

"I Discovered More than Book Knowledge": York University's Bridging Program for Women¹

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Abstract

This article examines York University's Bridging Program for Women from the perspectives of 37 of the program's graduates, showing how this program made possible the empowerment of women over the last quarter century. It focuses on three reoccurring themes found in the students' narratives: security, community, and validation.

Résumé

Cet article étudie le programme de préparation à l'emploi pour les femmes de l'université York à partir des perspectives de 37 des finissantes programme, démontrant comment ce programme a rendu possible la prise en main personnelle des femmes au cours des dernières vingt-cinq années. Il se concentre sur trois thèmes récurrents trouvés dans les narrations d'étudiantes : la sécurité, la collectivité, et la validation.

In 1981 Shelagh Wilkinson initiated a unique and innovative pre-university education program at York University called a "Bridging Program for Women"; it was the first pre-university program designed for women in Canada, and perhaps in the world. The program offers a thirteen-week course made up of 3 hour classes taught weekly, usually in the evenings. Any woman, twenty-one years or older (the age at which one is considered a "mature" student in Ontario), who is a resident of Ontario, and has reading and writing proficiency in English, may enrol in the course. A grade of B or better gives the woman automatic acceptance into York University. The courses are taught in various community locations in Toronto and the surrounding area. Over the last twenty-five years, courses have been offered in churches, community centres, adult learning centres, women's centres, centres for immigrant women, shelters for women, libraries, hospitals, and workplaces such as Motorola, City Hall, Metro Hall, the Ontario Women's directorate, and Ontario Hydro.

Four courses are offered each year with, on average, between twelve and twenty-four students in each class. The courses, taught by faculty who are trained in, and committed to, the theories and practices of feminist pedagogy, are fully subsidized by York University. While pre-university courses normally cost the same as a three-credit university course, or approximately \$500.00, in 2005 a student of the Bridging Program for Women paid only \$85.00 for a 13 week course, plus approximately \$40.00 for books.² In addition, once they enrol at York, many bursaries ranging from a few hundred to several thousand dollars are available to Bridging graduates in financial need.³

We estimate that more than two thousand women have taken a Bridging course in our first twenty-five years. Most went on to York University in programs as diverse as Anthropology, Cultural Studies, English, French, Psychology, Sociology, Fine Arts, History, Political Science and Women's Studies. Many earned a secondary degree in fields such as Education, Law and Social Work. Several went on to Graduate School. Cheryl Lemaitre, a 1990 graduate of the program, is currently completing her PhD in Women's Studies at York University and writing her dissertation on women's experiences in the Bridging program. Several others are currently completing their Master's Degree.

In 2006 York University published *You Can Get There from Here: 25 Years of Bridging Courses for Women at York University* to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Bridging Program, a program that has changed the lives of so many women. The purpose of the volume was to commemorate and mark this milestone by hearing the voices of the founders, students, and faculty who have had the privilege of being a part of this initiative. The volume, edited by Ruby Newman and Andrea O'Reilly, is composed of three sections: the first looks at the history of the program, the second examines its pedagogy and curriculum and, in the third section, thirty-seven graduates reflect upon their classroom experience and the paths they have travelled since completing the program. The volume bears witness to the profound and lasting difference education makes in the lives of women. Reading *You Can Get There from Here* you experience first hand the profound and lasting difference education makes in the lives of women.

The aim of this article is to explore the Bridging program from the perspectives of its graduates. More specifically it shows how this program made possible the empowerment of women over the last quarter century through York's Bridging Program for Women. An interest in women, education and empowerment has compelled me to ask: How does the program so effectively and

successfully initiate and facilitate the transitions and transformations noted in the students' essays? While I am sure that there are as many reasons as there are students, in reading through the essays written for the commemorative volume, I observed several re-occurring themes: security, community, and validation. The article will explore how the feminist pedagogy of York's Bridging Program facilitates the empowerment of women through these three themes. Time and time again the Bridging graduates write of how the program, in the words of Teresa Joudry,⁴ not only "helped me to be a better student" but also "helped me to be a stronger woman." Likewise, Robin Thompson writes: "Three years ago I thought my life was over. I do not feel that way now. The Bridging course has changed my life." While recognizing that there are no simple or straightforward strategies to realize the empowerment of women, this article will argue that the security, community, and validation found in feminist pedagogy enables, nay empowers, women to, in the words of Linda Rudkin, "open a door that others had closed so many years ago."

The Bridging Students

Thirty-seven students submitted writing for the volume. These students graduated from a Bridging course between spring 1987 and December 2005. We sent letters to a cross section of Bridging graduates asking them to reflect upon how taking the Bridging course affected their life. We included a series of questions to guide students in their writing, including: "What brought you to the course? How did you hear about it? Why did it interest you? Where were you in your life at that time? What were your hopes, expectations, or dreams in taking the course? What did you learn in the course personally, intellectually, emotionally, and academically? Where did the course lead you? What did you do after Bridging? How did Bridging enable you to fulfill your dreams? How did it change you? Where are you now?" We gave participants the freedom to present their contribution in whatever format they preferred, i.e., essay, letter, narrative, poem

and so forth. Likewise, in the letters to the graduates we emphasized the value of their personal experiences, noting that we are "especially interested in hearing the stories of students like you whose voices should be heard to inspire other women to pursue their dreams of a university education."

There is great diversity among the student contributors. Their ages range from early twenties to mid-seventies, and they come from both rural and urban communities. The women are married, partnered, and single; many are mothers and several are grandmothers. Though several are affluent, most are struggling to get by as students and workers. Many are first generation Canadians who have come from countries as diverse as Ireland, South Africa, the Caribbean, India, England, Iran, and Scotland, to name but a few. They are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu. Two identify as First Nations/Métis, one is Québécoise. Several of the women self-identify as a person with a mental or physical disability. One 2003 graduate, Genevieve Perri, wrote her essay in French. The contributors work in a variety of jobs and most of them are (or were) full- or part-time students at York University in a variety of different programs. They are thirty-seven of the more than two thousand women who have taken a Bridging course since the program began in 1981. Perhaps these women cannot represent all the graduates of the Bridging Program, nor speak to all the experiences therein; however, their stories, as cited in this article, do provide a good cross section of the many women who, in the words of Ashlee Ferner, "have crossed that 'bridge to a brighter future.'"

"Nowhere Had I Been Given this Much Grace": Confidence and Self-Empowerment

The emphasis in most pre-university instruction is on teaching the academic skills necessary for success in post-secondary education, i.e., critical reading and analysis, note-taking, studying for exams, seminars, essay writing, and so forth. Indeed, many Bridging graduates spoke at length about

how, by learning these skills in the Bridging class, they were exceptionally well prepared for a university learning environment. The essays revealed that what was equally, if not more apparent, was how the course gave the students self-confidence; it gave them the ability to believe in themselves, awakening within each of them that part of themselves that had been lost or never acquired. Indeed, every essay touches on this theme. Teresa Joudrey, a 2002 graduate, comments, "The self-confidence I gained during the Bridging course has inspired me to set new goals." Likewise, Maryam Salah, a 2001 graduate professes, "I find that I am stronger from what Bridging gave me." This same theme is echoed in Robin Thompson's words: "My professor believed in me when no else did" and, she goes on to say, "she encouraged me to believe in myself." Amy McNally's description of her experience poignantly reflects this theme: "Nowhere had I been given this much grace. Encouraged to try and try again with support and reassurance. I finally started to regain confidence in my abilities. I felt hope and hung on tightly." I believe the success of our Bridging graduates is directly attributable to the self-confidence they acquired in taking the course. In a moment I will discuss how the program brings forth this confidence under the themes of security, community and validation; however, first I would like to emphasize the critical importance of confidence building, or more specifically, self-empowerment in pre-university education for women. It is not enough to simply teach academic skills, as many pre-university courses do, without also ensuring that the women leave the course with the conviction, confidence, agency, and ambition to use these skills in a university setting. While the acquisition of skills certainly gives rise to confidence, trust in and belief in oneself, it simultaneously makes the application of these skills possible. Or, to state it metaphorically, it is not enough to teach a sky-diver how to activate her parachute, for we must also instil in her the confidence to jump out of the aircraft.

Two other issues need to be addressed before I turn to a discussion of the Bridging pedagogy, modelled on security, community and validation, that made possible the self-transformations noted above. First, it is my belief that we should not determine or measure the success of the Bridging Program solely by the number of students who continue to pursue post-secondary education. Many of our graduates never enrol at York but nonetheless describe the course as a life-altering experience. Several students emphasized that while the course did not lead to university study, it did give them the confidence and skills to empower them in various dimensions of their lives. For example, Deborah Antonia writes: "While I am unsure at this time in my life if I will pursue a university education at York University, I know that I have been equipped with a confidence to pursue my dreams." Earlier in her essay, Deborah discusses how this confidence was a contributing factor in her decision to perform liturgical dance and enrol in an adult ballet class. Likewise, many students who did attend York also spoke about how the confidence they acquired through Bridging was not limited to academic study, but in fact was transferable and applicable to all aspects of their lives: personal, relational, political, employment, activism and so forth. Reesa Winer, an early graduate (1994) commented: "I can now express myself more efficiently and this had helped me analyze everyday situations and deal with them." Speaking from her experience, Jacqueline Braithwaite, a 2003 graduate, writes: "The Bridging Program helped me find my feminist voice and then my wings came shortly there after." Similarly, Philomena Duley shares the difference the program made in her life: "[The Bridging Program] and my years at York have changed me" and she states, "I now have a feeling of fulfillment and a measure of quiet confidence. A few years after graduation I ventured out on my own and went on a hiking pilgrimage in Spain." Teresa Joudrey writes that the course "inspired [her] to volunteer at the North York Women's Centre." Imbued with newfound confidence, Robin Thompson says of herself,

"I became more vocal with my family and argued a viewpoint I believed in." Likewise, Vanessa MacDonald commented: "[Bridging] gave me a voice I now use at work, in school, with family, and strangers." Christina Clattenburg, a 1995 graduate, writes: "Now I use creative thinking, a whole lot of compassion, and I challenge the powers that be." Echoing a similar passion, Jennifer Edwards writes: "I hunger for more, more information to fill my ever expanding mind, more opportunities to articulate my every exploring thought." These comments reveal that the empowerment acquired in the Bridging Program is manifested in all dimensions of women's lives.

The second issue that must be considered revolves around the larger question of why many women do not follow the traditional educational trajectory of entering university after the completion of secondary school. Significantly, all of the contributors address this issue in one manner or another. This topic has particular relevance to the following discussion on security, community and validation. In reading the students' essays, I observed that while there are many reasons why women may choose not to pursue post-secondary education, all seemed to stem from one cause: women not being encouraged, supported or validated in their wish to do so. Significantly, but not surprisingly, these are the very things that a Bridging course does provide to give women the self-confidence necessary for university study. People often assume that this discouragement is something of the past; it is assumed that young women today have the same opportunities and possibilities as their male peers. However, in reading the students' essays we realize that nothing is further from the truth; women who were in high school just five years ago experienced discrimination similar to that of women who were there fifty or more years ago. Indeed, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Gail Trimble, a 2001 graduate who completed high school in 1963, writes: "In our family, university was not considered an option but I had hoped for a year of Teachers'

College." However, she goes on to explain that shortly after her graduation her father was diagnosed with cancer and upon his death a few months later, she, as the eldest daughter, took a job to help her mother who had been left with 5 young children and no income. Linda Rudkin remarks: "As a female of the 1950s, I grew up trapped in the stereotypical patterns of the post-World War II and Cold War era. My early childhood experiences set the stage for a lack of confidence which seemed to erode further as I grew older. Although deeply interested in literature, anthropology, history, and archaeology, I was directed into a secretarial program which would guarantee more 'suitable' employment." Likewise, Cheryl Lamaitre, a 1990 graduate who attended high school in the 1960s commented: "Although I was a good student I was directed to a four-year business and commerce program. Business programmes were almost the exclusive purview of young, poor women. For many like me the university door was slammed shut." Cathy Spragg, who attended high school in the seventies, remarks: "When I was growing up, the high school guidance counsellors did not promote university to the females, but they did to the males." Colleen (Longhouse) Fulford, a 1998 graduate, writes; "After completing secondary school in 1981, I found myself on the path of marriage and family in spite of the desire to further my education. At the time both friends and family made it quite apparent that further education and my role of wife and mother were mutually exclusive."

Jana Douglas, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of two and completed high school in 1991, discloses her experience: "Teachers or coaches never encouraged me to pursue university study. My guidance counsellor was actually bold enough to suggest, 'let the system take care of you.' So following graduation from grade 12, I enrolled in a vocational training program for adults with disabilities." Marayam Salah, who immigrated to Canada when she was in ninth grade and completed high school in 1989, writes: "When I arrived in Toronto I was

placed in a grade nine ESL class and enrolled in mostly basic and some general classes. No one seemed to recognize that I spoke English quite well...I realized too late the importance of the levels in the educational system; once again my dreams of going to university began slipping out of reach." Janet Thorning, a 1996 graduate, recounts the near paralyzing self-doubt and self-recrimination she experienced as she entered the Bridging classroom: "Me, the high school drop out; the stupid half-breed; the teen mother; the unlovable one; carrying books, who was I fooling?" Later she discusses how at this first Bridging class all the women shared their stories on what had brought them to the program. "One voice said, 'I've been sober for two years and now I want to make a better life for myself.' Another voice said, 'I dropped out of high school when I got pregnant.' That was my voice." She goes on to write: "That was the first time I had ever said that out loud in front of strangers."

After I said it, I felt free from the chains of shame that had weighed me down for years, that had denied me the opportunity to discover that I wasn't alone, that there were other women that had cried the same tears I had cried, tears of abandonment, shame, regret." While their stories span more than forty years, in each instance the women's intelligence and their dreams of higher learning were discouraged, discounted, and denied by a society and an educational system that was at best indifferent to these women's needs and wishes. Whether it was conveyed overtly or insidiously, or by way of sexism, ableism, racism, classism or a combination thereof, the message was clear: they were not qualified for, entitled to, or deserving of post-secondary education. They learned that they and their dreams simply do not matter. In response to these negative messages, women, as Cheryl Lemaitre's words eloquently convey, "learn to live without a voice," and are often unaware of their own repression, as Lemaitre suggests in her revelation: "in my case I did not even realize I had been silenced."

The Bridging Program, if it is about anything, is about giving back women's voices; it is about empowering them to rediscover their presence, their worth, their dreams, their hopes - their selves. As Vanessa MacDonald writes: "I'm growing comfortable with the image I see reflected back of myself, no longer using others' standards or expectations." Or as Jana Douglas comments: "I learned from Bridging how important it is to belong to myself."

"A Bridge Over Troubled Waters": Safety, Community and Validation

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word "bridge" as "a structure carrying a road, path, railway, etc. across a stream, ravine, road, railway etc" or "anything providing a connection between two things." Not surprisingly, words such as bridge, path, journey, and crossing are found throughout the students' essays. More than ten students used a bridge metaphor in their title and many more employed it in their essays. Lynn Ryan, a 2002 graduate, views the Bridging Program as "a special nucleus with various pathways that lead to multiples of possibilities." Deborah Antonia, a graduate from 2004, describes the course "as an actual bridge from a limited lifestyle to one of endless possibilities." Likewise, Adrienne Ryder, a 2003 graduate, describes Bridging as being "like the beginning of an exciting journey with no pre-determined destination." Beverly Chase wrote in her essay: "The Bridging course is not just a course. That if you put one foot in front of the other and cross that bridge your life will reach new wonderful heights." Valerie Thomas, who graduated in 1998, observed that as there "are multiple reasons why women lack the road map to actualize the possibilities of a postsecondary education, the Program is an avenue that provides clear instructions on navigating the busy highways." In Vanessa MacDonald's essay the word "bridge" appears close to a dozen times; in a concluding paragraph she writes, "Our last class, thirteen classes later, was held at a martini bar. There was cause for celebration. The bridging from whiner to doer had pulled at

brain synapses nearly forgotten. It took emotional effort to bridge over complacent ignorance. The bridge we'd constructed led to choice and from it I could see options." In her essay, Amy McNally, a 1999 graduate, is thankful to York "for providing this Bridge for me and others to walk over darkness, fears and all the barriers that keep us from discovering our potential." Ashlee Fenner, a 2002 graduate, is similarly grateful to the Bridging Program for "helping [her] find this path." Likewise, Muriel Casey, an early graduate, writes: "Thank you for opening a door to me that had been firmly closed when I failed to pass the 11+ Exam in England. The chance for an opportunity to enter a university helped me to continue my educational enrichment."

For other students, the word "bridge" functions more in its second meaning, as a connection, or more specifically, as transformation. Many students speak about how they were changed by the Bridging course. This is evidenced by titles like "New Directions," "Inspiring and Life-Altering," and "The Beginning of a New World." Helena Melo, a 2003 graduate, writes in her essay, "I am definitely a changed woman. There is very little or no old Helena left inside of me. I have grown in every aspect of my life." In her essay, appropriately entitled, "Becoming Who I Am," Elfie Campese, a 1987 graduate, writes, "The privilege of a lifetime [is not only] being who you are, but it is the allowing of - and becoming - who you are. I view my Bridging experience as the beginning of [this] journey." Linda Rudkin, who completed her course in 2005, wrote in her essay that the program "open[ed] a door that others had closed many years ago." Jana Douglas, a 2000 graduate, explains that "while the Bridging course's ultimate goal is about pursuing university study, it has given me the courage to chart new territory."

As the Bridging Program is described both as a transition and transformation, it is similarly represented as a foundation. Tanya van Strien, a 2001 graduate, writes, "I thank my lucky stars every day for the foundation Bridging has provided me." Likewise, Elfie

Campese explains, "Initially I wanted a sense of control over my life, some choices, and the opportunity to secure paying work that I love. The Bridging Program laid the groundwork for this goal." Whether the metaphor is one of transition, transformation or foundation, it is evident from reading these 37 essays that the Bridging course has had a profound impact on these women's lives, an outcome echoed by the words of 2003 graduate Robin Thompson who writes, it "changed my life. I have started to discover who I am and what I want to accomplish for the very first time." "With each class," Robin Thompson writes, "things began looking a bit brighter and the grey in my life began to get some colour. There was a new seed planted called hope."

Security

In a 1985 article on the Bridging Program, republished in the Bridging book, the authors discuss why they decided upon a "woman-only" class format when the program was first designed and implemented. "Like Plato," they write, "many outsiders were suspicious of the decision to restrict the class to women only. Fears of 'secrecy and craft' were cloaked under accusations of discrimination." The authors explain:

The decision had been made with the initial target group and was only strengthened as the course progressed. From the beginning the group agreed that the absence of men would be less stressful. The students felt that they would not have to worry about being tactful when they discussed personal reactions to texts. By the end of the course, all the students thought they had revealed much more in class because of the presence of exclusively female peers and instructors.

(Newman and O'Reilly 2006, 43)

I would argue that it is precisely the "women-only" format that makes possible the security of feminist pedagogy and hence makes the Bridging Program the success that

it is. Having taught in the program over the last eight years and now having read these 37 essays, I am convinced that it is only among women that the female empowerment described below becomes possible.

Many students spoke about how they felt "safe" in the Bridging classroom; they could discuss and debate ideas without worry or fear that their opinion would be ridiculed, attacked or dismissed by classmates or the instructor, as is often the case in traditional classroom settings. In using the word "security," I do not mean that the students were not challenged in their thinking or made uncomfortable by having to encounter new and different ideas; rather, I refer to respect in the class and consideration for each other's feelings and thoughts. "I felt safe in the Bridging course," writes Helena Melo, "and that helped me to open up with some of my personal stuff. That's what education is about, sharing information, connecting ideas from many minds...." Adrienne Ryder shares her thoughts: "Any comment or point of view was always validated by the professor. This was tremendously important to me because it was respectful of our perspective. From that I developed a trust in the class environment and more importantly, we began to trust our own voice." Likewise, Pauline Mulder remarks: "The course provided a comfort zone where we were not afraid to expose our weaknesses as each felt the insecurities the other might be experiencing." Colleen Longhouse Fulford reports a similar experience of support and security: "The professor encouraged an open dialogue and allowed for an atmosphere that welcomed everyone's thoughts and opinions." "For me," writes Elfie Campese, "there was a sense of comfort, a feeling of being valued, and the opportunity to be not only listened to but truly heard."

This sense of security, or more specifically trust and respect, functioned as a type of safety net for the students, particularly when the discussions or readings were upsetting and disturbing to the class. Gail Trimble talks about how, when she was presenting her seminar, she "questioned

whether anger in an article or essay was helpful in getting a point across." "I was quickly educated," she continues, "in the uses of anger by many of the women in the class. This opened up a whole new way of looking at the world [...]. It also gave me permission to be angry." Likewise, Linda Rudkin comments: "Emotionally, I found the course content rather difficult. The readings mirrored my own life experiences and brought back painful memories. A lot of anger surfaced and I felt very uncomfortable with these feelings. I did not particularly enjoy revisiting these issues but found the critical analysis and class discussion helped to put everything into a different perspective." She goes on to say, "The course had stirred up a hornets' nest inside of me, but a good thing was occurring as I felt my self-worth rise a notch or two."

Community

Just as security is essential for women's empowerment, so is community. Most of the contributors emphasize that the close and caring community created in the Bridging classroom was what made the completion of the course possible. "Having the emotional support of the other women in the Bridge course," writes Colleen Fulford, "was crucial for me to accomplish my goals. Collectively we bonded as a group and supported each other. We formed study groups and we always encouraged those who started to doubt themselves. We understood and respected each other's opinions and made a collective effort to listen to each other." Barbara Lee, a 2005 graduate, speaks of her experience: "The small size of the class allowed participants to feel at ease. It felt more like a coffee club than an academic pursuit. Enduring years of discredit and work left self-doubt. I wasn't sure that I belonged and I had no business trying to earn a degree. But the whole class supported each other." Likewise, Agnes Wadham (2001) comments: "Quitting the class never entered my mind. I must admit that having a very supportive study partner was very helpful. As Maryam, [her study partner] said, 'Even when I don't feel like coming to class I make an effort

because I don't want you to miss me in class.' I think that was true for both of us." "Our group was so diverse," writes Ashlee Ferne, "each woman with her own story of what had led her to that room." She goes on to say, "In a lot of ways, those women helped inspire me to dig deeper into myself and pursue my goals. No one questioned our past decisions or made us feel shameful, and for the first time I didn't feel like I had to hide the fact that I had dropped out of high school." Indeed, as Ashlee concludes: "We were 16 courageous women reading, writing, laughing and sharing our opinions, our writing and our evenings together."

Many life-long friendships were formed in the Bridging Program. Several contributors acknowledge these friends in their essays. Helena Melo writes: "I must conclude with a great gratitude to my friend Jacqui. She was an enormous part of this entire biography; she not only inspired me to write but also was one of the very important people in this journey of pursuing a university degree. To this day I will never forget that first hour that we both stood on that parking lot talking on that dark night of September 23, 2003." These friendships sustained the women as they went on to York; frequently, a group of Bridging graduates took classes together once at York. Colleen Fulford writes: "Second year work was a lot more demanding than Bridging. Once again we banded together, set up a study routine, and pressed on. We met in each other's homes or arranged for room access back in the high school where our Bridging had taken place. We studied, snacked, commiserated and supported each other again through personal and academic struggles." For many students, this community included the women authors read in the course. Linda Rudkin explains: "It wasn't until I enrolled in the program that I realized I was not alone in my sense of frustration and disillusionment. The women authors and story tellers [read in the course] shared my words and feelings. I found company for my guilt, a new perspective and appreciation for mothers and women alike, and for the first time in many years, I actually

started to feel sane." Reading these essays we are reminded of the simple but profound transformative power of women coming together to share their stories. Indeed, I would suggest that the Bridging program functions in a manner similar to the consciousness-raising groups of the early 1970s; while the setting and format of the courses are academic, a similar empowerment of women is made possible in creating this spirit of sisterhood. This is described well by Vanessa MacDonald, and I quote her at length:

Regardless of our reason for attending Bridging, our stories connected us as women. We were seven women. We were mothers and grandmothers with children in university. We were young women untested by life. We were women who worked and had careers. Husbands, boyfriends and fathers were discussed, with knowing nods. We shared times of sexist ridicule thinly disguised as humour. We confirmed hunches about the unfairness of being female. Slowly our gang grew to include Margaret Laurence and Alice Munroe. Their stories reminded us of what we were up against. Adrienne Rich and Susan Maushart wrote of what we could do. We met Rosie the Riveter and understood her fury at being duped into years of war labour in exchange for pot-roast recipes and crinolines. I was discovering more than book knowledge. Our studies turned up the volume on the silenced female culture of thousands of years. Women's smothered stories were not being whispered here. "To be seen and not heard" made us laugh. Suddenly saying everything was possible. We were using the language of rebellion, taking of rights, equality of power. We took back the labels of bitch, mother, slut and redefined them as strengths. Women, so long separated from

each other by work and families, were now in Barrie, Ontario,⁵ of all places, linking their stories together. How reassuring it was to hear the same laughter and sorrow where I had placed it in the telling of my own stories. The bridge was getting stronger.

Appropriately, she goes on to say: "I loved how this magic happened in a mall in Barrie. Surrounded by Dairy Queen and the dollar stores, we were achieving things of greatness. Somehow this was as it had always been, women gathered outside the mainstream to hatch furtive plans."

Validation

Community, as well as the security discussed earlier, gives rise to and makes possible the third theme: validation. The Oxford Dictionary defines "valid" as "having legitimacy, authenticity, or authority" and defines "validate" as "[to] lend force or validity to; confirm or substantiate." Validation, as I use this word, conveys both meanings. Indeed, the aim of a Bridging course is precisely to "confirm and substantiate" the "legitimacy, authenticity, or authority" of women's intelligence and their dream of post-secondary education. In other words, through the Bridging Program, women realize not only that they are capable of university study, but that they are entitled to it. Validation therefore is not completely synonymous with encouragement; while the latter means to "give courage, confidence, hope," to "validate" means this and more. Too often, as demonstrated in the essays, patriarchal culture convinces women that they are not worthy of university study, nor are they qualified for it. Thus, the primary purpose of the Bridging Program is to invalidate these patriarchal messages and to validate - confirm or substantiate - women's own aspirations and ambitions for university learning. This validation comes in many forms and from many places.

As noted above, such validation is found in course texts and also from

classmates. Frequently, however, it is the professor who provides this validation. Diane Corga, a 2004 graduate, writes: [The professor] was instrumental in making me realize that I was not any different than any of the other students. She understood our feelings, insecurities, and made our learning experience an easy transition. The professor's positive input allowed me to feel differently about myself." Likewise, Ruth Chenel, an early graduate (1989), comments: "This endorsement from my teacher was pivotal in motivating me to continue my education. The positive reinforcement she gave me by her enthusiastic response to my presentation gave me the confidence that I was capable of doing research." She goes on to say: "The Bridging course was my professor's passion. She did everything possible to make us want to succeed [...]. She shared stories with us about her life, which validated ours." Margaret Hurley, another early graduate, communicates similar feelings about her professor in her writing: "She helped me gain the confidence to recognize that if I tried hard and didn't give up I had the right stuff to go on. She saw something in me and my writing that I had yet to see." The Bridging Program, writes Valerie Thomas, "re-instilled my wavering confidence in past academic abilities." She goes on to say: "The professor's insistence for us to be reflective and her anti-racist pedagogical style further accelerated my suppressed need for further education." Linda Rudkin remarks: "I was delighted to find that my intellectual abilities were being acknowledged. This provided an enormous boost to my confidence and contributed to my ultimate decision to continue studying at a university level." "The professor," explains Beverly Chase Dunawa, "realized that we had the ability but needed the guidance to bring us to the realization."

Indeed, by way of security, community, and validation, the Bridging course aims to make possible the female empowerment that is so often denied to women in our culture. Elfie Campese, the earliest graduate in this volume, writes, "I consider the Bridging Program some of the

best therapy, it made a positive difference in my life."

"The positive, supportive, and anti-oppressive environment," writes Valerie Thomas, "is a benchmark of this program." She goes on: "Based on my...experience, I will unequivocally assert that this program is a valuable pedagogical tool for the empowerment of women who yearn to succeed at the postsecondary level of education available." Likewise, Helena Melo comments: "Academically, I came to the awareness that the skills I thought I lacked for university were always there, they just needed to be uncovered. Bridging did that for me."

Conclusion

In her essay Vanessa MacDonald writes: "There is something to be said of second chances." In many ways that is simply what the Bridging Program is: a second chance for women who were never given a chance in the first place. We entitled the book *You Can Get There from Here* to capture the movements made possible by the Bridging Program. In its most literal meaning *there* refers to post-secondary education, but *there* also signifies a multitude of other meanings. For some women *there* refers to career advancement, increased confidence, new friendships, or perhaps a better life. The Bridging Program, in other words, provides "more than book knowledge" to its graduates; it delivers, in the words of feminist theologian Carol Christ, "a new self and world" (1980).

Endnotes

1. This article is developed from section three of the Introduction to *You Can Get There from Here: 25 Years of Bridging Courses for Women at York University* (Newman and O'Reilly 2006).
2. The nominal fee of \$85.00 covers the costs incurred in setting up a course; room rentals, advertising, photocopying, mailing and so forth. The fee is waived for students in financial need.
3. We are grateful to our generous donors for making these bursaries available to our Bridging graduates.

4. The students requested that their names be used in this article.

5. Barrie is a small city, an hour drive north of Toronto. Many of the students in the Barrie course came from rural communities that surround the city of Barrie.

References

Christ, C. *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on the Spiritual Quest*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1980.

Newman, R. and A. O'Reilly. *You Can Get There from Here: 25 Years of Bridging Courses for Women at York University*. Toronto: School of Women's Studies, York University, 2006.