

From *Subjugating Knowledges* to *Liberated Territories*: A quilted reflection on everyday knowledges

by Lynette Plett

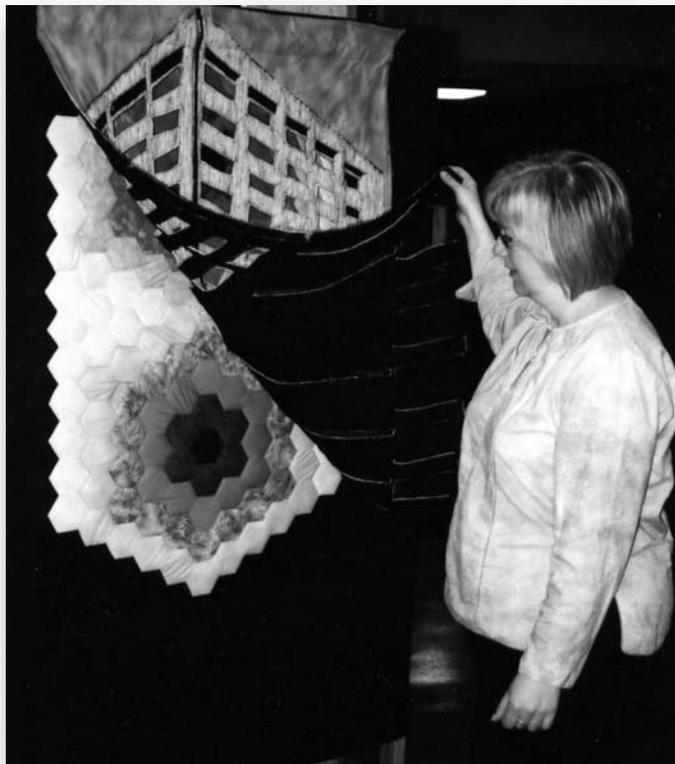
■ I am an adult educator, who researches and writes about various aspects of workplace education. I am also a quilter. Designing and creating, then writing about my quilt projects helps me to reflect more deeply on my work in adult education. My quilts combine traditional quilt patterns, passed down to me through several generations of Mennonite women, with my own designs.

Sometimes I think I learned to quilt by osmosis. Quilts and quilting have been part of my entire life. On warm summer nights, I slept under quilts sewn by my mother. While my mother sewed together quilt patches at her sewing machine, I played nearby, fashioning doll clothes out of the fabric scraps and drawing my own quilt patterns. When the women from church got together to work on a communal project, they stretched the quilt on a large frame in one of the women's living rooms. There was barely enough room for all the women to sit around it. To talk to my mother, I would crawl to her underneath the stretched quilt and see the patterns come to life on the back of the quilt. When I got older, I started making my own quilts by reproducing what I had observed over the years. I learned by doing, by making mistakes and fixing them. I read "how-to" articles in quilting magazines and on the internet. I attended workshops. Sometimes my mother, my sister, a friend or an instructor showed me a technique. I went to quilt shows and closely examined other women's techniques and artistry. I talked with other quilters about method and colours and patterns.

This process of learning to quilt is an example of acquiring everyday "knowledges." These are knowledges and skills needed for living ordinary lives and, for the most part, these knowledges are acquired through necessity by observation and conversation and by doing. They are learned in community. Similarly, I gained some of the most important knowledge about being an adult educator and researcher in much the same way as I learned to quilt: by observing colleagues facilitate workshops and meetings; listening to their conversations with participants; facilitating

lessons and workshops myself; making mistakes and learning from them; reading articles; attending workshops and courses; comparing struggles and sharing successes in conversations with friends and colleagues over coffee or tea in the staff lunchroom or over wine at a Sunday afternoon get-together at a colleague's home.

It is these knowledges of the everyday passed along, apparently seamlessly, between mothers and daughters, friends and colleagues that I have quilted into the projects I describe here: *Subjugating Knowledges* and *Liberated Territories*. What follows is a discussion of how designing and creating these quilts helped me to value and make visible this kind of learning in community that I had previously taken for granted, ignored or dismissed as an inferior way of knowing and coming to know.



Drawing aside the quilted building interrupts the ongoing subjugation of knowledges.



Subjugating Knowledges. Designed and created by L. Plett, 2003. Cotton and cotton-blend fabrics, curtain rod and hardware. Hand- and machine-pieced, machine appliquéd and quilted (34 x 51 x 5 in).

Barriers: *Subjugating Knowledges*

Subjugating Knowledges is a two-layered quilted wall hanging. The back panel, attached to canvas stretchers, features hand-pieced hexagons stitched into large flowers based on the traditional quilting pattern Grandmother's Flower Garden. These brilliantly hued flowers in reds and oranges, greens and yellows are appliquéd onto a black background. The hexagonal flowers are obscured by a quilted panel in the foreground. This panel is hung on a curtain rod that is attached to the stretchers of the back panel. It depicts a tall, austere and deteriorating building. I cut out holes for windows in the quilted building so that viewers can glimpse the vibrant hexagonal flowers through them.

This two-layered quilt symbolizes the theme of underfunding in post-secondary education on two levels. The quilted building with its raw seams, frayed edges and untrimmed threads signifies the deterioration of the physical structures due to lack

of funding. The bright colours seen through the building's windows signify the diversity of critical, innovative and creative knowledges—often voices of/for the disenfranchised in our society—that, in the current political climate, are suppressed in favour of knowledges that measure, evaluate and quantify people and programs for financial accountability to government and society.

As I stitched the hundreds of hexagons together by hand, my mind was freed to think about how to display this project. I was afraid that the product of all my labour—the panel of glorious and vibrant flowers—would remain entirely hidden from the viewers. Was it possible that no one would even see my work? Would the countless hours I had spent on this project be invisible, unvalued? Had I designed the project so that my most intricate (although tedious) work would be relegated to the background?

I realized then that these pieced hexagons represented the countless ordinary women, past and present, whose work and knowledge is hidden from us. The flowers, obscured by the austere building, symbolized ways of knowing and coming to know that are relational, through conversation and observation, and of the community. These are the kinds of knowledges that Michel Foucault defines as “subjugated knowledges”:

A whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition and scientificity (Foucault p. 82).

These ways of knowing and coming to know are either taken for granted or, worse, entirely invisible and unvalued. I realized that I had designed my quilted project in such a way that it would continue hiding these subjugated knowledges. If I did not find a way for the viewers of my quilt to see the entire panel of flowers, I would be complicit in keeping women's work and everyday knowledges hidden.

I solved the design problem by inviting the viewers of *Subjugating Knowledges* to draw aside the quilted building, like a curtain, and shine light on the hexagon flowers. In this way, the viewers would help me to interrupt the ongoing subjugation of

everyday knowledges and their knowers. These knowledges, although threatened by obscurity, would not be so easily destroyed!

Over the years, I have exhibited *Subjugating Knowledges* several times. Knowing that art is not to be touched and that exhibited quilts are to be handled only with white gloves, viewers are often cautious. One viewer, however, looked thoughtfully at the piece, read the accompanying artist statement that invited him to interrupt the ongoing subjugation of knowledges, looked at the quilt again and then threw caution to the wind. He picked up the bottom of the quilted building with both hands and flung it high up in the air. This is the kind of passionate response I want my quilt to engender, but most viewers' responses are more muted and tentative. And I continued to struggle with the problem inherent in the design and what that symbolizes.

Although I had found a way for viewers to help me interrupt the ongoing subjugation of knowledges, what is most disheartening about the design of *Subjugating Knowledges* is that the richness of everyday knowledges (the hexagon flowers) never comes into contact, never penetrates the organization (the quilted building). The two panels reside on separate planes and, furthermore, one obscures the other. It is a sad, hopeless statement, true to how I felt at the time I designed it. I had internalized the message that these knowledges—my own knowledges and ways of coming to know—were, to use Foucault's term, disqualified.

Openings: Liberated Territories

A few years after I had created *Subjugating Knowledges*, I was on a conference call with three other members of a research team. We had been working together for several years at this point, and our planning meetings flowed effortlessly back and forth between conversations about our own personal and work lives and our collaborative



***Liberated Territories* (Quilt in a light box). Designed and created by L. Plett, 2005. Antique heating grate, found pine, wooden dowel, hand-pieced cotton hexagons, found chicken wire, string of lights (34 x 37.5 x 23 cm).**

research. During this conversation, one of the team members told us about a workshop on appreciative inquiry (a model of organizational change that focuses on what works in an organization and building on that, rather than trying to fix what doesn't work) she had recently co-facilitated. She described a participant's artwork about hope—grass growing in the cracks of a sidewalk.

I was reminded of my dissatisfaction with the design of *Subjugating Knowledges* and how I had quilted my own despair into the project. But *Subjugating Knowledges* no longer reflected my experience. I had found a supportive community of friends, colleagues and academics within which I could pursue my interest in researching and writing ordinary women's everyday knowledges. I still faced barriers (internal and external), but I had found/created spaces for my work. Now I was ready to design a quilt project that responded to *Subjugating Knowledges*.

I remembered an ornate, antique cast-iron heating grate with a broken corner that I had hauled with me when I moved from Winnipeg to Toronto five years earlier. It had been waiting patiently for just this moment. I re-created the panel of hexagon flowers from *Subjugating Knowledges* on a smaller scale, using the same fabrics. Instead of the quilted building, the heating grate would symbolize organizations and organizational systems in which we live and learn and work. My brother, an outstanding woodworker and carpenter, built a wooden box for me. The box would frame the grate and hold lights to backlight the hexagons. He drilled holes for the dowels on which I would hang the panel of hand-pieced hexagons.

After the light box was sanded and stained, I hung the quilted panel of flowers, inserted the heating grate in front of it and pulled the quilted flowers through the hole in the grate. I was reminded that when Jean Connon Unda, an adult educator in the labour movement, facilitates a workshop, she frequently uses the term "liberated territories" to set the tone. She reminds participants that the physical and temporal space of the workshop takes place in a liberated territory. There it is safe to describe the tensions and successes of activists' struggles with integrating literacy into their work and into their organizations.

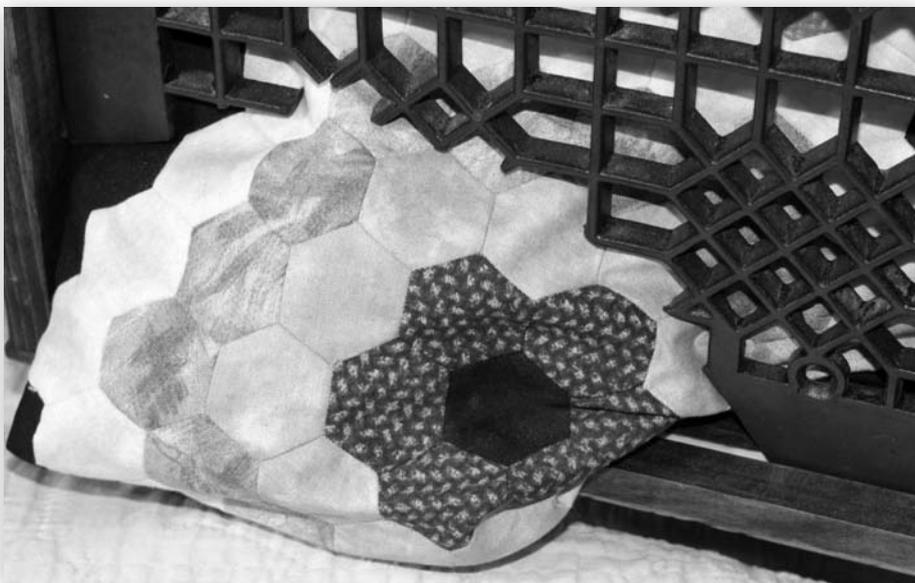
Liberated Territories is my response to *Subjugating Knowledges*. It acknowledges that there are spaces in our organizations where everyday knowledges and

their knowers are visible, welcomed and given voice. *Liberated Territories* reminds me to look for these spaces, recognize and value them, claim them, take root in them, erode the edges and expand the spaces to include a greater diversity of everyday knowledges and their knowers.

In *Liberated Territories*, the everyday knowledges, depicted by the quilted flowers, penetrate the organization and organizational systems. They act on and with the organization. Foucault describes the re-emergence of disqualified knowledges (or popular knowledges) as an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault p. 81). He argues that we can "rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle...that systematizing thought is designed to mask" (Foucault p. 82).

Final Thoughts

As an adult educator and quilter, I have found that artful processes and presentations hold the potential for personal transformations. And by representing my ideas artfully, inviting viewers to imbue the work with their own interpretations based on their personal and professional everyday knowledges, together we are able to create new understandings and new interpretations. Together we can disclose, bring into focus, recognize and value the many knowers and their knowledges that have all too frequently been absent from the organizations in which we work, live and learn. ■



An "insurrection of subjugated knowledges." *Liberated Territories* (detail).

LYNETTE PLETT, recently appointed Executive Director of Adult Learning and Literacy in Manitoba's Department of Advanced Education and Literacy, is a researcher and writer in workplace literacy. She is also a third-generation quilter. She seeks ways to bring artful inquiry and representation to her workplace literacy research.

SOURCES:

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