

## 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

Women's Studies at Concordia University, in an "alternative" programme at Dawson College (both in Montréal), and in an advanced level undergraduate seminar offered alternately at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa.

In the first years of an Introductory Women's Studies Course which I taught with Sister Prudence Allen (then Christine Garside), at Concordia University (1970-1979),<sup>1</sup> classes had between 85-150 students, making it impossible to organize practica. However, since students were given the choice of setting their own term projects, some developed research projects involving volunteer work in feminist groups and for "action projects," less formal but not dissimilar to practica.

The New School of Dawson College (1973-) is an alternative anglophone CEGEP<sup>2</sup> programme where courses are developed collectively by students and teachers. Because the average class size at the New School is 15 students, in Women's Studies classes it was possible to arrange outside learning activities for the students through their participation in feminist groups and groups serving women in the larger community. Women Studies courses were developed from the point of convergence of the students concerns and interests and my capacities and interests.<sup>3</sup> Their concerns and interests usually arose from issues in their own lives; they were interested in addressing these issues through gaining information, achieving a theoretical perspective on issues, and through practical experience. It was not difficult to arrange practica appropriate to course contents which the students had identified and negotiated. Since I was active in numerous women's organizations and activities in Montreal, I was often able to involve the students in feminist organizations such as women's centres and feminist advocacy groups, YWCA projects, schools, feminist journals, art galleries and theatre groups. One year three women's conferences took place in Montreal.<sup>4</sup> Because of the richness of content of these conferences, we built a course around issues which would be covered in these conferences. Students bartered their labour for free entry to the conferences and often participated in planning sessions. This experience exposed them to some powerful role models and to contemporary

discourse within women's movements, and inspired them to find places where they could participate in feminist projects. Another group participated at a Women's Centre: those who were bilingual were trained to answer calls on an information line; others worked in projects such as a clothing room, a newsletter or the planning of events. One year, students wanted to identify all the services offered to women in Montréal. The class divided the work, identified and visited numerous services for women throughout the city, and produced an annotated guide of these services for the school.

Practica were usually successful in the New School because classes were small, the courses were based on students' shared interests and concerns, and the community structure of the programme reinforced the value of community-based learning and the expertise provided by hands-on experience.

Twenty years of work done by my students at the New School of Dawson College and at Concordia University convinced me that practica provide an excellent way to achieve many of the goals articulated for feminist pedagogy. From 1991-1996, as Joint Chair of Women's Studies at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, I drew on these experiences for a Women's Studies seminar for under-graduates and graduate students. I recalled that at the outset of the "second wave" of the women's movements in Canada, many feminists hoped that large numbers of women would participate in formal political life. While there had been a steady increase, it had and has yet to reach 51%. These universities are at the seat of the federal government in Canada, a prime location to observe the exercise of both small and large "p" political power from a feminist perspective. Consequently, I developed the courses, "Women, Knowledge and Power" and "Les femmes, la connaissance et le pouvoir,"<sup>5</sup> with the intention of creating multiple sites of learning outside of the seminar room. Each week, the students participated in a three hour seminar and worked at practica for another 3-5 hours. In the seminar we discussed the practica, the readings, issues which came up in discussion or during the week, and the students' ideas for their term

projects. Each student kept and submitted an "intellectual journal" where she responded to the readings, as well as a log of her practicum.

Because the course was only 13 weeks long, I organized the practica rather than having the students spend time seeking them out. At the first class, I would distribute a descriptive list of the practica; at the next class, students would identify...and sometimes have to negotiate...their choices.

Setting up practica was an arduous business, requiring that one enlist supervisors one term in advance. Wherever I went, I was on the lookout for potential supervisors. Since I was invited to give talks in numerous organizations and to attend many feminist events, I was able to make many contacts in Ottawa. Because I wanted students to have as broad a choice as possible with respect to the kind of practica offered, I found placements in the offices of women MPs, in various governmental offices and agencies where policy is made, at the now defunct Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, and at non-governmental organizations which had particular interest for women.<sup>6</sup> I would send potential supervisors a letter describing the course in detail, the function of the practica, and the tasks of practicum supervisors. Inviting them to become supervisors, supplying tear-sheets on which they could respond if they wished to participate. About a month before the beginning of the course, I would confirm that potential supervisors were still on board. Sometimes they were no longer available, which meant that at the outset I had to negotiate more potential placements than I needed. Between the second and the third classes, students would contact and usually meet with their supervisors. I developed a contract form for written contracts which took into account the expectations and requirements of all concerned. There were also evaluation forms to record the conclusions from the mid-term and final evaluation meetings held between supervisors and students. In order to ensure some consistency of marking, I would translate the supervisors' comments into appropriate marks with student approval.

Sometimes there were problems in the

practica. One student was so difficult to get along with that it became clear that we had to find an other option for her. In one case a supervisor, who had been excellent in the past, never kept her appointments with the student and, after forcing her to wait for hours, neither showed up nor left messages. One student, a Québécoise federalist who had lived in Ontario for over 20 years, was placed in the office of a Bloc Québécois member of parliament during the Québec referendum campaign. The people in the office knew she was a federalist and did not trust her. While she did not enter into direct conflict with them, she felt excluded and disliked, and she suffered great anxiety. This was especially difficult because she was also estranged from her family in Québec who were strong separatists. In both these cases, I advised the students to extricate themselves, and asked them to write an analysis of why that placement had not worked, how power was used in the situation, and what they had learned from it. The students reported learning a great deal, not only from these painful situations in themselves, but from classroom discussions and brainstorming regarding such problems.

On the whole the practica were very useful for the students. They were able to apply what they learned regarding women and power to specific situations in which they found themselves. In some cases the practica led to jobs; in other cases, they gave the students skills as well as ideas for further study and career planning; some practica convinced students that they wanted to be in positions of formal power while other students concluded that they wished to redefine power from "power over" to "power to." Often they were disillusioned regarding the exercise of power in both the government and non-governmental organizations; often the intensity of their disillusionment was in direct relationship to their proximity to real power. Students described the practica as important sites for the practical application of theoretical works we read in class. They also thought they learned a great deal about themselves through the practica and felt that the supervisors were generous with time and expertise and evaluated them fairly.

At the end of the course the students and I

would write letters of thanks to the supervisors. The supervision of students often adds more to the supervisor's workload than is relieved by the students' work. It is important to keep good supervisors well motivated so one can turn to them again. I also asked them for suggestions regarding the practica, and I found many of their suggestions most helpful. I fear that in these days of cut-backs in both the governmental and non-governmental (NGO) sectors, it will become increasingly difficult to place students, especially since numerous university programmes now compete for practicum space.

While practica are labour-intensive for everyone involved, they are well worth the work if one follows a few sensible guidelines: 1) the immediate environment of the course should be helpful in determining appropriate practica; often the institution itself will present interesting possibilities; 2) placements and tasks should be related to the assigned readings within a course; 3) it is important to emphasize the students' responsibility to their supervisors and placements, especially since their behaviour may determine the access of other students to particular practica; 4) keep the supervisors motivated by your acknowledgement of their hard work; 5) have the students share their experiences; they learn enormously from one another's experiences and from the problem solving they sometimes have to do.

While the practicum is a labour intensive project for all concerned, it can be a site of dynamic education for students, professors and supervisors. It provides a privileged location where students may critically observe both contradiction and convergence between feminist theory and practice. This experience helps students test their ideas for a better world, explore their own interest and concerns, and identify locations for their active participation in changing and improving the world.

#### ENDNOTES

1. This course, "Women's Identity and Image" was the first Women's Studies course to be taught at a university in Canada.
2. The CEGEPs, or Collèges de l'enseignement général et

professionnel, are a combination of community college and pre-university transfer institutions specific to the educational system in Québec.

3. I have written about the pedagogy of Critical Humanism developed in The New School in my book: *Reconstructing Education: Towards a Pedagogy of Critical Humanism*. (Toronto: OISE Press, 1993)

4. That year the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was having its semi-annual meeting in Montreal; the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW) and the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) had conferences in Montréal.

5. The course was given alternately in English and French. Its title at the University of Ottawa was "Les Femmes, la connaissance et le pouvoir."

6. The following is a partial list of placements: The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW), the offices of 7 members of parliament; with an alderwoman in Cornwall; Women's Bureau, Labour Canada; Immigration Canada, Liberal Party of Canada, *The Womanist* - a feminist newspaper; Planned Parenthood Association, Place aux Femmes-Women's Place; Comité régional de coordination pour contrer la violence faite aux femmes; Centre Amethyst pour femmes toxicomanes; Canadian Vocational Association; Orientation au travail pour femmes; Cultural Survival Organization; Elizabeth Fry Society.

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