative learning.

6. I recommend that transformative learning practitioners provide a connected learning environment when working with abused women in order to empower them to work toward transformative learning. This type of learning environment provides the balance of support and challenge that women need to grow, to develop, and to change.

Completing this study enriched and deepened my experience in the art of teaching. Daloz' (1999) metaphor eloquently describes my understanding of the role I played as guide, mentor, and midwife for the women who participated in my group programs:

Like guides, we walk at times ahead of our students, at times beside them, and at times we follow their lead. In sensing where to walk lies our art. For as we support our students in their struggle, challenge them toward their best, and cast light on the path ahead, we do so in the name of our respect for their potential and our care for their growth. (p. 244)

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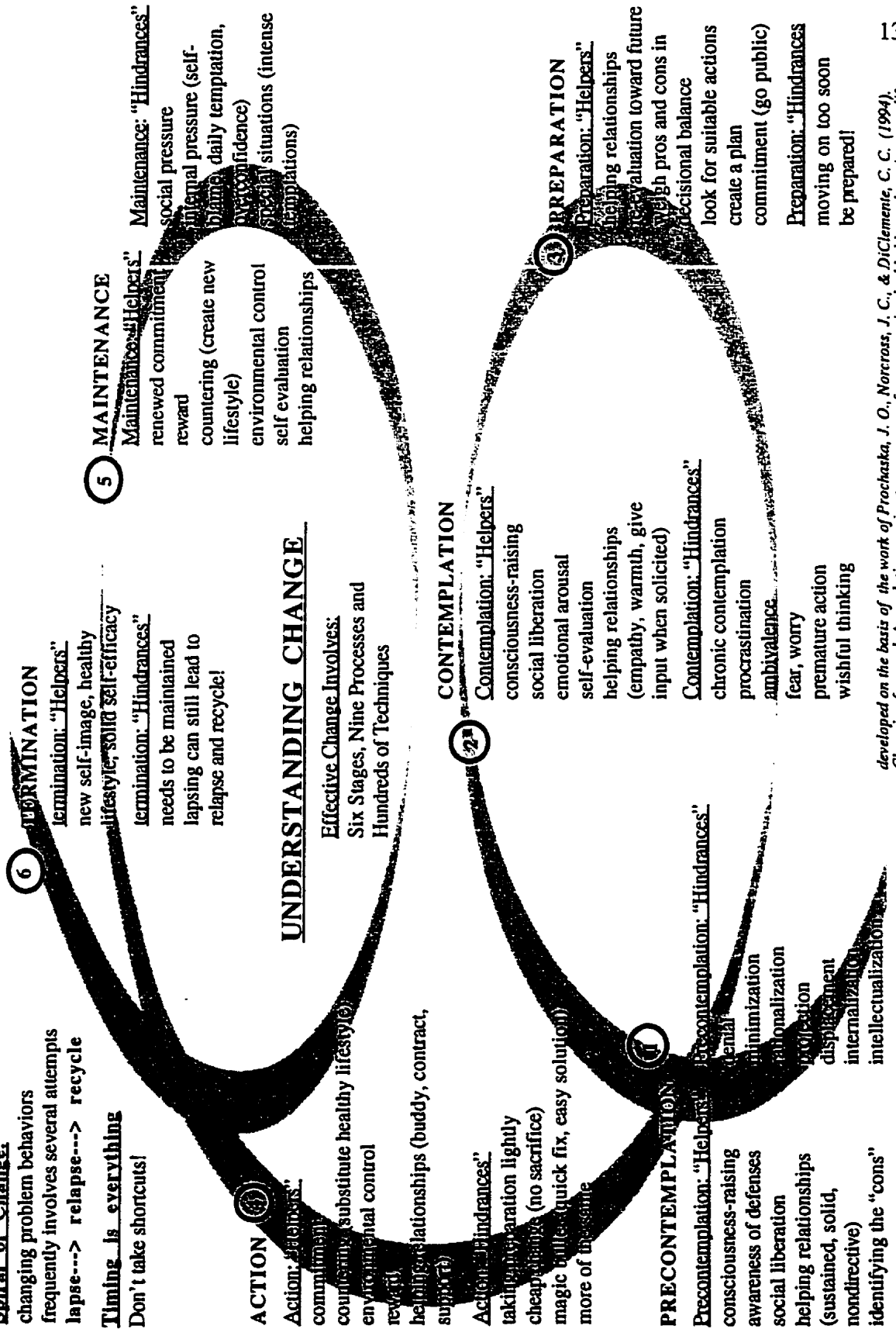
## APPENDIX A: Graphic Tool for Explaining the Change Process

### Spiral of Change:

changing problem behaviors  
frequently involves several attempts  
lapse---> relapse---> recycle

### Timing is everything

Don't take shortcuts!



developed on the basis of the work of Prochaska, J. O., Norcross, J. C., & DiClemente, C. C. (1994). *Changing for good: A revolutionary six-stage program for overcoming bad habits and moving your life positively forward*. New York: Avon Books.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Group Participation Assessment Tool**

#### **1. Relationship with Family Violence Prevention Unit:**

- a) Are you currently receiving individual counseling? Is your partner in the Assaultive Husband's Program?
- b) Do you think that group counseling would be of benefit in addition to individual counseling?

#### **2. Abuse profile now:**

- a) Are you currently in a relationship where there is violence?
- b) What forms of abuse are you experiencing at the present time? This may include physical, psychological, emotional, financial, social, and sexual abuse.
- c) Are you afraid for the safety of yourself or your children now? Are you being stalked? Are there threats against your life? Is the violence in your relationship getting worse?

#### **3. Historical abuse profile:**

- a) What forms of abuse have you experienced in the past in this relationship?
- b) What forms of abuse have you experienced in other relationships?
- c) What forms of abuse have you experienced in your family of origin?

#### **4. Practical concerns:**

- a) Are you currently with your partner? How would you describe your relationship right now?
- b) Do you receive financial support from your partner?
- c) Do you have concerns about housing, food, or transportation?
- d) Are you the primary caregiver for your children?
- e) Do you have legal custody of your children? What are the access arrangements for your children? Do you have day care?

**5. Relationship with the criminal justice system:**

- a) Are you currently involved in legal proceedings regarding child custody, assault charges, peace bonds, no contact orders, probation orders, separation agreements, divorce proceedings, witness protection program, historical abuse?
- b) Do you need legal assistance?

**6. Physical and emotional health:**

- a) Do you have any current medical concerns about the health of yourself or your children?
- b) Do you ever feel depressed?
- c) Have you ever attempted suicide? Are you currently considering suicide?
- d) Have you experienced the death of someone close to you?
- e) Are you currently using substances to cope? Do you consider that you abuse substances? Does your partner use or abuse substances?
- f) What helps you to cope with stresses in your life?

**7. Support network:**

- a) Who helps you the most in your family and your community?
- b) Who hinders you the most? How?
- c) What has helped you the most in the past when you have needed support?
- d) What other agencies or services are involved in your life right now, for example, Mental Health Services, private counseling services, Employee Assistance Programs, Alcohol and Drug Services, Health and Social Services, Family and Children's Services, Child Abuse Treatment Services, Victim Services, First Nations Justice Committees, RCMP, Transition Homes, faith community?

**8. Learning style:**

- a) Have you attended other group programs in the past? What did you like the most and the least in that experience?
- b) What types of learning activities do you enjoy, for example, discussion, activities, videos, art projects, reading. How do you learn best?
- c) What learning will help you the most right now?

**9. Commitment:**

- a) Are you willing to make a commitment to attend the group sessions for 10 weeks in addition to individual counseling?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Guide**

1. Please reflect on the most significant change that you have been making in your life over the past year.
  - a) What triggered you to start the change process?
  - b) What did you do that helped your process?
  - c) What got in the way?
  - d) What motivates you to keep moving forward?
  - e) What have you discovered about yourself that allows you to engage in the change process?
2. As part of your change process, you chose to seek individual counseling and you completed a group program for women who have experienced domestic abuse.
  - a) How did you know when you were ready to seek counseling and to participate in a group program?
  - b) How has counseling and group work helped you with your change process?
  - c) What did you need from the group leaders to support your change process?
  - d) What did you need from the other women in the group to help your change process?
  - e) What did you dislike about group work?
  - f) What is the most significant learning that you will take away from the group program?