

of view, the practicum experience is one we will continue to participate in for as long as we are given the opportunity.

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OUT IN THE FIELD: PRAXIS IS WHERE WE PLAY

Control over our bodies and health is a key component to having control over our lives, as women's bodies continue to be sites of abuse, oppression and exploitation. The barriers to women's health and well-being are manifold, from economic obstacles which affect women's access to proper health care, to such practices as the universalizing of male symptoms and diseases.

My desire to develop an awareness of the health issues that affect women and to explore the theoretical frameworks which help to analyze these issues led to my choosing as my field placement the Women's Health Collective, one of the working groups of the Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group (NSPIRG). This group has been in existence for close to two years, and consists of a core group of about six students and community members.

I chose this site because addressing women's health issues seemed an important way to ground my feminist theory. The collective offers workshops and facilitates discussion groups as a way of promoting awareness of women's health issues and of providing alternative perspectives to mainstream notions of women's health. I was a member of the collective before I started the MA program in Women's Studies and I participated in these activities over the academic year. I continue to work with the collective even though my course is finished as I find the work that we do valuable and rewarding.

An important issue that field-based learning has raised for me is how we go about focusing our activism without privileging one form of oppression over others. The Women's Health Collective tries to make connections

between different forms of oppression, and have this awareness reflected in the health issues addressed. For instance, what are the effects of culture, race and sexuality on women's health? How can the examination of the multiple axes of oppression within the practice of social activism form part of our social activist work? Addressing questions like these offers one of the ways that feminist postmodern and postcolonial theorizing can play out in practice.

My subjectivities and life experiences have informed my scholarship and have influenced the ways in which I am a social activist. I grew up in the Comoro Islands, Malawi and Trinidad, and my experiences growing up in different cultures has meant that issues around hybridity, racism, and global inequities have remained important and integral both to my activism and to my scholarship. Similarly, coming out as a bisexual woman while doing my undergraduate degree led me to address issues around homophobia, biphobia, heterosexism, and monosexism (the assumption that everyone must either be attracted to people of the same sex or the opposite sex, but not both). My concerns here had already led both to my involvement in the queer movement and to my theorizing about bisexuality. Such personal experiences and idiosyncrasies will ultimately influence our scholarship and activist choices, so it is important to examine how these shape our understanding, as well as how they are embedded within our socio-cultural and political milieus.

Field-based learning has reinforced my belief that knowledge is not always generated within the academy. Much of our work as a health collective involves discussions of our experiences of health and also the sharing of knowledge and information not supplied by the medical system. When we tell our stories of healing and health we can make the opportunity to connect the experiential and the theoretical. A good example of what I mean by this can be found in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980), where she relates her experience of having a mastectomy and explores the issues around wearing a prosthesis. Lorde's writing demonstrates the power of combining the lived experiences of women about their health with feminist theories, as a way of

countering some of the barriers to good health that women face, economically, socially, and culturally.

In this spirit, our collective is presently working on a magazine on women's health issues thanks to a small grant from NSPIRG. We are soliciting articles from a wide variety of perspectives and sources with the goal of bridging theory and practice and connecting the academy and the community. We have put out a call for submissions, targeting a variety of groups and organizations such as the Multicultural Association of Nova Scotia, the Black Women's Health Program, the Maritime Center for Excellence in Women's Health, and the Sexual Health Coalition of Nova Scotia. We hope to gather poems, narratives and essays not just from professors and experts in the health professions but from a wide diversity of women, so that the contributions of those interested in sharing their experiences and knowledge about women's health can heard and valued.

Field-based learning raises important questions about definitions of epistemology, about where, how, and by whom knowledge is generated. Scholarship is not just created within academia; it also emerges out of communities of individuals and groups who seek to understand the conditions and forces that affect their lives and their health. Activism and learning go hand in hand both in and out of the university so, if implemented appropriately, a field-based learning component can legitimize and recognize these links. As soon as my feminist theory starts to drift away from my feminist practice, I remind myself that I am a researcher and a student because I believe in working for social justice. How can we begin to challenge the notion that somehow the academy presents a more expert or superior brand of knowledge than other forums? One way this can be done is by privileging poetical, political and experiential discourses alongside theoretical and philosophical discourses so that all are seen as valid means of discussing ideas and strategies of resistance. Stories can help us identify with the experiences of others, articulate experiences we share in common, and provide strategies for resistance and survival.

It is my hope that field-based learning can lead to questioning false oppositions and may encourage a more sophisticated understanding of human experience. It should, therefore, be an integral component of a Women's Studies program because of the important insights that can be learned from it. I continue to look for ways to connect my "formal" education with community activism, and believe that Women's Studies should allow for and facilitate this connection. This encourages what I might call "responsible" or "accountable" scholarship, by which I mean feminist scholarship that questions its relevance to the world in general, and to women's lives in particular. I would argue that a field-based learning component facilitates the grounding of theory and keeps us more honest, whether our work is literary analysis or action research. It has been said before but we too often forget that theory and practice must be connected. Praxis is where we play.

REFERENCE

Audre Lorde. *The Cancer Journals*. (San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1980)

Tania Trepanier

GIVING FEMINIST THEORY A HEARTBEAT: FIELD-BASED LEARNING AND THE ACADEMY

As a graduate student in the Interuniversity Masters in Women's Studies program, I chose to fulfill the Field-Based Learning requirement for my degree with the Women's Action Coalition of Nova Scotia (WAC). WAC functions as an umbrella organization of grassroots women's groups across the province. Its main mission is to lobby the federal and provincial governments as a collective entity on behalf of the various member groups. My most significant work with WAC to date (I continue to work with WAC despite having fulfilled my field-based learning requirement) has been in planning and attending a provincial conference, attended by almost 60 women as