# Feminist Social Projects: Building Bridges between Communities and Universities

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## Introduction: Patricia

Historically, feminist teachers in particular have been aware of the academic–real world divide because feminism was a social movement before it was taken up by university theorists.[1] However, a common critique is that feminists in the academy do not make their theories practical because of their unwillingness to engage with audiences outside the ivory tower. bell hooks argues that although there is a need to translate ideas to such audiences, "university professors fear their work will not be valued by other academics if it is presented in a way that makes it accessible to a wider audience" (111). While theoretical investigations in themselves help us analyze current power relations, the inability to connect academic theories and community practices severely limits the impact that our critiques can have on societal structures—including those of the university itself.

With its emphasis on community engagement, service-learning has a history of building bridges between universities and the communities in which they are located. Interestingly enough, while feminism has been critiqued as overly theoretical and abstract, service-learning has often been seen as a set of atheoretical practices. This perception, however, is not accurate. While older service-learning projects posited the student as "knower" and the members of the community as the "other"

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who needed the "knower's" expertise, current examples of service-learning share feminism's goal of building reciprocal relationships between the university and the community in a way that complicates the relationship between "knower" and "other." In fact, many service-learning strategies could help feminism reconcile academic theory and community activism. Similarly, feminist theories could bring an even more critical perspective to the current projects of service-learning and even add an academic sense of legitimacy to them. Building connections, then, can and should be emphasized *within* the university even as we look to building them with communities.

Although bringing feminism and service-learning together can address one set of problems facing us, service projects constructed through a feminist lens must also interrogate the impact of the authority that institutions grant to the teacher. To construct and participate in these kinds of service-learning projects, teachers must reflect on how best to create a classroom environment in which students can use their own experiences to problematize and interrogate the perceived split between their roles as students and their "other" lives outside the academy. We may want to create an activist, change-based classroom, but we must recognize that we continually negotiate the tensions between empowering students and imposing our ideologies on them. In the very act of inviting students to define themselves, we run the risk of defining them through the lenses of our own agendas.

How, then, can we construct approaches to learning that illustrate the reciprocal relationship between communities and universities, thereby situating classrooms in pragmatic experience? Are there ways for teachers to create spaces in class for it to be okay that students don't necessarily define themselves through our visions of change? Can we, that is, negotiate this range of possibilities?

In an effort to do just that, I created ENG 591: Feminism and Composition, a rhetoric/composition graduate seminar at Arizona State University that I taught in fall 2003. In addition to a more traditional research paper, the course included a service-learning component that I called a "social project." This project required that students volunteer at a local community organization whose main goal was to help women. After their work in the community, I asked students to write a self-reflection paper in which they analyzed how theories we read in the course got played out in actual community contexts and how their participation might transform the institutional situations in which they volunteered. My goal for the assignment and the course was to raise students' awareness about the intersections between the theories we read and systemic patriarchy, and, possibly, to encourage them to become active, ongoing participants in the organizations they worked with. Further, the majority of the students in the class were training to be or were already composition teachers. I hoped that they would take what they learned from their participa-

tion in community organizations back into their classrooms as well as into their own lives beyond this course, beyond my assignment for them.

To what extent were my goals achieved? What happened when I introduced this assignment in the Feminism and Composition seminar? Too often, teacher-researchers attempt to answer these questions by performing their own reading of the course. However, given the nature of this course and its emphasis on theory/experience, a "true" evaluation of the impact is only possible by looking through multiple lenses. In this essay, then, the three of us—the professor, Patricia, and two graduate students in the course, Kirsti and Tom—analyze the course, using our different perspectives to interpret the experience and its durable effects within and beyond the graduate classroom. First, we thoroughly examine the theoretical perspectives that informed the course and the social project. Then, the three of us analyze what happened in the course and what outcomes were achieved. Throughout, we critically evaluate the potential for implementing feminist pedagogical goals through experiential, social projects in other institutions within our communities.

## Theoretical Foundations of the Project: Patricia

In their early instantiations in composition, service-learning projects came mostly in the form of tutoring. Undergraduates in university writing courses would go out to community centers and schools, trying to help primarily underprivileged grade-school children read and write more effectively. In many cases, the students' experiences with tutoring were incorporated into class discussions and/or writing projects. Far too often, however, these projects focused on how to teach their knowledge to those in the community rather than examining how the service-learning project could be used to critically analyze the university and its discourses. In an almost colonialist way, the student was positioned as the "knower" who brought "enlightenment" to the "natives." Because of the structure of the projects, students were working in communities but through a unidirectional relationship.

Teacher-researchers have discussed the difficulties they faced when implementing these projects. In a study of a class she taught using service-learning assignments, Laura Julier reflected on these limitations: the class "rarely involved, I later realized, any conversation about ways their work with discourses outside the academy might lead them to critical engagement with academic discourses, or about the ways their work might be socially transformative in the community" (139). Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins also point to potential difficulties with students' work with the Community Literacy Center at Carnegie Mellon University, arguing that

> when university faculty enter communities to "consult," they often assume their expertise is immediately transferable. Research agendas, framed in the armchair of theory and untested in the context of real people and problems, misrepresent factors that matter. New curricula, uncritically packaged and turned over to community agencies, die an early death without the testing and revision that generates new knowledge. (586)

Many service-learning projects, however, have extended the focus from tutoring to other sorts of activities, including ones that encourage students to critically analyze not only their experiences within the community but also practices of the university itself. For example, in our graduate course, student projects ranged from observing court proceedings to leading a body-awareness seminar for women in the community to facilitating writing groups. As Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere point out, "'public' service would require that students enter relationships with communities and not with easily isolated individuals. In this approach, the activity of service learning itself may provide an opportunity for students to rethink the nature of literacies and discourses as they operate in different communities" (145). Instead of seeing themselves as "the experts," then, students in service-learning programs "need to begin not as teachers but as learners in a community setting, where goals and purposes of a 'service' effort are not established beforehand" (145).

While feminism and service-learning come out of different social experiences (feminism starting outside the university as activism and service-learning starting in the university as pedagogy), current debates in both areas study power relations. Service-learning goals echo the feminist ones I used to frame the social project, goals summarized succinctly by Chris Weedon:

> Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between men and women in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education, and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are, and what we might become. (1)

Current examples of service-learning in composition, I realized, were based in theories of activism that analyze power relations (as feminist theories do) *and* work to change current structures. Challenging traditional conceptions of service-learning, Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds reclaim its "activist" potential (230). They believe that concepts of service-learning are "too often infused with the volunteer ethos, a philanthropic or charitable viewpoint that ignores the structural reasons to help others" (230). These authors would like to see service-learning take into account the systemic aspect of social problems, rather than only practical issues—a goal we worked to achieve in the graduate course. Ultimately, as opposed to creating "colonialist" volunteers, these authors seek "a more historical and geographic approach to activist learning projects [that will] give learners a broader understanding

of dissent and will encourage them to envision themselves as actors or agents in political arenas" (230).

Positing a similar focus on political dissent, Nancy Welch adds another dimension to the theoretical conversation by focusing on the ways students' writing in/for multiple public spaces can enact changes. For her, rhetoric is a tool for "ordinary people who make up our country's multiethnic, working-class majority, in their press for relief, reform, and radical change" (474). In light of obstacles that students might face when trying to speak out in public, Welch emphasizes the process of making rhetorical space as an integral part of activism. Her teaching strategy is geared toward "[learning] the history and [naming] the tools that students in a public writing classroom need not only to imagine and build rhetorical space but also to anticipate and think through the discursive *and* extradiscursive obstacles they'll face in attempting to do so" (474). For Welch, activism that students participate in should include not only "speaking out" on issues that concern them, but also finding ways to create rhetorical spaces in public spheres that are not restrictive and that allow those voices to gain adequate publicity. She asks her students not just to analyze discourse, but to *create* discourse as a way to change social structures.

Teacher-researchers who identify themselves and their projects as "feminist" make theoretical arguments much in line with those of Welch and Bickford and Reynolds. Dale Bauer's article "The Other 'F' Word: The Feminist in the Classroom" is a representative example of these positions. Bauer contends that activism is important to include in our pedagogical agendas because it can help us analyze current conditions as well as construct ways to change those conditions, within and outside the university. While some argue that the classroom should be or already is a value-neutral space, many feminist theorists have demonstrated that there are no such things. If values and ideologies always drive what we do in the classroom, then we need to carefully and consciously choose that framework. Bauer contends that "political commitment—especially feminist commitment—is a legitimate classroom strategy and rhetorical imperative. The feminist agenda offers a goal toward our students' conversions to emancipatory critical action" (355). This agenda, just like current service-learning agendas, extends the focus of the classroom beyond a critique of existing structures into strategies for changing them.[2]

Defined in this way, service-learning builds bridges between the university and the communities of which it is a part. In their agendas, theoretical leanings, and practical applications, such projects are tied to feminist activist goals; they connect theory and practice as they encourage students to engage in strategies leading to change, at whatever level and to whatever extent. As Catherine Orr points out, rearticulating links between communities and universities "can help both instructors and students move beyond the static construction of the academic/real world, theory/practice, and self/other divides" (37). This work, however, does not simply

posit activism as theory applied. Instead, activism is positioned as "a practice that engenders power and makes us aware of particular understandings of difference" (Orr 52). Rather than erasing difference, these bridges help "students navigate the difficult and complex terrain of difference in such a way that makes the 'real world' more about access and engagement than about encountering 'the other,' whoever that other may be" (53). Feminist theories provide us with multiple frameworks through which to ethically analyze relationships between self and other. By approaching service-learning projects from this feminist perspective, we can reimagine the potentials for using classroom space as a starting point for larger social engagement.

### Patricia's Reflections

While most service-learning projects are located in the undergraduate classroom, I used the graduate classroom to invite students beyond the analysis typically privileged there into communities where the university is located. By extending class discussions of theories into students' participation in communities, I attempted to help them locate themselves in relation to power, privilege, authority, and entitlement. I also attempted to help them locate women within specific life situations discussed in many of the academic readings. Rather than trying to shun disciplinary structures, the social project I required merged specialized knowledge with community experience in an effort to build new interpretive frames. By having feet in both camps, students could, I hoped, critically analyze claims made in the research, evaluating the theories' abilities to engage with and capture current social situations within and outside the university.

Again, the major writing assignments in the Feminism and Composition seminar included a research paper and the volunteer reflection, along with an ongoing glossary of feminist terms. (See Appendix A for a course overview and Appendix B for the volunteer assignment specifically). All were intended to help students address the following questions: What has happened to activism that challenges *and* changes the existing power structures? Why do women and men continue to tolerate social relations that subordinate their interests to those of patriarchal perspectives? Why do we make choices that run counter to our best interests? These questions were based on five key premises drawn from feminist pedagogical theories:

- Patriarchy is a set of power relations that rest on the social meanings given to biological sexual differences. Out of this system of thought comes our current system of sexual divisions of labor, the social organization of procreating, internalized norms of femininity, and dualistic discursive practices.
- Analyzing contradictions within institutional structures, feminism studies gender along with race, class, and sexual orientation. Who we are (i.e., our constructed and lived identities) is more complicated that simply our gendered selves.

- Feminism leads to creating a theory of subjectivity that helps us explain the institutional practices that preexist us. By critiquing the status quo, feminism helps us develop alternative views of social relations. From these alternative perspectives, we can transform existing institutions and practices through activist interventions.
- Everyday life and identities are excellent sites of redefinition. The writing classroom can then become an important site of intervention.
- Feminism must/does already combine theory and practice.

I used these premises to select reading assignments and discussion topics. Also, I encouraged students to use them as they selected the organizations where they would work.

I used these principles, too, to create the course's environment, including class discussions. In each three-hour class meeting, we discussed the theoretical readings and applied them to issues occurring in communities, in the university, and in their volunteer projects. My intention was to shift my role from "expert" to facilitator, which is certainly a common goal for critical pedagogy. The class discussions and the students' volunteer projects, then, became the center of the course. By having students write about their own experiences with volunteering—by having them report on these through the lenses of the theorists we had read and discussed in class—I was hoping that personal experience would become one facet of the research process: a facet that would lead to more social awareness and then to ethical social action, both inside and outside their classrooms. Analyzing how the women in the community organizations reported their experiences in the various volunteer spaces helped us to see that they were not dupes of a system, but were, in fact, attempting to participate in structures whose codes they had been reading.

I also volunteered at the Fresh Start Women's Resource Center throughout the semester in order to align my own practices with the goals for the course. Throughout the semester, I shared my own volunteer experiences with the students as well. "Doing" the homework myself would, I hoped, shift the view of instructor as expert as well. What the effects of these decisions were, however, can only be determined through the students' eyes.

## Kirsti's Reflections

Patricia's seminar functioned in two very different ways for me. Both the volunteer experience I did and the time I spent in class affected me personally *and* professionally. The semester I took Patricia's seminar was my first semester teaching first-year composition. The issue of accessible discourse became very important for me throughout that semester, and it was a recurring theme in my volunteer experience, Patricia's class, and my own classroom.

I spent the bulk of my volunteer hours at Fresh Start Women's Research Center, sitting in a writing group with women from all walks of life. We read books that I will characterize as "woman power" texts and then brought in samples of our own writing to discuss along with the reading that we had done. I listened to a woman writing a novel, to a poet, and to several other women who were interested mainly in discussing reading and writing practices. During my time in the writing group, I noticed that my subject position shifted drastically. Instead of bringing in any of my academic writing, I started looking back over the poetry that I used to write and began to value that sort of writing once again. Interestingly, during most of my time in the writing group, many of the women would talk about their writing in self-deprecating terms or use dismissive language to characterize both their processes and their skills. This kind of talk constantly reminded me of class discussions we had had with Patricia about women's agency and ownership in language.

In class we discussed gender and language a great deal and found that women are often seen as passive or agentless in the language practices that function around them. The issues broached by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray were particularly pertinent: if language cannot accommodate or speak female experience(s), what are women to do? Though they did not say it in these exact terms, the women in the writing group I visited recognized that they did not have access to the language that was privileged in the communities we were discussing. I think that because of issues of access it was important that women's voices and women's power be privileged in the writing group. This privileging took place while we read published texts that dealt with women's experience of the world, personal narratives about less-privileged subjects and activities.

However, when dealing with their own writing, the women's discourse slipped and we were again amateurs discussing a new genre. I saw the women in my group grapple with issues of subjectivity and agency on a very tacit level. One of the women continually undermined her own work, providing disclaimers for her writing each time she read. "I wrote this really late at night." Or "Keep in mind, this is really rough." Or "This is only a first draft. I wrote it quickly. I'll make it better." This observation made me reflect on my professional experience teaching first-year composition, where I saw my students taking on a new discourse community as college students. Along with the women in the writing group, my students were struggling to own their voice as academic writers.

Through a process of reflection, trial and error, and praxis based on the theories we generated collectively in the Feminism and Composition classroom, I had an idea for a community-based first-year composition curriculum that asked first-year students to do the same thing that Patricia was asking us to do: go out into the community and volunteer in social settings. While the curriculum was still in the idea stage, I began to focus on the ethical issues of the feminist research project and

in feminist pedagogy. I turned to Patricia Sullivan, one of authors we read in the graduate class, for her explanation of feminist research and praxis:

> As both an ideology and a praxis, feminism not only reinterprets but seeks to change the dominant, patriarchal structures and categories of experience that have rendered women's activities and social relations analytically invisible. Feminist scholarship in composition thus has both reactive and proactive components: it focuses on received knowledge—on the existing studies, canons, discourses, theories, assumptions, and practices of our discipline—and reexamines them in the light of feminist theory to uncover male bias and androcentrism; and it recuperates and constitutes distinctively feminine modes of thinking and expression by taking gender, and in particular women's experiences, perceptions, and meanings, as the starting point of inquiry or as the key datum for analysis. (126)

To accomplish the goals presented by Sullivan, we must raise important questions about ethics and materiality. Over the course of the graduate class, we engaged critically as student activists but to do that we first had to enter into a feminist discourse community that paired teaching practices and social critique—the proactive and reactive elements that Sullivan discusses. The ethical dilemma for durable feminist goals is encapsulated in the very goal that is the most important: action. We can't simply walk into the classroom and turn students into "raving liberals" or force an adherence to our personal pedagogies. The questions then become: is an ethical act opening up the structure for critique so that students can make up their own minds? If we are furthering a feminist project that opens up the social structure to critique, does that constitute an ethical act because we are not, as instructors, telling students what or how to think but rather working together in the classroom to critically evaluate the broader systemic discourses we come across socially and culturally?

From the volunteer project I had completed in the graduate class, I knew that social change was not simply about going out into the community and bringing change and/or awareness to others; instead, I knew I wanted to design the curriculum for my first-year writing course so that my students and I could reconceptualize *need* by reinterpreting hierarchy and the social project. With another graduate student enrolled in Patricia's seminar, I designed a curriculum that we call Writing and Community Action. Our curriculum is based on current activist definitions of service-learning, because, like Patricia, we interpret service-learning as strategic and systemic. We see it as an insertion into a system of social hierarchy, rather than a method of experts coming in to "fix" what's wrong. Using Patricia's course as a model, I asked my students in the Writing and Community Action course to rethink issues such as expertise, power, and ethics. I asked them, instead of going out into the community to provide a service, to go out into the community and interact. The broad focus of our course was on researched knowledge of the local history and community. This, we hoped, would increase students' rhetorical knowledge, critical

thinking, and abilities to read and write, including the ability to work with conventions of academic research and writing. Moreover, by having them analyze the interactions between academic and public literacies, we encouraged them to consider community work as a tactic for social change.

The curriculum is now in its second year and the students in the course have given nothing but positive feedback. One student went so far as to say, "[T]he writing felt alive when we did it because the issues were real." The connection between the classroom and the community became a material and visceral experience for the students, one that they walked into with their eyes wide open. By setting up a critique of power and discussing ethical action in the classroom and the community, students were able to locate and talk critically about their subjectivity, including how they fit into social systems and power relations both inside and outside the classroom.[3]

In my own volunteer work in the graduate class, I had sought to affect the community I was in by interacting with the women in the writing group, rather than by imparting a service to them. In turn, over the course of the past year, as I've taught my newly developed curriculum, my students have found this approach both intellectually challenging and rewarding, because as they seek to renegotiate what *need* is, their projects become a great deal richer and more complex. Further, writing becomes a simpler process because they are not holding their research subjects at a distance but rather working with them to take on a different identity than simply student and researcher. They are moving into the subject position of activist, but it is an ethical and tangible discourse for them to take on because they spend time interacting with me, one another, and the community at large in order to understand the larger social concerns that appear in the discourses they access.

For me, this position as student activist embodies our feminist goals because the instructors (traditionally the "us") are not forcing their positions or their politics on the students (the "them"). The us/them dichotomy collapses in a classroom that focuses on working together in order to break down boundaries between the ivory tower and the community. Student, instructor, and citizen are no longer singular identities that one must move between in the classroom. "Rather than opposing the public and private voices or opposing masculine and feminine, we need to see how to negotiate that opposition in order to speak a multiplicity of voices into cultural dialogue" (Bauer 354). I have found that as we question larger structures of social communities and discourse communities, this multiplicity of voices becomes both visible and tangible for each student, including me.

My most durable memory from Patricia's class is not the readings (though I still use many of them) nor the final "product" I wrote (though I still work with that). Rather, it is the realization that if students, at any level of college, interact with local communities as participants rather than as observers, the feminist research strategy

almost becomes tacitly engaged. Rather than view their subjects as objects, they seek to understand constructed subject positions and the identities inherent in those.

## Tom's Reflections

Patricia presented us with several possible service projects in which to participate (though she also gave us the opportunity to find our own). One included service for the Make-a-Difference foundation, and a representative came to give us a short presentation. During the talk, I raised an issue regarding men volunteering for projects that required direct interaction with women and/or children who were victims of domestic violence. Although I do not recall whether men were specifically excluded from certain projects by the Make-a-Difference Foundation, I do remember feeling uncomfortable, for the sake of possible victims, about volunteering there. My impression was that many women at the foundation's shelter were displaced as a result of domestic violence. Thus, I began thinking about other projects Patricia had offered, to find one in which my presence might not cause extra tension or unnecessarily complicate matters for victims. In other words, my social identity as a young male played a role in my decision for a volunteer project, which was, one might say, subject to some discursive limitations.

I chose to volunteer with Courtwatch, a watchdog program sponsored by the Arizona Coalition against Domestic Violence that concerned itself with the treatment of women in courtrooms. My task was to go to domestic trial hearings and observe the way judges treated the women in cases that involved domestic disputes or orders of protection. As a volunteer, I attended hearings (especially order-of-protection hearings) and took notes on the conduct of the judges. Courtwatch wanted to know whether the judges appeared biased against women, whether their cases were taken seriously, and whether the court afforded them protection from potentially dangerous situations. During my volunteer experience, I faced an institution on its own terms. My initial belief in societal change (though not necessarily unqualified before the class began), augmented by feminist theory and a new experience with a patriarchal institution, was problematized. My everyday life and experiences did not match up well with those of the women (or men) whose cases were being heard in the courtroom because I belong to a different gender and sometimes class; the hierarchical system does not perpetuate disadvantages for me the way it does for women who, for example, seek orders of protection. Additionally, my project did not meet expectations that were created for me.

Before I began my service project in earnest, my conception of Courtwatch as an activist institution was molded by the presentation video shown us by a Courtwatch representative during the Feminism and Composition seminar. The video introduced us trainees to the problem of male ethos in the courtroom. One of the most

enduring memories I have of Patricia's graduate class was that video, because it made real to me the powerless position of both women and children that is constructed by conceptions that are cultural and systemic. Because so many custody battles and cases about visitation rights involve "deadbeat dads" who do not pay child support and do not appear to care for their children, fathers who *do* appear to care for them and who *do* pay support are seen as "model" fathers who deserve time with their children. The Courtwatch video reviewed, among several cases, one in which there was strong evidence of a father's sexual abuse of his very young daughter. Despite the child's obvious fear of and aversion to her father, in conjunction with evidence of vaginal stretching, the court ruled in favor of the father for custody because he paid child support and seemed interested in spending time with his child. The child's screaming is what I probably remember the most, as well as the documented history of the father's temper problems. (Even in court, he was visibly irate as seemingly damning evidence about his character and behavior was being introduced). The real disjuncture in this case lies in the selective uses of empirical or forensic evidence. While such types of evidence are often favored in the court system, the Courtwatch video taught me that a defendant's ethos (a white male who "wants to be with his children") could play an overpowering role that contradicts the traditional emphasis on "facts." In the video, a selective use of evidence that depended on the father's systemically constructed ethos was more important than crucial empirical evidence that favored the mother and the daughter. Fathers who can construct their identities as something other than "deadbeat dads" through their self-representation and the subject positions granted them by the larger court system enjoy a favorable ethos, even if evidence exists that their conduct outside the courtroom is reprehensible.

After my Courtwatch training, I became aware of systemic issues that I hadn't considered before. Courtwatch appeared to pay close attention to systemic issues, at least in its training, in a way that I don't remember from the Make-a-Difference presentation. Make-a-Difference seemed to be more concerned (at least during their training) with a more benign volunteerism in which participants helped meet the immediate needs of women and children in shelters. On the other hand, Courtwatch left me with the impression that it was paying close attention to the systemic causes of prejudice in the court system because it was interested in how women *became* disadvantaged as opposed to the idea that they simply *were*. Courtwatch wanted to investigate whether institutionalized rules and laws were being carried out in the context of the courtroom. If it received enough reports that those rules were not being carried out, its job was to find ways to make sure those rules were enforced at the institutional level. Through this contrast, I began to think of differences between volunteerism and activism, in a way that comes closer to Bickford and Reynolds' definition of activism as participation for systemic change rather than mere charity.

While my own notions of activism were changing, my experience in the courtroom seemed stifling. I witnessed an order-of-protection hearing in which the plaintiff must have believed herself to be in immediate danger. Priority was given to her hearing by the court; the original schedule for that week was changed to accommodate her (a criterion from Courtwatch to which I was supposed to pay close attention). She was granted an "emergency" order of protection and was afforded some recourse in her plight; the court was at least aware that a potentially dangerous man was threatening her. However, on a material level, she was afforded no real protection. The court left it up to her to plan escape routes and to minimize risk to herself by whatever strategies she deemed necessary. The judge recommended that she put copies of the order of protection in places where she carried out her daily life—in her car, in her desk at work, in her home, and anywhere else the perpetrator might try to find her—so that if she were attacked and could get to a phone, she would be able to show any responding law enforcement officer that she had an order of protection in place. The officer would then "know what to do."

Whether her ex-husband or boyfriend had actually assaulted her before the OOP hearing or had only threatened to, nothing was really done about the situation; he was not arrested, which would have provided the maximum safety for her. Instead, she was physically as vulnerable as she had been before she entered the courtroom in the first place. Her representation of herself as a person in danger became a "re-presentation" of a self that is created for her by the system. In all reality, she could have still become a real victim instead of just a potential one because the system chose not to make a nonvictim out of her through actual physical protection. The contradiction is that *she* ultimately had to make provisions to keep herself safe from the man, and the judge, in a sense, reinscribed her into the role of victim with which she went into the court to begin with: "You need to have a plan of defense and notification in place—otherwise, you'll be defending yourself from him with a piece of paper." The outcome of this hearing reminded me of Judith Butler's concerns about (re)presentation in the patriarchy. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that any representation within patriarchal discourses that women are able to achieve will be co-opted for the use of the patriarchal system itself, thereby rendering women powerless to change their own situation. Although women may be allowed to "represent" themselves, they do so on terms established by institutions that control their definitions of themselves in the first place; thus, they are "re-presented." The system from within which women operate still controls the ways in which they are defined.

My experience led me to believe that the patriarchy is alive and well, continuing to insinuate itself in social structures in many ways. It appears that the judicial system gets stuck with its own framework of socially constructed identities despite

its efforts to protect women, which makes only certain outcomes possible. I finished this service project with an odd feeling of dissonance between the impression I had after the Courtwatch training and the observations I made in actual courtrooms. Especially because of the training video and the screaming little girl, my initial impression of Courtwatch was that it intended to fight for systemic change because it ultimately focused on institutionalized identities for men and women. However, the Courtwatch forms that I filled out as part of my volunteer service asked only whether judges were following certain rules. My duty seemed more like that of a volunteer as I "manned" the courtroom to watch for injustices. Others from Courtwatch would be taking more activist measures at the institutional level if violations were recorded by volunteers like me. And, unfortunately, shortly after my volunteer project began, the Courtwatch organization folded for reasons that were never communicated to me. After spending several hours observing courtrooms, I was unable to turn in my observations. While I believed in change through activism, my actual experience of looking for ways to change society at the systemic level felt unsuccessful.

As a result, I have not spent a great deal of time trying to integrate community participation into my own composition classes. While I am convinced that the gap between the academy and the larger community needs to be addressed, I do not think it is easy to find community projects that provide an opportunity to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between the two. Although I did get a real glimpse of how feminist theories play out in contexts outside the university (and thus one of Patricia's goals was accomplished), my experience was also limited by my own complex subject position as a young male in the context of feminist activism. In a sense, I relegated myself to the role of an academic who watched feminist issues play out while I simply observed them. On the other hand, I felt my reason for choosing Courtwatch over Make-a-Difference was good: I was afraid that I might exacerbate harm already caused by systemic issues, and so I sought access to patriarchy on a more systemic level.

## Collaborative Reflections: Toward a Conclusion

What power, then, do we really have to challenge the boundaries between community and university when we are working within an institutional structure that is based on and draws authority from its separateness? The three of us have attempted to critique the dichotomy between the university and the communities within which it is located. Drawing on feminist theories that insist on being active in the community rather than simply observing it from behind the walls of the university, Patricia's social project assignment sought to deconstruct this binary relationship by connecting the work in the graduate seminar with volunteer/service experiences that her graduate students participated in while taking the course. The hope was that this

connection between theory and experience would lead students to understand, evaluate, and work to change the social systems in which the women's experiences are silenced and/or marginalized—both in communities *and* in the university.

Curriculum such as Patricia's graduate course begins to challenge old definitions of activism and service-learning by encouraging students to build reciprocal relationships with community organizations. It draws on the best of feminist theory and service-learning practice to help students locate themselves as agents in the discourse of feminist activism. In the Feminism and Composition seminar, students as well as the instructor investigated these theories in the communities and worked toward building reciprocal relationships. For example, Kirsti continues to volunteer at Fresh Start, hence building an ongoing relationship with that organization that collaboratively creates projects drawing on her expertise to meet the needs of the women served by the Center. In true reciprocity, though, she has drawn on her experiences with the community to change her undergraduate curriculum, hence bringing back what she learned there to the university.

While there were certainly common themes in the students' projects, students had very different experiences and faced different outcomes. As is made clear in their reflections, Kirsti and Tom had varying experiences in their attempts to build reciprocal relationships between community organizations and the university. Given that the students and the teacher came from a variety of backgrounds, it makes sense that their experiences with the social projects were dramatically different, because factors such as gender, race, and class directly shaped their discursive involvement throughout the course projects. For Kirsti, her experiences with the social project dramatically shaped her pedagogy and praxis—as well as her continued local involvement. For Tom, however, his work with Courtwatch, a program that ultimately failed, had a different impact on him because of his subject position within the course and the social project.

Class discussions of these differences challenged traditional conceptions of the authority relationship between students and teacher. In order for these discussions to be successful, it is crucial to dislocate the traditional space of the instructor by engaging with students in an ethical discussion of power relationships. This dialogue opens a space in the classroom to begin critiquing structures both in the classroom and in the university, a dialogue that can then be extended to analyses of institutional structures within larger communities. By understanding the intersections between various institutions, we can begin to expose the relationship between the ivory tower and the community. The construction of knowledge that took place in the classroom was complicated and recursively examined because of students' participation in the social project, their movement between academic and community spaces. Knowledge and knower began to take on multiple meanings for the students and professor because of the constant negotiation between us/them and

inside/outside. These practices allow students and instructors to renegotiate their identities as students, teachers, and citizens who operate within multiple social frameworks.

By asking them to analyze the connections between feminist theories and their experiences in the community organizations, the reflection papers gave students a chance to look at their own situatedness within academic and community discourses. When he looked at his role in the structure, Tom was aware that his sense of powerlessness came out of a feminist awareness of the control that men (and particularly white, middle-class men) are automatically given in social situations. He was afraid of doing further harm to women who had been marginalized and silenced by patriarchal systems; therefore, he selected a more passive social project so that he could "observe" and not harm. The ways in which he interpreted his situatedness and the real social interpretations of masculinity, then, prevented him from making/helping change in a grounded, durable way. On the other hand, Kirsti realized that her positioning as teacher granted her authority within the community, even though she did not, as a feminist instructor, want to claim that space. Beyond the external interpretations of her subjectivity, though, her own identification of herself as "writer" and "feminist" who wanted to enact positive change for women gained her entrance to the space. Because of her sense of her subjectivity, Kirsti felt that she could help. All of these factors helped her to be immediately "let into" the space because of her gender and her self-identification as "writer." She was allowed, and claimed the right to, entry in ways that Tom was not and did not.

What these differences suggest is that the social projects were affected both by students' perceptions of their own situatedness—gender, race, and class—and by the community participants' perceptions of it. Although it may be easy to read Kirsti's experience as a success and Tom's as a failure, we recognize that we must measure the success of these projects along a continuum. Even when their participation does not directly change the social situations in which they worked, students' work in the community can achieve the goals set forth by theories of service-learning and feminism. The course project challenged the separation between self/other and knower/known; provided opportunities to build reciprocal relationships between the university and the community; questioned the theory/practice split; and renegotiated the role that universities can play within their communities. The results of the project point to the need to address more thoroughly divisions even within the university, as our resistance to the traditional concept of service-learning highlights. Work still needs to be done, obviously, but graduate curricula like the one discussed here can make an important intervention and create significant changes.

We are not claiming that feminist classrooms can, by themselves, change the systemic structures that construct our relationships in ways not beneficial to us or our communities. We do believe, however, that the classroom is *one* important site

of intervention—as long as student dissent and difference are acknowledged, embraced, and encouraged as integral parts of daily classroom praxis. Being aware of the spectrum of possibility for how students experience the community projects we assign is one important step toward ethically implementing the feminist goals of social change within institutional structures, both in the academy and in communities.

## Notes

1. As bell hooks argues, "[F]rom the onset, women's liberation movement participants have struggled to unite theory and practice, to create liberatory feminist praxis (defined by Paulo Freire as 'action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it')" (112).

2. See also Bacon and Cushman ("Public" and "Rhetorician").

3. The students' projects can be found at http://www.public.asu.edu/~kkcole/eng102b.html under "Student Links."

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## Appendix A: Course Overview

English 591
Feminism and Composition
Professor Patricia Webb
Fall 2003

Course Rationale:
*Feminisms at Large:* Is feminism a theory? A practice? A politics? All of these?

We live in a time in which many women and men think that feminism is no longer needed or that it represents a group of man-hating radicals. Second Wave feminists' fights for the Equal Rights Amendment and the 80s wave of feminist theory across disciplines have given way to an era in which young women and men cringe at the word "feminist" and embrace the primacy of the "individual" and the "uniqueness" that is associated with it. What has happened to collectives fighting for changes in the existing power structures? Why do women and men continue to tolerate social relations that subordinate their interest to those of patriarchal perspectives? Why do we make choices that run counter to our best interests?

These kinds of questions apply to all areas of our lives: welfare rights, education, labor practices (pay and working conditions), childcare, birth planning, popular cultural representations, legal system, medical and psychological care, etc. To understand why we make the choices that we do, we need to understand the basic "fact" that patriarchal relations are structural—they exist in the institutions and social practices of our society and cannot be explained by the intentions—good or bad—of individual men and women. (Individual men and women can certainly work as agents of that oppression, but they do not, by themselves, create it. Patriarchy is continually being created by current practices, but it has a durable history that cuts across institutions and times.) We need to study the structures of our society, then, that influence and "control" all areas of our lives. In order to undertake this kind of study, we need to draw on feminism as a theory, a practice, a politics, *and* a philosophy. While these four categories are presented as separate in the previous sentence,

in actuality feminist practices are always already informed by theory and philosophy, feminist politics is based on feminist practices, and so on.

*Feminism and Composition (Shape of the Course):*
Given the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures, it is not surprising that theorists/practitioners in rhetoric/composition would study the impact of patriarchy on the educational system, particularly on the teaching of writing. This course focuses on the ways that theorists/practitioners in the field of rhetoric/composition have taken up, engaged with, and participated in feminist theories. In order to understand the larger context in which the rhet/comp feminist writings arise, we will be "reading around" the rhet/comp theorists. In other words, we will be reading the sources from which rhet/comp theorists are drawing along with the work that was being done in other fields around the issues that rhet/comp researchers are/were writing about and studying.

*Key Premises of the Course:*
The key premises of this class are as follows:

- Patriarchy, a set of power relations that rest on social meanings given to biological sexual differences, is the starting point of feminism. Out of this system of thought comes our current system of sexual divisions of labor, the social organization of procreation, internalized norms of femininity, and dualistic discursive practices.
- Because it derives from a contradiction between the structures of institutions and our experiences of them, feminism studies not only gender but race, class, and sexual orientation as well. Who we are (i.e., our identities) is more complicated than simply our gendered identities.
- Feminism leads us to create a theory of subjectivity that helps us explain the institutional practices that preexist us. By critiquing the status quo, feminism helps us to develop an alternative view of social relations. From this alternative view, we can transform existing institutions and practices.
- Everyday life and subjectivities are the site of redefinition. The writing classroom can then become an important site of intervention.
- Feminism must/does already combine theory *and* practice.

Class Activities:
*Weekly Class Meetings*
Each week, we will discuss in depth the articles assigned for that week. Our goal will be to map out key trends, understand key terms and theories, identify linked practices, and explore the connections between feminist theory and composition studies.

The core activity of our class meetings, then, is engaged, interested discussion of the sources. These discussions will help you to develop a stronger understanding

of core ideas and theories, an understanding that will inform your final paper for the course.

*Ongoing Glossary:*
This is kind of like a daily log, except what you are logging are key terms that we discuss in class, that appear in the reading, and that you run across in your own research. While I will collect the log in the middle and at the end of the semester to give you credit, its purpose is for you to work through definitions of difficult, complex terms and to see how various authors define the terms differently. There is no length requirement to this assignment. What is important is engagement with the sources, ongoing entries (rather than cramming at the end), and mapping out multiple sources' definitions of similar terms.

*Volunteer Activity:*
Because we will focus on theoretical investigations in our weekly class meetings, we will participate in a volunteer activity in order to experience the more practical side of the theoretical issues we will be discussing. (Realize that I fully believe that theory and practice dance together and that I'm making an artificial separation here—but I'm using the separation strategically.) You will volunteer at least six (6) hours at a local women's organization and write a reflection paper on it. (See assignment sheet)

You will sign up for a time to present in class during the semester on the volunteer activities you engaged in and what you learned from them. Ideally, your volunteer activity would also inform your writing of your research paper, if only tangentially.

This activity is required, but can be done on your own time.

*Final Paper Project:*
You will write a comprehensive, theoretically informed research paper for this course. The paper will explore an intersection between a body of feminist theory and composition studies. You will want to consult with me about your topic.

In order to complete this project, you will work through the following assignment "parts":

- Topic Proposal (2–3 pages, including a short annotated bibliography)
- Audience Analysis (2–3 pages)
- Summary of Key Theorist Paper (3–5 pages)
- Final Paper (15–20 pages, plus apparatus)

All of these parts tie into the final paper project.

The final class meeting, 12/9, will be devoted to your presentations of your research paper projects.

Grading:

| | |
|---|---|
| Final Research Paper (includes all of the "parts"): | 50% |
| *Volunteer Activity (includes volunteering, presentation, paper):* | 20% |
| Ongoing Glossary (includes midterm and final turn-in) | 10% |
| Participation (being prepared to discuss, active participation) | 20% |

Blackboard Accompaniment:
A Blackboard course page accompanies this course. I will routinely post my multimedia presentations, URLs, and student projects to the site.

## Appendix B: Volunteer Assignment

English 591
Feminism and Composition
Volunteer Activity Assignment

There are two parts to this assignment:

1. You will volunteer at a nonprofit organization which specialize in serving women and women's needs. You will volunteer at least 6 hours throughout the semester.
2. You will write an informal yet "meaty" 5–7 page, double-spaced paper in which you analyze your volunteer experiences and show how they connect back to the theoretical discussions in the class.

The Purpose of the Assignment: Why volunteer?

- to make a difference
- to learn about/experience "real" effects of patriarchy
- to identify what is being done to help women in our culture
- to see the intersections between theory and practice
- to see the disjunctions between theory and practice
- to see the results of past women's political actions
- to evaluate what's working and what's not
- to ground theories in faces and experiences
- to become an active member of the local community (i.e., a citizen)

- to go beyond the theory/practice split
- to see how the slogans "The personal is political" and "Knowledge is power" get played out—to evaluate their "true-ness"
- to explore the multiple layers of life affected by patriarchy (children, work, education, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual parts)

The Process:

- Select an organization on your own or use one from my list.
- Write down your preconceptions about the place. (MAKE SURE YOU DO THIS BEFORE YOU GO.)
- Go to one organization multiple times (unless there is a compelling reason to go to different organizations).
- Write a paper reflecting on the process (see assignment).

The Paper:
In a conversational yet meaty paper of 5–7 pages, evaluate the experiences, using the following guidelines:

- Explain where you went, what you did, who was there, and how you felt while there.
- Compare your preconceptions with what actually happened.
- Explore connections between your volunteer work and the theories we've been discussing in class. Were the multiple layers of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation operating here? How?
- Analyze what this experience tells you about the state of patriarchy in the United States today (be careful not to generalize—though you can certainly point out some durable issues).
- Would you use a similar activity in your writing classes? How could what you learned be applied to your teaching?
- Would you volunteer again?