

additional challenge is the importance of students recognizing that they are ambassadors for program. Their actions and words reflect on how the Women's Studies Program is perceived in the region. Another concern is the potentially dangerous situations that students can face doing some types of community work, for example, by slipping on icy steps entering the community organization, or meeting violence on a picket line or in some deliberate act of violence against users of a clinic. As faculty we can control the safety of a classroom setting but we lose control over the circumstances facing our students in community placements. Finally, in the era of high unemployment, the voluntary work done by our students ought not to be in lieu of payment to someone in the workforce.

A successful placement program involves a commitment by the student, faculty member and community contact person. This commitment can be formalized by having the student draw up a contract which specifies the involvement of all three participants. Fair evaluation can be assigned by encouraging the student to contract for a grade at the beginning of the process by specifying the type and quality of work expected. I have found regular meetings with the student which are informed by reading the students's field notes/journal a useful mechanism to keep the process on rails.

Introducing experiential learning by involving students with community groups raises the spectra of involving politics in an academic program (Patai and Koertge, 1994; Wine, 1991). My inclination is to embrace social activism as one of many options of field placements. Not all students ought to feel obliged to have an activist component to their placement but those who want to participate actively in social change initiatives should be facilitated as well as monitored to ensure they are not at risk.

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## A GOOD IDEA TAKES FORM: PRACTICING FEMINISM FOR FUN AND PROFIT

WS 450: Practising Feminism was offered for the first time at the University Of Victoria in the academic year 1996-7. While the department had for several years included practicum components in numerous courses, students reiterated their wish for the department systematically to recognise the value of activist work to feminist scholarship. Two students, Jacqueline Crummey and Naomi North, worked collaboratively under the supervision of my colleague, Michèle Pujol, to research and construct a model course as part of their graduating essay.

Michèle, always a student advocate, made it her special task to design the course on the basis of the students' draft and see it through the university curriculum process. In other words, rather than the professor deciding that students need this kind of exercise, in our case the impetus for the full-year field-based course came from activist students. Michèle taught the first term, I the second, a team-teaching arrangement that opened up many more placement possibilities and a richer understanding of the ways feminist activism works.

Nine students signed up for the course. Each was required to find, by the previous June, a feminist organisation (purposely left undefined), on or off campus -- in recognition that the university is as much a site of activism as the surrounding community -- that would agree to take them on from September to April. Students created an individual contract agreed upon by their placement supervisor, themselves, and the course instructor, specifying the knowledge, skills and responsibilities expected of the student by the organisation. Students were evaluated at the end of each term by their placement supervisor. Contracts could be revised for the second term as the need

arose.

In addition to their placement work of eight hours per week, students were responsible for researching the history of their organisation; for keeping a field journal that recorded both their specific experiences and their analysis of their experience; for meeting with the course instructor twice each term to discuss the individual implications of their experiences; and for meeting as a group to relate their experiences to the wider world of feminist activism through course readings and guest lectures by selected local feminist activists. Each term, students submitted an analytical paper on the content and process of their placement. I discuss in the following section some changes to the course requirements implemented in the second term in response to student course evaluations at the end of the first term.

Students took up a wide variety of positions. Three were with the feminist bookstore; two with NGOs concerned with international issues; two worked individually with local advocacy groups; and two worked together in a newly created Canadian chapter of an international feminist organisation. Each kind of position carried its own advantages and disadvantages, and each made demands on the students beyond what they had anticipated. In my view, the unexpected elements were the most valuable and stretched the students' understanding of the meaning of feminist activism, of the delicate balance between goal-oriented and process-oriented work, and of the limits both of individual and collective responsibility.

Students were also offered, in response to a departmental need, the option of delivering (previously developed) workshops on *What Is Feminism?* and *Why Is Language a Feminist Issue?* to introductory Women's Studies classes, and seven of the nine chose to do so. Although there are certain disadvantages to having students present workshops, all those who presented did creditably well, and all appreciated the skill-building and confidence-building aspect.

### **Second Thoughts**

It became clear that the students expected

a much lighter course load than Michèle and I had anticipated. Although the weekly time commitment expected was less than those required by the schools of Social Work and Nursing at our university, students found themselves overwhelmed by the demands of their placements. Some were being given vast quantities of high-level administrative tasks in unfamiliar settings; one had too little to do and no encouragement to take on more work; all were coping with feelings of inadequacy exacerbated by inadequate supervision. Some of the organisations were undergoing funding cuts and severe internal upheaval.

In the first term, students didn't always make their weekly three-hour class meeting, didn't always do the reading or prepare adequately for the discussions. They regarded the sessions as an extra burden rather than a comradely sharing of pleasures and complaints. Guest speakers were enthusiastically received, but the students, three of whom were mothers of young children, generally felt resentful of the reading and meeting requirements.

For the second term, I decided to have the students meet biweekly instead of weekly, taking seriously their complaints about time commitments. In general this worked well, and I was careful to use the time to help build morale, by having them do a check-in round and then making links between their individual comments, between their comments and course readings, between their experiences and mine in activist work. As they gained some critical distance from their own experience, developed more realistic measures of what could be accomplished with the available resources in a given time, and also gained confidence in their own abilities, the students found more value in the class discussions.

Two or three continued to be lamentably lax in their attendance. From what I could ascertain, the students who worked the hardest in their placements, really over-extending themselves to benefit the organisations, were the same students who always made an effort to attend class, no matter how "stressed-out" they felt or how heavy their domestic responsibilities and total course load. This is not news to those of us with many

years of organising and teaching under our ever-expanding belts. Generally, group morale was high and students were generally enthusiastic about the speakers, the readings, and class discussions.

The individual tutorials also worked well, allowing me to explore some of the problems in a confidential environment. One particular problem involved the two students working together in a new Canadian chapter of an international organisation. Their placement supervisor in this instance was another professor in the department, who is a key member of the organisation. Frictions between the two students, and between the students and the professor, made the role boundaries awkward. Students, who are dependent on faculty members for grades and recommendations, inevitably have to have an instrumental view of their interactions with faculty members, even when they occur in contexts outside the university. Although the frictions were ultimately resolved, and everyone involved behaved with integrity, my initial doubts about the wisdom of a departmental instructor acting as field supervisor were strongly confirmed, and I would not accept such an arrangement in future.

I similarly experienced a certain murkiness of boundaries, since I am a member of the volunteer collective running the local feminist bookstore. Although not responsible for supervising or evaluating the students, and repeatedly giving them explicit permission to be as openly critical as they wished about the bookstore, I can't assume the contents of their field journals, tutorials, class discussions, and final essays didn't reflect to some extent their fear of offending me or hurting my feelings. Given that many Women's Studies instructors do activist work on and off campus, and that a small city like Victoria has a limited number of feminist organisations, we need to develop more explicit guidelines for placing students.

During the second term, some students continued to be overworked to the point of being exploited by their organisations, although a few were able to renegotiate their contracts. Most continued to be inadequately supervised. Some found that their definitions of "feminism" and "feminist activism" fitted awkwardly or not at all

into the framework of their organisations' activities and processes. These all seem to me to be the sort of problems that are intrinsic to a field-based course and even necessary to the development of a mature and sophisticated approach to activism. After all, the perfect organisation, into which we can slot ourselves comfortably and happily "activate" with all our preconceptions intact, doesn't come along very often, and doesn't stay perfect very long.

The guest speakers were a much appreciated and crucial part of the course, particularly on the hot topics of fundraising and conflict in feminist organisations. Students were able not only to refract their own experience through the vision of the long-time activists who spoke with them, but also drew much-needed inspiration from their stories. In some instances, they confirmed that the skills they were acquiring in their field work could enhance their future professional prospects as well as contribute to the strength of feminist organisations. Creating social change and gaining employable skills doesn't have to represent an unresolvable contradiction, although as I mention in the final section below, it is still, for me personally, an uncomfortable combination.

In my mind, the course requirement of the final paper allowed the students the necessary context to refine their ideas of the meaning of feminist activism, the value of practice to theory and theory to practice, and allowed personal closure on the year's work. For most of the students, all but one of whom took the course in their last year, the final paper was just one last hoop to jump through. Only a couple of the papers really satisfied. I'm not quite sure what to conclude about that, except to remind myself that my perspective, as the instructor, is bound to differ from the perspective of the students.

### **A Reflective Look To The Future**

This felt like a good course in the end. I certainly enjoyed my part in it. Most of the students showed up for the information session aimed at the next year's intake, eager to share their enthusiasm. Part of me was envious of the practicum students. I spent huge amounts of time,

as an undergraduate in the early and mid 60s, taking part in direct action on and off campus, as my grades were left to look after themselves. Being rewarded for activism, rather than being jailed, harassed and scorned, seems "soft." I am also a veteran of 1970s Second Wave self-help groups that decried professionalism and the rise of the 1980s "femocracy." Gaining credit for activism in the university seems like a parallel with gaining remunerative employment for activism in the community--doesn't anybody do anything any more just because it's the right thing to do?

The truth is, of course, that we're all doing a lot just because it's the right thing to do, a lot more than we're paid for, a lot more than we're given credit for. The course didn't only reward these students for their activism, it helped to make them more realistic, more thoughtful activists who can avoid false and obfuscating dichotomies. It taught them something about short-term and long-term organising that will, I hope, prepare them for the long haul as we contest the current regressive social and economic realities and create more openings for a sustainable feminist future.

### **A Sad Afterward**

As I work on revising this article, my colleague, Michèle Pujol, is on sick leave, struggling with cancer. The Practising Feminism course that she developed will not be offered next year, as it was not possible to rearrange the timetable. I hope to carry it on the following year, as a tribute to Michèle's unceasing work towards social justice. [Editor's note: Michèle Pujol died August 2, 1997]

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