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Elizabeth Hayes and Danielle Flannery with Ann K. Brooks, Elizabeth Tisdell, & Jane M. Hugo: Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning

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Elizabeth Hayes and Danielle Flannery with Ann K. Brooks, Elizabeth Tisdell, & Jane M. Hugo: *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*,
San Francisco : Jossey-Bass Publishers, c2000. 280 p. ISBN 0787909203 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Barbara A. Macaulay, Ed.D., University of Massachusetts

There are three caveats to consider in the review of this book. The first of these caveats is that this text was published in 2000, making it already an “older” text; its relevance, however, continues to be strong as it both served to organize prior literature on women and learning and to provide a foundation for continuing research in this arena. The second caveat is that the text is written by two primary authors with contributions from three others. While the inclusion of multiple voices enriches the text, it is a challenge to represent the contributions of all the authors in a single review. The last caveat is that this book does not directly deal with social justice; however, a critical underlying theme is that of women finding their voices through learning. This finding of voice by women is critical to their performance of multiple roles and the construction of and contribution to the worlds in which they live. Social justice emerges from those able to understand, give voice to, and take action on injustice that impacts their families and their communities.

Several factors have contributed to an inconsistent and incomplete foundation – namely, the lack of attention on women’s learning in the mainstream adult education literature; the tendency for the attention, such as it is, to be placed on women learners in formal educational settings, particularly higher education; and the neglect of the examination of learning for women in informal settings,. Hayes and Flannery redefine traditional research paradigms and examine different sources of literature about women that better incorporate the learning experiences of women. In so doing, they also organize the amorphous writings about women and learning and provide a framework that continues to be of merit. Using narratives and stories of women in their research, they were able to place gender at the heart of their analysis, thereby allowing the examination of learning in a broader context that included informal learning and role evolution for women.

The connecting themes of the various contributors to this book center on the strong influence of social contexts for women, the balancing of multiple roles women assume, and the connection of identity development with societal norms, upbringing, and family/community expectations. In their learning, women tend to be faced with conflicts between that which they want and need to give voice and that which their social and family context may allow or sanction. Women can actually still their voices as a response to these conflicts in roles and role expectations. In the chapter on “Voice” by Hayes, for example, the reclaiming of voice is seen as the unlearning of silence and the resolving of role conflicts. The development or re-development of voice is seen as central to having power over oppression, power in self-direction, and power in collective voice and community-building.

Hayes and Flannery, along with the other contributors, provide a valuable framework for examining women and their learning. More importantly perhaps, they expand the understanding of women’s learning into broader, more inclusive contexts, thereby giving voice to more women

and giving recognition to the need for women to reclaim their voices as part of the learning process.