



## ***Activist Learning vs. Service Learning in a Women's Studies Classroom***

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**Abstract:** Various scholars assert that teaching and discussing feminist literature written by and about women constitutes activism. While we agree that integrating Women's Studies into college and university curricula is a radical act and an important step toward broader social change, we argue that Women's Studies programs must see promoting feminist scholarship as a beginning point, and not an end point. We argue that faculty members must teach students to merge feminist theory with social action in order to transform systemic gender, class, and race inequalities. At a time when there are few strong and vibrant social movements and few students who participate in movements for social change, one way to include activism in the classroom experience is to structure it into course assignments. Based on a pilot of an activist learning project for a Women's Studies class, we make recommendations to faculty members on how to get the best results from such a project.

Various scholars assert that teaching and discussing feminist literature written by and about women constitutes activism (Bystydzienski 2004). While we agree that integrating women's and gender studies into college and university curricula is a radical act and an important step toward broader social change, we argue that Women's Studies programs must see promoting feminist scholarship as a beginning point, and not an end point. It is true that, as Berenice Fisher asserts, "consciousness-raising supports and generates women's political agency" (Naples 2002:11). However, we argue that we must go a step further than consciousness-raising to encourage students to implement what they are learning about social inequality and social change into practice. Course

readings and classroom discussions are critical for understanding feminist discourse and analysis, but we must also teach students to merge feminist theory with social action in order to transform systemic gender, class, and race inequalities.

Women's Studies programs were founded to promote scholarship and teaching about women and women's oppression with the hope and intention that such programs would contribute to women's liberation from patriarchal domination. In the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement, Women's Studies was seen as the "academic arm" of the movement. The symbol of the Women's Liberation Movement was a circle with a cross beneath it and a fist in the center. As Bird (2002) writes, "The *academic* arm signified that the

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academy was also to be a part of the struggle for women's liberation" (p. 140, emphasis in the original). Professors who taught early Women's Studies courses in the 1970s were activists, as were the students who demanded and took their courses (Bird 2002). There was a dialectical relationship between feminist scholarship and feminist activism. Professors and students used the knowledge they taught and learned in the classroom to inform their activism outside of it. Students' and professors' experiences in the Women's Liberation Movement also informed and facilitated learning in the classroom.

Like other feminist scholars (Naples and Bojar 2002; Dickinson 2005), we assert that integrating activism into Women's Studies is fundamental for effective feminist pedagogy. However, many Women's Studies programs do not incorporate activism into their courses. Social change begins with analyzing inequalities and oppression, but it does not end there. It requires that people use analyses of social problems to come up with strategies to challenge and change their communities and the larger society. In an era when there are few strong and vibrant social movements, and few students--or for that matter, faculty members--who participate in movements for social change, one way to include activism in the classroom experience is to structure it into course assignments.

Service learning has become a popular pedagogical tool in many colleges and universities, and many Women's Studies programs have integrated service learning projects into their courses. Service learning is a pedagogical strategy that incorporates traditional academic classroom knowledge with public or civic engagement within a selected community. Service learning often takes the form of volunteerism and charity work (Hinck and Brandell 2000; Lewis 2004). Students are usually placed within community agencies or ongoing community projects in which they work a certain

number of hours/week and then reflect on their experiences through classroom presentations or written papers (Derbyshire 2002). Courses specifying a service learning component began to surface in the early 1980s (Hinck and Brandell 2000). On April 23, 1985, numerous colleges and universities gathered to discuss the issue of civic involvement, which led to the formation of the National Campus Compact. The compact was committed to engaging students from 2 and 4 year colleges with community issues and needs through service work and volunteerism. Four goals were agreed upon to enhance service activity:

- 1) Direct public-awareness campaign aimed at reestablishing a commitment among students to serve others;
- 2) Develop policies that university and college presidents, state boards of education, policy makers, and others can use to encourage public and community service;
- 3) Conduct a survey of public service activities and universities involved in the coalition;
- 4) Establish a public service network that will match students seeking service opportunities with local and regional service agencies. (Hinck and Brandell 2000:871).

According to the Campus Compact Report (*Campus Compact 2007*), more than 1,000 campuses belong to Campus Compact, and approximately 6.5 million students enrolled at Campus Compact colleges participated in service in 2005-2006 (this includes both volunteer work and service learning projects for courses).

In *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Boyer (1990) asserts that institutions of higher education must be committed to providing service to the surrounding community. Boyer (1990) claims, "Service is not just something students do in their spare time; it connects back to the core curriculum and the search for shared values" (p. 26). Various studies

report service learning's positive impact on students' personal and academic growth (Cunningham and Kingma-Kiekhofner 2004; Hinck and Brandell 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994; Roschelle, Turpin and Elias 2000). Hinck and Brandell (2000) find that service learning accomplishes four important goals: it enhances the academic skills of students, enhances and develops the service-learning center, enhances the social character of students, and meets community needs. Roschelle, Turpin and Elias (2000) describe service learning as having the added benefit of facilitating positive relationships between the community and university. This relationship serves to promote the university's dedication to social service and community needs.

Despite the benefits and advantages service learning provides students, communities, and universities, however, there are also problems and deficiencies in the service learning model. One central argument against service learning is that it encourages passive participation in communities. Passive participation incorporates acts of charity rather than acts of social change. Unlike activist participation, passive participation does not focus on challenging social structural inequities. For example, Marullo and Edwards (2000) assert that acts of charity such as giving canned food to the poor involve transferring resources to an individual or group that has fewer resources, but do nothing to challenge the institutional arrangements that create the inequality in the first place. Karen Bojar (2002) writes, "I am not completely comfortable with the term *service learning*, with its connotations of noblesse oblige, of charity rather than social change" (p. 54). We agree with various scholars who argue that current service learning models must be transformed to incorporate social change (Bojar 2002; Derbyshire 2002; Dickinson 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994; Lewis 2004; Marullo and Edwards

2000). Social change involves "altering institutional arrangements by redistributing resources and enhancing capacities of those with less, so that such institutional operations no longer maintain such inequities" (Marullo and Edwards 2000:898).

Currently, agency-based models of service learning neglect to challenge the status quo and fail to empower the communities they serve (Lewis 2004). Furthermore, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff (1994) found that students in service learning courses without prior understanding of social inequalities on a structural level may create racist conclusions about the population(s) they're serving. Students often view social problems through a culturally deterministic approach or see them as the product of individual character deficiencies (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994). Thus, it is essential for service learning courses to provide a contextual understanding of race, class, and gender inequalities from a structural perspective before sending students to serve in the community. Community empowerment is a central factor required for social change and collective action. Tammy Lewis (2004) compares the "Charity Model" of service learning with what she calls the "Social Justice Model" of service learning. Lewis' Social Justice Model is community-based, views the community as a partner, empowers the community while simultaneously advocating student learning, and views society through a conflict model in which social structures need transformation. This model acknowledges oppressive inequalities and calls for "empowering the oppressed to seek social justice and equitable social arrangements. The analysis focuses on social structures rather than interpersonal relationships" (Lewis 2004:97).

We do not dispute that traditional service learning has provided useful programs, initiatives, and opportunities for students, faculty, and academic institutions to connect with the community. Examples

of service learning projects include but are not limited to: canned food drives, assisting at a battered women's shelter, cooking at a soup kitchen, reading to community children, volunteering time at a local Boy's and Girl's club, running errands for disabled people, or helping at a local homeless shelter. These experiences make a positive impact on both students and the communities they serve.

However, while these initiatives are helpful for the people they serve, they do not significantly diminish pervasive social problems. For example, providing child care and answering a hotline at a battered women's shelter certainly helps underfunded battered women's agencies provide much needed services to the women and children they serve. And, although such services are crucial, and sometimes even life saving for women who are battered by their intimate partners, providing services is not enough to reduce (let alone end) domestic violence. These kinds of services fail to address the structural components of why almost one in three women will be battered by a male partner in her lifetime (Collins, Scott, Schoen, Joseph, Duchon, Simantov, and Yellowitz 1999). We argue that even though traditional service learning benefits students, communities, and colleges and universities, it does not significantly ameliorate social problems. Instead of or alongside service learning projects, faculty should encourage projects that target social structures that perpetuate social inequalities and injustices. Thus, if, for example, we want students to apply their knowledge to address the social problem of domestic violence, activist and social change projects need to be created that address larger macro issues such as affordable housing, equal pay for women, laws regarding intimate partner abuse, divorce, and child custody, immigration laws, welfare policies, and ideologies that promote unrealistic notions of romantic love and, more generally, male dominance. In short,

we must encourage students to work toward the transformation of our culture and institutions. We must encourage students to work toward ending violence against women instead of just "treating" women who are already suffering from the problem by providing services to them.

We also argue that both the discourse and practice of "service learning" in Women's Studies reproduces sexist social relations. In our male dominated society and culture, women are expected and socialized to be passive, compliant, compassionate and serving. Traditional service learning projects are focused on helping people and caring for people. They often also include monotonous clerical work which is meant to be part of students' learning experiences. When Women's Studies faculty members ask their students--the majority of whom are women--to participate in traditional service learning projects, they are reproducing gender relations that relegate women primarily to caregiving and clerical work. They are contributing to what Margaret Adams (1971) calls the "compassion trap," in which women feel they exist to serve others, which traps women in low paid "helping professions." Conversely, activist learning projects place students in social change organizations through which students assertively challenge inequality and oppression.

Encouraging students to create projects that are social change rather than social service oriented is no easy task, however, especially in a socio-political context in which there are few strong social movements for students to connect with. Ingrid Semaan piloted an activist learning project in a special topics course on domestic violence in the fall of 2006, with mixed results. As part of the writing assignment they were required to complete after finishing their activist projects, students were asked to answer the question, "Do you think the project was more social change oriented or service oriented (or both)? Explain." All of the stu-

dents wrote that their projects were both service and social change oriented:

My project pertained to social change because I was able to educate people with regard to the need for social change in the community. My project was also service oriented in that I provided a local domestic violence agency with gifts that will help them improve their services.

I believe our project was more service oriented since we...[raised] money for a safe house..., but I believe it also had a social change element to it. By talking about domestic violence to the people who stopped at that table...we were able to raise awareness on a level that went beyond the goal of raising money.

Although Semaan had spent the better part of a class discussing the distinction between providing services and working for social change, and had done a group exercise with the class in which they came up with examples of each, most of the students who completed activist learning projects ended up working on projects that were more service oriented than social change oriented. We argue that there are two main reasons for this. First, the current generation of traditional aged students have little or no experience with social movements, and thus have trouble coming up with strategies to effect social change. And second, battered women's agencies are currently not doing very much social change work. According to Andrea Smith (2007) in *The Revolution will not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, as the battered women's movement grew throughout the 1970s, it became more and more institutionalized, and began to work on gaining government monies to fund the ex-

pansion of their services. With those funds came strings which forced battered women's agencies to focus on providing professionalized services and banned certain political activities. As battered women's agencies became dependent on those funds to provide shelter for women and their children, they moved away from the activist work that founded the shelters in the first place, and put their energy into maintaining a steady flow of grants and donations to keep their shelter doors open. When students in Semaan's class asked the local battered women's agency what they could do to support the work of the agencies, they were told that what the agency needed most was money to fund their services.

While the projects were not as social change oriented as we would have liked, students in Semaan's class were successful in making an intervention into campus culture by raising awareness about the prevalence and causes of domestic violence and promoting models of healthy relationships. Two students performed a form of guerilla theater by applying makeup to simulate bruises on her face and body and wearing a t-shirts with provocative slogans on them. One of those students wrote,

Overall, I think we definitely affected people both inside and outside of our campus. Students and faculty members will remember what we did, and they will reveal our message through the stories they tell at home and at work.

In addition, students reported that working on their projects was a positive experience that has sparked a desire to do more in the future:

I have never been asked to do something like this before and it made domestic abuse more personal for me. The more I thought

about my project and the more I talked about it, the more interested in activism I became. Because of this project I am considering [continuing to be active].

All in all the experience was exhilarating. It always feels good to stand up for what one believes in and I greatly appreciate the privilege of being able to participate...I would repeat this thoroughly rewarding experience in a heartbeat. Not now; I'm off to picket the fur stores with pictures of tortured animals.

The assignment was very interesting because I was made to be part of the solution instead of shaking my head in sympathy and getting angry momentarily.

To get the best possible results for activist learning projects, we make the following recommendations to faculty members:

1. Contact local service and/or social change organizations before the class begins to brainstorm social change oriented projects that the organizations would be interested in working on with students.
2. Set the groundwork by teaching students the distinction between providing services and fighting for social change as well as the importance of understanding how race, class, and gender inequalities shape the social problems they are addressing.
3. Work with students to push them to come out of their comfort zone—to try something new and potentially scary.
4. Meet with students during their brainstorming process to guide them toward social change rather than service oriented projects
5. For the writing portion of the assignment, have students answer the question, "Was your project more service oriented or social change oriented? Explain."

## CONCLUSION

Current reactionary legislation in the United States such as welfare reform, restrictions on abortion, and the overturning of affirmative action policies undermines the significant progress of social change movements from the 1960s and 70s. At a time when a women's right to choose is in the process of becoming eroded and the effective overturning of *Brown vs. Board of Education* looms in the horizon, it is starkly apparent that there is a significant need for activist learning within classrooms and pedagogical practices. Without grassroots activism, social policies and practices are determined by politicians and interest groups of the wealthy. As we illustrated in our example of battered women's agencies, there has been a trend of these agencies' shifting from being part of grassroots movements to becoming institutionalized bureaucracies that are heavily influenced by federal and state mandates. Most importantly, as domestic violence agencies and other community groups have left grassroots activism and moved into institutional hierarchies, it is very unlikely that the oppressed will have voices in these newly formed institutions (*Incite! Women of Color Against Violence* 2007). It is essential that Women's Studies programs encourage and educate the next generation to fight social injustice through activism. At a time when gender, race, and class inequalities continue to run deep, it is important for Women's Studies programs to return to their activist roots. As this article and study of a classroom assignment demonstrate, it is critical for feminist pedagogical practices to incorporate activist learning. It is also

important for students to learn and implement an intersectional approach to activism, one which focuses on eliminating multiple forms of oppression. As previously discussed, activism is a means of empowerment and changing oppressive social structures. As social injustice continues to pervade our society, the mere transfer of resources through such activities as clothing and canned food drives will not eradicate the fundamental causes of injustice. It is only when we begin to uproot of the problem that we will see oppression reduced, or, ideally, eliminated. Domestic violence and other forms of women's oppression will not end without an approach that focuses on transforming the social structures that perpetuate women's vulnerabilities.

However, this fight to transform education in Women's Studies programs will not be successful if only a handful of professors integrate activism into their courses, nor if there are minimal requirements for activist projects in courses. It is unrealistic to assume one activist assignment will change and challenge students' mindsets. The traditional aged college students in Ingrid Semaan's class (constituting the vast majority of her students) were raised in an era of much less social activism compared to their parents. None of Semaan's students had previously taken any courses on social change. Moreover, when the students went into their community agencies to ask what these organizations needed, not one agency described an activist project for them to be involved with. Aside from her one course, on all other institutional levels students were not encouraged to be activist learners. Semaan's trial run of an activist learning project is evidence that professors need to spend a significant portion of classes setting up such projects, and students need to take multiple courses that focus on understanding how the intersections of race class and gender shape social injustice and the ways that activism can transform our society.

As Women's Studies educators, our priority should be to instill activist learning in our pedagogical practices. Empowering our students and our communities should be our priority. However, it is difficult for a single professor and a single course to sufficiently and effectively create a deep understanding of how to effect social change. As with any social movement, we must make a collective effort to encourage our students to be a part of movements to end social injustice and oppression. In short, Women's Studies programs must return to our activist roots to effectively carry on our feminist mission.

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