

Women's Studies in Focus: Field-Based Learning in the Practicum Course

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INTRODUCTION

Students and faculty in Women's Studies programs express perennial concern about keeping academy-based studies responsive to, and involved in, the grassroots movements from which the academic field grew. While most of us who are engaged in feminist studies also participate in social justice projects, many of us often find it difficult to interweave our activism with our scholarship. Certainly the ethos of the academy militates against the combination of the two, but this institutionally-based ideology is one some feminists have worked hard to resist. The particular form of resistance demonstrated in the following papers is the creation of courses that very consciously and thoroughly connect activist work with scholarly theorizing, that refuse the false dichotomy that would dismiss or minimize the importance of learning by doing.

When I considered the trial-and-error development over the past ten years of practicum elements in courses of my own department, I thought it would be useful to share in these pages the experiences of other colleges and universities so that groups considering the implementation of the practicum course might profit from the knowledge already acquired in various sites across the country. Using the networks of the Canadian Women's Studies Association (CWSA) and PAR-L, a bilingual Internet discussion group of individuals and organizations interested in women-centred policy issues in Canada set up by Wendy Robbins and Michèle Ollivier, I called for contributions to a round-table discussion at the

CWSA annual meeting held in 1997 in St. John's, Newfoundland. The following nine people agreed to describe and analyze the practicum courses they have been involved in.

Two of the participants, Greta Hofmann Nemiroff and Linda Christiansen-Ruffman, have been offering field-based learning courses for many years. Each theorizes the importance of this approach in addition to sharing practical advice gleaned from her experience of offering undergraduate and graduate courses. Linda Clippingdale offers the perspective of an agency that has hosted over a period of years a number of practicum students, from the high school level through the post-graduate. These papers are then framed by the student voices of Tania Trepanier, Sandra Gabriele and Joan M. Smith reflecting on their experiences as M.A. students combining within a credit course the heavy academic demands of graduate study with a serious commitment to community organizations. Finally, professors Katherine McKenna, June Corman and Debby Yaffe discuss the specific practicum courses they have been involved in designing and delivering within their universities.

What emerge from the different papers are some striking commonalities as well as a few significant differences in the various experiences and in the advice they generously share. While each extols the advantages of the exercise, each also offers serious caveats about attempting to design and deliver courses so against the grain of the usual academic offering.

Christine St. Peter

ARE PRACTICA WORTH THE EFFORT?

Women's Studies developed in Canada in concert with the much publicized and televised investigations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1967-1970), its final report in 1970, the creation of numerous women's groups in anticipation and as a result of the royal commission and of earlier developments in the field in the USA. Many of the pioneers of Women's Studies in Canada were activists in their colleges and universities as well as in their wider communities. Early meetings of the Canadian Women's Studies Association and its precursors included regional reports which discussed the local activities of feminist groups both within and outside the universities. Early discourse on Women's Studies focused on content and course materials which were scarce but which burgeoned throughout the 1970s as various journals and women's presses were founded, and studies were published by governments and private publishers. Although there was an immediate need for in depth research on the many facets of women's histories and current lives in numerous disciplines, a multi-disciplinary field of Women's Studies also developed over time. As Women's Studies developed, there was a growing recognition that traditional "talking head" or "top down" pedagogy was not always appropriate for a course of study rooted in a liberation movement (Nemiroff 1990).

While there have been numerous definitions and explanations of feminist pedagogy, there are some general ideological and practical indicators of feminist pedagogy. Women's Studies was to help women effect change through the development of a body of knowledge and research on multiple aspects of women's lives (Bunch and Pollock 1983, 62). While the creation and understanding of feminist theory was crucial to women's understanding of their lives, the subject matter of Women's Studies arose from multiple areas of experience; the physical, political, social, spiritual and intellectual dimensions of women's lives inspired research and formed the epistemological base of feminist theory. Early Women's Studies teachers found areas for

investigation in the experiences and preoccupations which students recounted in class discussion and their written work. Because its impetus originated in the desire for the liberation of women from various personal and systemic forms of oppression, it was clear that Women's Studies pedagogy must not reproduce the gender, race and class oppression to which women were subjected. The communication of feminist knowledge was not to be separated from an understanding of the limitations of the context in which it was taught in post-secondary institutions. Because Women's Studies and feminist research are historically rooted in a political commitment to changing women's situation in the world, it is logical that Women's Studies students be exposed to feminist praxis (Weiler 1988, 58-9). As a result of these concerns, within Women's Studies, there is often an emphasis on the empowering effect of students' participation in the design of their own education (Brodrribb and de Sève 1987, 5). Feminist pedagogy legitimates the experience of "ordinary women" and their life-experiences as appropriate subjects for analysis (Culley and Portugues 1985, 216). While in the early days of Women's Studies, teachers and students often participated in feminist events and organizations, this can no longer be taken for granted. Some faculty are new to Women's Studies *per se*, having come to the field solely through academic research on women within specific disciplines; the general individualism of the 1990s has not encouraged community-based work among young people, many of whom are also simultaneously obliged to spend many hours in the paid work force. Currently, post-secondary educators, their institutions and their students do not look to the outside community for the production of "academic" knowledge. Traditionally, however, within Women's Studies a high value has been placed on the convergence of theory and praxis with the objective of developing with the students a critical view of patriarchal society. One way of facilitating such critical understanding is through practica...spaces where knowledge can be tested and produced outside of the classroom.

In this article, I will describe several models I have used for practica over 27 years teaching