

TEACHING TO TRANSFORM: TOWARD AN ACTION-ORIENTED FEMINIST
PEDAGOGY IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

by

Shereen Siddiqui

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
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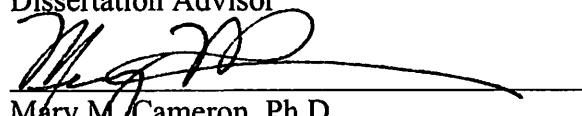
This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation advisor, Dr. Susan Love Brown, Department of Anthropology, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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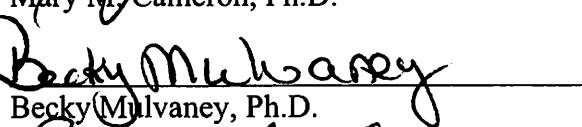


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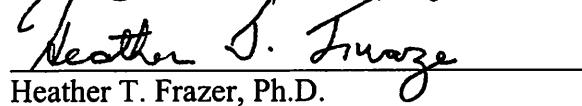
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While working on the Ph.D., I trained for and completed several distance races. I am struck by the similarities between the daunting endeavors of academic research and distance running. Standing at the start line of a marathon is not unlike sitting in front of a blank document. Thousands of words to write. Miles of road to traverse. With both, there are most certainly moments of self doubt, hitting the wall, asking why you ever dared attempt something so big, wondering how you could have ever possibly thought this was a good idea, wishing you could quit, yet knowing you've gone too far to stop now. Both are largely solitary, and oftentimes lonely, endeavors. Yet both are greatly facilitated by the presence of others. My completion of distance races would have been difficult, at best, without the shared wisdom of more experienced runners, the camaraderie of fellow runners with whom I trained, the cheers and high-fives from fans along the race route, and the dedication and unwavering support of those real diehard fans waiting for me at the finish line. Knowing they were there pushed me to keep going when I wanted to quit. Likewise, my journey to the dissertation finish line would not have been possible without many important "coaches" and "fans."

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end. I am grateful to Dr. Mary Cameron for her insistence on a solid proposal, which facilitated the writing of this dissertation. The project itself is an outgrowth of interviews I conducted for one of her courses. Likewise, Dr. Heather Frazer's course on Oral History was instrumental in helping me to see myself as a capable qualitative researcher. I appreciate her thorough reading and helpful comments, and am also grateful for her willingness to stick with me and this project, even in her retirement. Thank you to Dr. Becky Mulvaney, a passionate educator, for joining my team and believing in this work.

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There are a few people who came into my life at critical moments in the dissertation process. Lorraine Cross played a pivotal role when she selected me, a lowly adjunct instructor, to be part of a faculty learning community on academic service-learning, giving me a whole new language and lens. Dr. Debbie Layton-Tholl helped me put things in perspective and pushed me in the right direction. Dr. Valentina Kloosterman coached me when I hit the wall at one particular critical juncture. John Pennington, a tremendous cheerleader, came back into my life at just the right moment; I must thank him for the gift of Adam Hurst's motivational music, for painstakingly reading each word of this dissertation and giving thoughtful feedback, and, to use his perfect words, for "patiently holding out cups of refreshing affection and adoration" as I approached the finish line.

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I am fortunate to have extraordinary friends who have stuck with me and continued to cheer me along this very long journey. Richie Delewsky nourished me, literally, with coffee and lunch breaks, but also with love and cheers, just when I needed them most. Jill Edwards stuck with me through it all, listened to all my moans and groans, and made me laugh along the way. Buffy Tucker provided encouragement, the perfect writing retreats, and occasionally, much-needed kicks in the butt. Agatha Falso's wisdom and insistence that I finish were greatly appreciated. I am grateful to Jamie Johnson and Andrea Canora for giving me opportunities to laugh and recharge my batteries, and to Loren Niemi and Jim Gilbert for their friendship and loyalty over the years. Thanks also to my friend and P.I. peer, Jacqui May, for commiserating and for the "interventions."

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the love and support of my family whose patience and belief in me has been constant. My father, Dr. K. Ali

Siddiqui's, remarkable educational journey and insistence that his daughters travel far beyond the illiteracy of his sisters in Afghanistan has been a constant motivational force in pursuing the doctorate and completing this dissertation. Knowing how much this degree meant to him and to our family and the sacrifices he made for me to have every advantage were huge factors in my pursuit of this goal. My mother, Doris Siddiqui, is like the ultimate fan—wearing my name across her chest, cheering at every point along the race route, ready with words of encouragement, a snack, a break—whatever I needed. She never wavered in her support of my pursuit, or in her belief that I could do it. Her love and guidance were like a blanket that enveloped me, comforting and nurturing when I wanted to quit. I am also grateful to my siblings, Rona Siddiqui and David Siddiqui. Their love, encouragement, and brilliance in their respective fields and pursuit of their own dreams pushed me to go the distance. My aunt, Anita Troccoli, could have cared less about my mastery of any subject, with the exception of Italian cooking, but her generous assistance allowed me the time to focus on my dissertation at the end. I wish she could be here for the “post-race” party. There will be carbs!

Great thanks go to those who had to live with me on a daily basis. My furriest and most loyal of fans, Mooshy El Choo Ché Siddiqui, kept me company for countless hours as I toiled, forfeiting long walks, and asking for nothing more than the occasional rub and treat. I must thank Jeff Young, not only for his support of my goal, but mostly, for enduring; I realize that living with a procrastinating perfectionist is no small feat. I imagine it was nothing less than excruciatingly painful and frustrating for him to watch me jog in place, run into roadblocks, stop, restart, and repeat this process for so many years. My partner in all things, he started this race with me, and his own sprint to the

dissertation finish line, while juggling work and family responsibilities, was an inspiration. Finally, I must thank my littlest fan, my beautiful son Harris, who without knowing it, gave me the final push across the finish line when he came into this world and taught me what years of formal education never could: what is most important.

ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study was conducted to develop a better understanding of the place of praxis in higher education women's studies programs in the U.S. Built upon theories of feminist pedagogy, feminist praxis, activism, experiential education, and academic service-learning, the research explores how praxis is reflected and taught in women's studies programs, how these programs impact students' understanding of feminist theory and practice, and what factors affect the implementation of action-oriented pedagogy. Examples of several action-oriented projects that have successfully been implemented in women's studies courses are offered, and a case study demonstrates the impact of these projects. The methods used include document review of women's studies mission statements and syllabi, and interviews with women's studies faculty and alumnae. The interview data were coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

The study found that women's studies program have the goal of empowering students to engage in social change work, but this mission is not taking place through action-oriented projects. Students desire and benefit from this type of learning experience, but the opportunities to put theory into practice in the context of the college classroom are scarce. Women's studies programs point to internships as an opportunity for students to connect theory with practice, but these programs are often poorly organized or are not required. The research suggests that faculty members refrain from engaging in action-oriented pedagogy due to fears about repercussions from university administration with regard to program funding and tenure and promotion decisions. Additionally, the perception that action-oriented pedagogy takes more time to do is a deterrent. Despite the absence of action-oriented pedagogy, many students are creating opportunities for praxis themselves, connecting theory and action on a daily basis through their jobs and volunteer work.

This study contributes to the research on feminist pedagogy by offering one model for assisting students in applying theory in the service of social justice, thus fulfilling one of the missions of women's studies. It suggests that faculty use the existing infrastructure for service-learning programs and incorporate these experiences into their courses. Universities should provide support, including incentives for faculty who implement action-oriented projects.

DEDICATION

To my parents, K. Ali Siddiqui and Doris Siddiqui, for instilling in me a love of learning and for giving me the foundation upon which this work was built. I am so proud to be your daughter and eternally grateful for the sacrifices you have made for me. I have always wanted to make you proud.

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CHAPTER 1

THEORY MEETS ACTION: A LOVE AFFAIR?

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

Not having heard something is not as good as having heard it; having heard it is not as good as having seen it; having seen it is not as good as knowing it; knowing it is not as good as putting it into practice.

—Xun Kuang, *Xunzi*

Prologue

Like many of my students, when I started college I did not know that I was a feminist or even what feminism was, but I was naturally drawn to sociology and women's studies classes because through these disciplines, I saw the potential to connect academic work to progressive social change. However, as an undergraduate student, I was often overwhelmed in my classes when I learned about the abominable things happening to disenfranchised groups all over the world. Although we studied theories explaining the origins and causes of subordination, not one of my professors offered hope for the future. By "hope" I am not talking about holding hands, lighting candles, and singing "We Shall Overcome"; I was looking for viable solutions in an academic context. But I found no insights on or discussion of how we could create strategies for social

change and improve the lives of the people we studied. My experience is not an isolated one. In an issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Siobhan Ring echoes my own experience in women's studies. She writes:

As a student of women's studies, I felt lucky to be able to have meaningful dialogues with students and professors about the personal, social, and political aspects of gender oppression. I learned to value academic study that was relevant to people's lived experiences, and I was also exposed to the idea that academics might have a responsibility not only to study but also to act to change the world around it. But unfortunately, my education did not go far enough. I left academia, and specifically women's studies, frustrated that it stopped short of inspiring truly transformative social change.¹

We surveyed social movements and activism as historic events, not as formulas we could employ or models we could emulate. Although I loved women's studies and thrived on the rigor of reading feminist theory and learning how to do research, my classes left me frustrated and depressed. I found outlets by writing articles for a campus feminist magazine and working with the Women's Center to educate about date rape. I belonged to an underground society of women who subscribed to radical feminism and engaged in subversive plots to fight sexism on our campus. In short, I became a feminist leader. My experience matches the research findings of Claire N. Kaplan's study on the impact of praxis on women's studies graduates: "Individuals who devoted a significant amount of time in undergraduate leadership positions and feminist activities outside the classroom stated this was where they honed their organizing and leadership skills; these women were more likely than other interviewees to continue their commitment to feminist social change work after graduation."² Indeed, it was through my extracurricular

¹ Siobhan Ring, "Seizing Academia for Social Change," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1999): 230, accessed February 6, 2015, JSTOR.

² Claire N. Kaplan, "Carrying it on: Post-Graduation Impact of Feminist Praxis on Women's Studies Majors" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2004), ii.

activities, my experiences *outside of* the college classroom, that I was able to see the power of people working together toward a common goal, became a believer in activism as a tool for affecting social change, and developed the skills necessary to engage in social change work.

When I went to graduate school I had similar frustrations. I had entered graduate school, after a three-year academic hiatus, with the intention of pursuing the academic life. Not knowing how else to put my skills and talents to use, I had convinced myself that academia was my niche. “I’ll do meaningful research,” I told myself. It did not take long for me to realize that I would be stifled in the ivory tower, my activist spirit squelched and my meaningful research buried in scholarly journals, only to be read by those who spoke the language of “Sociologese.” I went to a professor in my department, a scholar in the field of social inequality, and explained my concerns about doing research that would not help the people who needed help the most. “Sociologists do research; ‘do-gooders’ become social workers,” he told me, matter-of-factly. It was extremely disheartening. There was, for me, a disconnect between theory and action, and I feel that I have spent a great majority of my academic life trying to reconcile the two.

I actually considered titling my dissertation “Theory Meets Action: A Love Affair” because it sounds slightly provocative and because it seems to simply sum up what I wanted to address. My mind went on one of its frequent tangents. I began to wonder if I should put a question mark at the end: “Theory Meets Action: A Love Affair?” Is this really a love story? I began to explore this relationship metaphor. Let’s say that theory and action are both single. They meet each other on-line, let’s say through eHarmony. They both spent an hour and a half filling out the free personality inventory,

and the data program matches them up. They meet at a café not far from campus. They like each other. There's definitely chemistry there.

Action admires theory's intelligence. Theory admires action's passion. They both are interested in social justice. But neither one of them is quite sure if this relationship is going to go anywhere. Action is worried that theory is too serious, spends too much time reading and writing. Theory is concerned that action is too capricious, does not spend enough time considering what the research shows or even recognizing the difference between correlation and causation, for that matter. Theory always wants to take action to the library. Action tries to drag theory to protests. It all seems too difficult to work out. This is where I come in. Extending this metaphor probably beyond a reasonable limit, I think of myself as a couple's counselor. It is my job to help theory and action see that they are good for each other, that they need each other, that they complete each other. They are soul mates! Alone they might accomplish some things: theory might get tenure; action might get some media attention for the cause. But together, they could do great things. They could change the world! So like most great love stories, this one is complicated. Like any relationship, this one takes work. They are going to need a lot of counseling, and they are going to have to commit to working on the relationship.

For the purposes of my cheesy metaphor, I called myself a couple's counselor, but in the past I have often thought of myself as a bridge between theory and action. I have recently learned a new term that applies to what I do: social movement broker, "an actor connecting other actors," whose "most crucial property lies in their capacity to connect actors who are not communicating because of some specific political or social

barrier, rather than the mere absence of practical opportunities.”³ Regardless of the word choice, the implication is the same: I respect and understand both theory and action and strive to have a foot planted on each side. Communicating this relationship to my students became my next challenge.

When I finished graduate school and began teaching my own classes in women’s studies, I tried to be mindful of the important elements of feminist teaching that I had gleaned from watching my own professors and from studying feminist pedagogy: participatory learning, personal experience as a source of authority, critical thinking/open-mindedness, and the fostering of social understanding and activism.

From John Dewey to Paulo Freire to bell hooks to Robert Putnam, educators across time and disciplines have commented on the importance of education in increasing social capital and producing social change. When I was hired to teach my first women’s studies course straight out of my M.A. program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, I attempted to set up a classroom that would foster all of these things, and I told my students that with their new understanding of the world they could and should strive to make changes. But I recognized on their faces the same frustration and hopelessness that I had experienced as a student. A piece was missing: the “how.” I offered suggestions, but many of my students at UMSL were full-time employees, some of them parents; in our class discussions, they expressed to me that they did not have the free time to participate in extracurricular activities, as had I in my undergraduate years, nor did they believe that there was a way to fit activism into their busy lives in any shape or form. I knew then that I had to figure out a way to make praxis part of the course experience.

³ Mario Diani, “Leaders’ or Brokers? Positions and Influence in Social Movement Networks,” in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 107.

I developed my first action-oriented assignment in the second women's studies course I taught. It was 2002, and I was a newly-hired adjunct teaching Introduction to Women's Studies at Florida Atlantic University. Since then, I have taught over 15 different courses that employ this pedagogical technique.

In the beginning, I had no clue what I was doing. I had not read Freire. I had never heard of academic service-learning, nor did I know that there was a growing body of literature that could inform and support my work; all I had was an academic background in feminist pedagogy, a job history in student affairs, and my intuition that it was possible to bridge theory and action in the college classroom. In short, I admit that I made it up as I went along. Over the years, I have tweaked, revised, and refined. I have called it an "action project," an "activist project," a "make a difference" project. I joined a faculty learning community on academic-service learning, and as a result, gained a new lens and learned a new language. When it came time to pick a dissertation topic, the decision was easy. Theory emerges from praxis.

As many feminist researchers before me, this project stems from, and is part of, my own life.⁴ As described above, my interest in action-oriented pedagogy grew out of my own experiences as a student in and instructor of women's studies courses and my own perceived lack of praxis in these courses. "Writing such as this is not a confession of 'bias' as it would undoubtedly be labeled in a positivist framework. Rather, it is an explanation of 'the researcher's standpoint' in a feminist framework."⁵

⁴ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 258.

⁵ Ibid., 259.

The title of this dissertation clearly exposes from the onset that I am writing from a perspective, even that I have an agenda. Playing off bell hooks' title *Teaching to Transgress*⁶, the present work suggests that individual transgression should not be a final destination. The goal of action-oriented pedagogy is transformation on micro and macro levels: transformation of society, and through the process of acting, transformation of self. The use of the word "toward" in the subtitle implies movement. Thus, this is not merely a description of action-oriented pedagogy; it is a call to action. From my standpoint, I approached the research with an open mind and allowed the data to teach me. As Reinhartz explains, the recognition by a feminist researcher that she approaches the project from a perspective "does not mean that she abandons what she considers to be objectivity."⁷

In keeping with feminist principles and with the objectives of the Public Intellectuals Ph.D. Program, I have intentionally resisted the use of highly theoretical academic jargon and written this paper, to the best of my ability, in language that is accessible to an audience outside the walls of academe.

The Study

This interdisciplinary, qualitative study examines feminist praxis in the discipline of women's studies through interviews with key informants and through content analysis of documents, providing insights into how women's studies programs teach praxis, how graduates of women's studies programs are impacted by their experiences (or lack

⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁷ Reinhartz, *Feminist Methods*, 262.

thereof) with praxis, and the factors affecting the use of praxis in women's studies programs and courses in the United States.

According to its professional organization, the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), the primary goals of women's studies are educational and social transformation through scholarship and research, teaching, and activism. The latter, feminist social activism, is a tenet of women's studies. According to its bylaws, the NWSA "leads the field of women's studies in educational and social transformation" and holds that "scholarship, activism, and teaching are inseparable elements of a single whole."⁸

The relationship between activism and feminism in the U.S. is a long one. The activism of suffragists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries secured women's right to vote,⁹ and the activism of second wave feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought many advances for women, including "women's health clinics and women's claim for reproductive rights, changes in the way the medical profession and medical research treat women," more opportunities in employment, and the creation of women's studies programs.¹⁰ As women's studies historian Marilyn Jacoby Boxer succinctly explains: "Women's studies came out of the women's liberation movement."¹¹ The

⁸ "Bylaws," National Women's Studies Association Bylaws, accessed December 14, 2014, <http://www.nwsa.org/content.asp?pl=19&sl=23&contentid=23> <http://nwsa.org/about/index.php>.

⁹ J. Kevin Corder and Christina Wolbrecht, "Political Context and the Turnout of New Women Voters after Suffrage," *The Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1, (February 2006): 45, accessed January 27, 2015, Web of Science.

¹⁰ Marilyn Jacoby Boxer, *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

academic discipline of women’s studies itself would not exist without the advocacy of the feminist community in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹²

For activists in the academy, both students and faculty, part of the project of feminism was to “identify the obscuring of women’s historical experiences and participations,”¹³ to critique “masculinist power structures,”¹⁴ to conduct research that would correct and add to the academic record,¹⁵ as well as to address inequality within universities.¹⁶ “Then merely to assert that women should be studied was a radical act.”¹⁷ Today many feminist scholars continue to engage in research “in the service of promoting social change and social justice for women.”¹⁸ And recent studies suggest that contemporary women in the academy still engage in activism, both individually and collectively, “to address concerns of and improve the climate for women faculty.”¹⁹

¹² Ibid., 9.

¹³ Jane Haggis, “The Feminist Research Process: Defining a Topic,” in *Feminist Praxis: Research Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*, ed. Liz Stanley (London: Routledge, 1990), 69.

¹⁴ Sneja Gunew, “Feminist Cultural Literacy: Translating Differences, Cannibal Options,” in *Women’s Studies on Its Own*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) 50.

¹⁵ Jean Fox O’Barr, “The Necessity of Women’s Studies in a Liberal Arts Education,” in *Making Sense of Women’s Lives: An Introduction to Women’s Studies*, eds. Michèle Plott and Lauri Umansky (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 6.

¹⁶ Marilyn J. Boxer, “Women’s Studies as Women’s History,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2002): 44, accessed March 18, 2015, JSTOR.

¹⁷ Ann Calderwood, “Revised 1977 Editorial Statement for *Feminist Studies*,” quoted in *Politics and Scholarship: Feminist Academic Journals and the Production of Knowledge* by Patrice McDermott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 80.

¹⁸ Abigail Brooks and Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, “An Invitation to Feminist Research” in *Feminist Research: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 4.

¹⁹ Jeni Hart, “Activism among Feminist Academics: Professionalized Activism and Activist Professionals,” *Advancing Women in Leadership* 18 (Spring 2005): 1, accessed March 18, 2015, GenderWatch.

Activists are often viewed with disdain,²⁰ and “the relationship between women’s studies as an academic field and feminism as an activist movement” is being questioned by both critics and supporters of the discipline.²¹ As women’s studies programs became institutionalized, “a note of anxiety about compromising one’s scholarship through political engagement was sometimes heard; increasingly, some feminist scholars began to see feminist activism as something of a career risk.”²² Despite this distancing from activism, there remains in women’s studies a commitment to social change, and feminist teachers indicate a desire to produce social transformation through their teaching.²³

In their study of women’s studies classes, Hoffmann and Stake found that encouragement of social understanding and activism is one of the common goals of feminist pedagogues in women’s studies courses:

If the classroom trains students through participatory learning and fosters self-confidence and nonstereotyped ways of being, so too should it encourage the translation of these feminist principles in the service of social justice. Feminist scholars and teachers are interested in understanding the nature of gender inequality in order to redress it. Cognitive and motivational elements are embedded in this goal. Proponents of feminist teaching argue that it should assist students in drawing connections between information learned in class and the larger social and cultural context within which it is embedded and in developing a commitment to act on their insights in the world at large.²⁴

²⁰ Nadia Y. Bashir, et al. “The Ironic Impact of Activists: Negative Stereotypes Reduce Social Change Influence,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43, no. 6 (September 2013): 1.

²¹ Boxer, *When Women Ask*, 161.

²² Nancy A. Naples and Karen Bojar, eds. *Teaching Feminist Activism: Strategies from the Field*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

²³ Barbara J. Bank, Sara Delamont, and Catherine Marshall, “Gender and Educational Policies,” in *Gender and Education: An Encyclopedia*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 731, accessed December 14, 2014, <http://www.credoreference.com/book/abcge>.

²⁴ Frances L. Hoffmann and Jayne E. Stake, “Feminist Pedagogy in Theory and Practice: An Empirical Investigation,” *NWSA Journal* 10, no. 1 (1998): 79, accessed July 15, 2013, JSTOR.

There is less agreement on how to develop this commitment to act. Feminist “teachers diverge in how they view social justice and how they hope to promote it in the classroom.”²⁵

In her historical account of women’s studies, Boxer, one of the foremothers of the discipline, writes, “Knowledge empowers, and education—all education, if it ‘takes’—produces change.”²⁶ Her presumption, then, is that once students gain knowledge about a social problem, they will be motivated to take action. However, Berenice Malka Fisher argues that classroom discussions that are divorced from social change movements risk never moving beyond individual development.²⁷

The connection between theory and action in women’s studies is known as feminist praxis. In the Freireian sense of the word, praxis is “action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it.”²⁸ In women’s studies, praxis typically refers to a synthesis of theory and practice in which each informs the other. Students may learn about the connection between feminist theory and feminist activism but do not necessarily act to transform the world, as in Freire’s vision of praxis. Praxis risks becoming diluted into nothing more than an “academic exercise, a classroom activity in and of itself, distant from the activist ‘front lines’.”²⁹

²⁵ Bank et al., “Gender and Educational Policies,” 731.

²⁶ Boxer, *When Women Ask*, 187.

²⁷ Berenice Malka Fisher, *No Angel in the Classroom: Teaching through Feminist Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 51.

²⁸ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 112.

²⁹ Susan Iverson, “Raising Consciousness: The Use of Activism in an Introductory Women’s Studies Classroom,” *FemTAP: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Practice* (2008): 6.

Criticizing the institutionalization of feminism through higher education women's studies programs, hooks' call to take "feminism out of the university and into the streets and homes of this society"³⁰ has been taken up by some faculty. "Concerned about a growing chasm between the feminist classroom and social activism, some faculty in women's studies identify the classroom as a site in which to theorize and from which to act, arguing that through active involvement with social problems, students may be more likely to become more engaged citizens and community members."³¹ Despite the desire of some faculty to give their students the experience of feminist praxis, the research presented here and in Kaplan's study finds that most students in women's studies programs are not offered formal opportunities for praxis through their classes.³²

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and describe the place of praxis in higher education women's studies programs in the U.S., by exploring how praxis is taught, how students learn praxis, and by offering one potential model for action-oriented pedagogy. In-depth analysis of mission statements and syllabi, and interviews with key informants, women's studies faculty and alumnae, were used to explore the research topic.

Although praxis is a common buzz word in women's studies, little exists in the literature on how praxis is taught to women's studies students. Studies exist that show women's studies professors' desire for students to create change,³³ but there is little in the literature on teaching praxis through action-oriented projects, or on the impact of action-

³⁰ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984), 110.

³¹ Iverson, "Raising Consciousness," 3.

³² Kaplan, "Carrying it on," 3.

³³ Hoffmann and Stake, "Feminist Pedagogy in Theory and Practice," 90.

oriented pedagogical projects. While there are a few edited collections about assignments using service-learning and activism, the projects discussed typically involve individual student projects rather than collective actions. Because one of the goals of women's studies is social transformation, and social change often involves a collective of individuals making a coordinated effort focused on a specific goal, collective praxis assignments could give students opportunities to experience the type of work that happens in movements for social change, albeit at a smaller, classroom-sized level.

As long as social transformation remains a goal of women's studies, more research is needed on how praxis is taught as well as the impact of action-oriented pedagogy on students. This study contributes to the scholarship in feminist pedagogy by exploring the role of praxis in contemporary U.S. women's studies programs and by offering examples of action-oriented pedagogical projects.

Research Questions and Grounded Theory

The primary objectives of this study were to explore the connection between theory and practice in women's studies programs. The research questions included:

1. How is feminist praxis reflected and taught in higher education women's studies programs?
2. How do women's studies programs impact students' understanding of feminist theory and practice?
3. What factors affect the implementation of action-oriented pedagogy in women's studies programs?

Although the work began with a set of research questions, it did not begin with a hypothesis that I then tried to prove or disprove with data. Rather, the methods used in

the study were informed by Anselm Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin's grounded theory approach, which begins with an area of study and allows theory to emerge from the analysis of data.³⁴

A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge.³⁵

The point of using grounded theory in this study was to discover information about teaching praxis in women's studies that was not known before and to propose a set of feminist-theory-informed practices that empower students to continue engaging in praxis after they graduate. The data come from a variety of sources, including interviews and documents.³⁶ "By examining information collected through different methods, the researcher can corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study."³⁷ As noted by Adele E. Clarke, because it emphasizes "actual experiences and practices—the lived doingness of social life," grounded theory is implicitly feminist.³⁸

³⁴ Anselm Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, (Newbury Park, Calif: Sage Publications, 1990), 23.

³⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁶ Ibid., 18.

³⁷ Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (November 2009): 28. Accessed February 20, 2014, Academic OneFile.

³⁸ Adele E. Clarke, "Feminisms, Grounded Theory, and Situational Analysis" in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2006), 347.

CHAPTER 2

STEPPING STONES TO ACTION-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY

In a study where “discovery is our purpose, we do not have beforehand knowledge of all the categories relevant to our theory.”³⁹ As Strauss and Corbin explain, “We do not want to be so steeped in the literature as to be constrained and even stifled in terms of creative efforts by our knowledge of it.”⁴⁰ A comprehensive review of the literature might “inhibit or impede the development of new theoretical formulations.”⁴¹ Strauss and Corbin advocate instead the use of literature to 1) stimulate theoretical sensitivity; 2) serve as secondary sources of data; 3) stimulate questions; 4) direct theoretical sampling; and 5) serve as supplementary validation.⁴² This chapter is broken into five interrelated categories which provide the conceptual background and rationale for the study: Feminist Pedagogy, Activism, Feminist Praxis, Experiential Education, and Academic Service-learning. An examination of the scholarly literature in these five areas provided the conceptual framework of this study.

Feminist Pedagogy

This research is informed by the principles of feminist pedagogy, meaning a set of specific educational strategies that guide the teaching/learning process and, through that

³⁹ Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 50.

⁴¹ Ibid., 50.

⁴² Ibid., 50-51.

process, emphasize empowerment and social action of participants.⁴³ Feminist pedagogy “evolved from many different sources: the consciousness-raising practices derived from the women’s movement and other movements of the 1960s, the progressive tradition in American education created by John Dewey, and the more general forms of ‘liberatory teaching’ espoused by Paulo Friere and others.”⁴⁴ Given these connections, particularly to the women’s liberation movement, social change has always been a goal of feminist pedagogy.⁴⁵ The point of understanding women’s oppression is to end it.⁴⁶ The academy itself has been the object of change. Feminist pedagogy arose with the emergence of women’s studies programs and the realization by feminist teachers that “the content and pedagogy of American education, although projecting the ‘illusion’ that it spoke to everyone, ignored the needs, experiences, and perspectives of the majority of people in this country—women of all backgrounds, people of color, and all women and men who perceive their education as not made for them.”⁴⁷

As Jean Shackelford explains, there are “recurring themes and principles” in feminist pedagogy, including

⁴³ Carolyn M. Shrewsbury, “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 3/4, (Fall/Winter 1987): 6, accessed June 6, 2013, JSTOR.

⁴⁴ Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *The Feminist Classroom* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 9.

⁴⁵ Sally J. Sayles-Hannon, “Feminist and Liberatory Pedagogies: Journey Toward Synthesis,” *The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations* 7, no. 2, (2007): 35, accessed July 2, 2013, http://www.academia.edu/1415946/Feminist_and_Liberatory_Pedagogies_Journey_Toward_Synthesis.

⁴⁶ Fisher, *No Angel*, 50.

⁴⁷ Maher and Tetreault, *Feminist Classroom*, 1.

an explicit goal of ending patriarchy and oppression and empowering or giving voice and influence to those disempowered by patriarchal structures; validation of forms of knowing other than ‘objective,’ ‘hierarchical,’ or ‘authority-laden’ models; and a focus on practices, with an emphasis on process over product or content.⁴⁸

Thus, merely teaching a class that has “women” as its subject of analysis is not enough to constitute a feminist pedagogy. Nor is it enough for an instructor to identify as a feminist.⁴⁹

The four key elements of feminist pedagogy identified by Jayne E. Stake and Frances L. Hoffmann are: participatory learning, validation of personal experience and development of confidence, the development of critical thinking and open-mindedness, and the development of political/social understanding and activism.⁵⁰ Shrewsbury points to two other common elements of feminist pedagogy: the building of a community of learners in the classroom and the development of leadership skills.⁵¹

All elements of feminist pedagogy are supposed to be fused through praxis.

Feminist pedagogy links classroom-based teaching with opportunities for application in communities through social action using strategies such as service-learning, feminist-action research, and other methods of engaged and community-based learning. This tenet is about recognizing the links between the personal, including the individual’s educational experience, and the political, including working to understand and change the collective social reality.⁵²

⁴⁸ Jean Shackelford, “Feminist Pedagogy: A Means for Bridging Critical Thinking and Creativity to the Economics Classroom,” in *Valuing Us All: Feminist Pedagogy in Economics*, ed. April Laskey Aerni and KimMarie McGoldrick, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 20.

⁴⁹ Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, and Adela C. Licona, “Introduction: The Passion and the Praxis of Feminist Pedagogy” in *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward*, ed. Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, and Adela C. Licona (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 2.

⁵⁰ Jayne E. Stake and Frances L. Hoffmann, “Putting Feminist Pedagogy to the Test: The Experience of Women’s Studies from Student and Teacher Perspectives,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 2000): 30-31, accessed January 26, 2015, ProQuest.

⁵¹ Shrewsbury, “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” 8.

⁵² Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona, “Introduction,” 5.

The link between the personal and political in feminist pedagogy can be traced to the women's liberation movement and the subsequent formation of women's studies programs.

Activism

Women's studies as a discipline was born out of the activism of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and "the writings of feminist activists provided the basic questions that spurred the development of women's studies."⁵³ Women's studies "was more than academic work about and (largely) by women but also was for women—intended to further women's access to equality in society as well as academia."⁵⁴ Early in the discipline, feminist pedagogues drew from the work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, specifically his notion of *conscienciação*⁵⁵, or critical consciousness, "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."⁵⁶ The concept of critical consciousness was "enthusiastically taken up by feminist and critical educators."⁵⁷ According to Naples and Bojar, "In the early days of women's studies programs, the link between the academic study of women's lives and the feminist movement was for the most part

⁵³ Boxer, *When Women Ask*, 12.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Translated from Portuguese, "conscienciação" is the act of acquiring knowledge of, awareness.

⁵⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 35.

⁵⁷ Naples and Bojar, *Teaching Feminist Activism*, 21.

unquestioned.”⁵⁸ However, even from its inception, women’s studies grappled with “the relationship between academic pursuits and advocacy.”⁵⁹

In the process of changing the academy through its feminist scholarship, women’s studies became a discipline itself.⁶⁰ Messer-Davidow “enables us to understand now how the exciting, life-changing ideas expressed in the feminist political movement have been transformed by and within academe into dry, highly abstract academic jargon as feminist discourse transmogrified into feminist scholarship through the disciplining of feminism—turning it into an academic discipline and compelling it to follow the conventions of the academy.”⁶¹ Boxer traces this disconnect between feminist political activism and the discipline of women’s studies. She notes that “academic feminists of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s required institutional validation that rendered them accountable to university administrators rather than to the ‘feminist community.’”⁶² Furthermore, the eventual social acceptance of many ideas of the women’s movement caused instructors to shift emphasis to “intellectual mastery” rather than “attitude and behavior change.”⁶³

Many feminist scholars have offered a critique of this turning away from activism. In a 1988 essay, Annette Kolodny suggested that women’s studies professors remind their students that “feminism is a visionary politics which declares that a theory is

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁹ Boxer, 163.

⁶⁰ Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 13.

⁶¹ Barbara Townsend, review of *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*, by Ellen Messer-Davidow, *The Journal of Higher Education* 74, no. 6 (November/December 2003): 715, accessed November 6, 2013, Project Muse.

⁶² Boxer, *When Women Ask*, 163.

⁶³ Ibid., 171.

only as a good as its practice” and not “merely another entrée into sophisticated critical theory circles.”⁶⁴ Others have pointed out how women’s studies programs have become elitist and distanced themselves from not only their activist roots, but also from campus women’s centers.⁶⁵ Paula Rothenberg suggests that “some academic feminists choose to continue to separate themselves and women’s studies from the political and social issues and actions that literally mean life and death for so many of us” just when “the right wing has decided to connect explicitly the politics of the university with political issues in society at large and is fighting to promote the proliferation of antifeminist, elitist, racist, and heterosexual values.”⁶⁶

Similarly, in an article in *The New Republic* magazine, philosopher Martha Nussbaum criticizes feminist theory’s wavering alliance to “the practical struggle to achieve justice and equality for women” and its disconnect from “proposals for social change,” the “concrete projects” that feminist scholars once engaged in since the inception of women’s studies programs in this country, such as “the reform of rape law; winning attention and legal redress for the problems of domestic violence and sexual harassment; improving women’s economic opportunities, working conditions, and education; winning pregnancy benefits for female workers; campaigning against the trafficking of women and girls in prostitution; working for the social and political

⁶⁴ Annette Kolodny, “Dancing between Left and Right: Feminism and the Academic Minefield in the 1980s,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 461, accessed June 10, 2008, JSTOR.

⁶⁵ Flora Pearle McMartin, “The Institutionalization of Women’s Centers and Women’s Studies Programs at Three Research Universities” (EdD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1993), 246.

⁶⁶ Paula Rothenberg, review of *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles*, ed. Himani Bannerji, *Signs* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 563, accessed June 10, 2008, JSTOR.

equality of lesbians and gay men.”⁶⁷ Nussbaum very publically criticizes the “dense,” “ponderous,” and “obscure” writings of Judith Butler and other “feminist thinkers of the new symbolic type” for promoting a “disquieting” and “insidious” new trend in U.S. women’s studies, “the virtually complete turning from the material side of life, toward a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women.”⁶⁸ Also questioning the relevancy of contemporary women’s studies to real life circumstances, former University of California—Berkeley instructor Elizabeth Segran suggests that young women today are disavowing feminism because they are not given the opportunity to see its relevance to their own lives in their women’s studies courses.⁶⁹ “Far from being sites of activism and empowerment, Berkeley’s Women’s Studies classes were weighed down by theory and jargon,” and Segran and her students “spent our days wrestling with dense and difficult texts, parsing the works of Gayatri Spivak, Monique Wittig, and Judith Butler.”⁷⁰ Although she does not entirely blame women’s studies for “feminism’s fall from grace,” Segran suggests that it has

certainly not done much to make feminism useful or accessible or appealing to the generation it addresses on college campuses. These departments have an opportunity to make feminism relevant again by helping college students understand the nature of gender inequality they are currently facing and to develop strategies to tackle it. But this will involve moving away from theory and meeting students where they are. It’s not too late to turn things around.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler,” *The New Republic*, February 22, 1999, 37.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Segran, “If We Want Feminism to Have a Real Impact, Then Let’s Stop Teaching So Much Theory,” *The New Republic*, August 07, 2014.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

The call for women's studies to shift away from high theory and return to a "personal is political" mentality is not shared by everyone, though.

Women's studies' commitment to social change has long been criticized by those outside the academy. Conservative writer David Horowitz calls it an "activist mentality."⁷² A good portion of his book, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy*, is devoted to denouncing the alleged "political subordination of scholarship to political agendas" in women's studies programs.⁷³ There have also been attacks at women's studies lobbed from within the academy. "Literary theorist Stanley Fish lumps women's studies into a group of programs that "forget what the purpose of a university is and continue to think of themselves as extensions of a political agenda."⁷⁴ Fish accuses many women's studies programs of being "more political than academic" and calls for professors to stick to the dissemination of knowledge, a dispassionate pedagogy through which politics is studied, not practiced.⁷⁵

Although women's studies programs have flourished and been largely insulated from these attacks, some within the discipline have begun to question the viability of an institutionalized women's studies that is simultaneously politically connected. While Nussbaum would have women's studies revert to its roots of political engagement with

⁷² David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin, *One-Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 8.

⁷³ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁴ Stanley Eugene Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 2008), 150.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

legislatures and movements, rather than keeping feminist politics primarily “in academic publications of lofty obscurity and disdainful abstractness,”⁷⁶ others within women’s studies offer a critique of such nostalgia and caution against conflating the political with the academic.

Although largely discounted by feminist scholars due to questionable methodology and reliance on anonymous anecdotes, but included here because of the enormous amount of popular press they received, Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, both former women’s studies affiliated faculty, devote an entire volume to denouncing what they view as indoctrination in feminist teaching, and question women’s studies’ relationship to activism and ties to the community. Patai and Koertge “claim that the demand that research in women’s studies be justified by its contribution to a feminist political agenda has severely limited the field.”⁷⁷ Patai and Koertge decry the opportunity offered to students in many women’s studies programs to “receive academic credit for doing ‘internships’ or performing community service in feminist agencies, and then submitting reports on their activities.” Like Fish, they hold that it is not the job of the university to promote student advocacy.⁷⁸

Perhaps the most damning indictment of women’s studies’ political orientation comes from one of its own, Wendy Brown, still affiliated with the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at the University of California-Berkeley. In “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” she writes:

⁷⁶ Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” 38.

⁷⁷ Susan C. Bourque, review of *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies*, by Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 453, accessed June 17, 2013, JSTOR.

⁷⁸ Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Education and Indoctrination in Women’s Studies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 92.

Indeed, by privileging the political over the intellectual and the institutionally strategic over the intellectually sound, and by effectively conceding that these operate on separate planes, these arguments affirm the status of women's studies as something distinct from the rest of the university's intellectual mission for research and teaching. In effect, by admitting its thoroughly politicized rationale, these defenses replicate the low value that hostile outsiders often accuse women's studies of attaching to the caliber of arguments and to intellectual life as a whole; suspicions about the non- or anti-intellectual dimensions of women's studies are thus confirmed.⁷⁹

Brown suggests that in order for women's studies to grow and remain viable, it must be willing to at least question whether or not new strategies are necessary to move forward and that:

the strategies and ambitions that produced this effect at one historical moment are not necessarily those that will sustain or enhance it at another. Feminist scholars must ask whether the very institutional strategies that once fomented rich and exciting intellectual endeavor now work against it, or work against the currents that might be its most fruitful future.⁸⁰

The suggestion by critics that women's studies teachers privilege the political over the intellectual contradicts the largest study of feminist classrooms. After surveying 111 faculty and 789 of their students on 32 campuses, Stake and Hoffmann concluded that: "Contrary to WS critics, WS faculty and students reported strong emphases on critical thinking/open-mindedness and participatory learning and relatively weaker emphases on personal experience and political understanding/activism. In addition, student ratings of positive class impact were higher for WS than non-WS classes."⁸¹ The lesser emphasis on activism over other variables does not mean that encouragement of activism is completely absent from women's studies classes.

⁷⁹ Wendy Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," in *Women's Studies on the Edge*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 33.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁸¹ Stake and Hoffmann, "Putting Feminist Pedagogy to the Test," 30.

As Stake and Hoffmann point out, “The development of political/social understanding and activism has been central to the mission of the WS movement. WS proponents emphasize the importance of guiding students to understand connections between course material and the political and social context within which it is embedded. With this greater insight, students are encouraged to consider how they can become active agents.”⁸² In another study of women’s studies faculty, Hoffmann and Stake found that feminist pedagogues strongly endorse the fostering of social understanding/activism through women’s studies classes.⁸³

However, although there may be an encouragement of activism by feminist pedagogues, there is not necessarily a requirement of activism. In the literature on feminist pedagogy, there are scant examples of activist assignments. Most of the books and articles focus on the necessity of teaching activism, rather than providing examples of projects and their outcomes.

Naples and Bojar provide “theoretical approaches, methodological strategies, and practical teaching tools” for feminist pedagogues who wish to deepen their understanding and know-how of teaching feminist activism.⁸⁴ Their edited collection is an excellent jumping off point for exploring the relationship between feminist pedagogy and experiential education. The connection between service-learning and feminist pedagogy, including its history and its applicability to other disciplines, is specifically addressed in

⁸² Ibid., 31.

⁸³ Hoffmann and Stake, “Feminist Pedagogy in Theory and Practice,” 90.

⁸⁴ Naples and Bojar, *Teaching Feminist Activism*, vii.

*The Practice of Change.*⁸⁵ Several case studies are included. Another edited collection gives two examples of activist assignments, letter-writing and service-learning, among various other innovative feminist teaching strategies.⁸⁶

An issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* in 1999 was devoted to the topic of activism in the women's studies classroom, mostly offering a critique of feminist pedagogy when it ignores feminist activism but also giving a couple of brief examples of activist projects.⁸⁷ Encouraging students to become activists and leaders and providing an opportunity to put theory into action, an assignment in Suzanna Rose's *Theories of Feminism* course required students to "protest sexism, racism, homophobia, or any other 'ism' related to feminist thought in one situation."⁸⁸ It is noteworthy that Rose's description of the project was originally published in *NWSA Journal* in 1988 and was republished in 2009 in a collection about feminist pedagogy.

In the literature, projects that could be classified as action-oriented or activist pedagogy usually are referred to as something else, most often praxis, service-learning, or experiential education. Naples refers to her assignment in a large introductory women's studies course at the University of California-Irvine as a "Community Action Project"

⁸⁵ Barbara J. Balliet and Kerrissa Heffernan, eds., *The Practice of Change: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Women's Studies* (Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 2000).

⁸⁶ Maralee Mayberry and Ellen Cronan Rose, eds., *Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸⁷ Colette A. Hyman and Diane Lichtenstein, eds., "Expanding the Classroom: Fostering Active Learning and Activism," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1999), accessed May 22, 2012, JSTOR.

⁸⁸ Suzanna Rose, "The Protest as a Teaching Technique for Promoting Feminist Activism" in *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward*, eds. Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, and Adela C. Licona (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 171.

and describes it as an exercise in “collective action.”⁸⁹ Groups of students pick a topic and then develop and carry out a project “that will leave a legacy beyond the ten-week quarter.”⁹⁰ Types of projects developed by students ranged from on-campus awareness campaigns to making permanent changes at the university, such as revising a student survival guide to include information on sexual harassment and assisting with the development of a feminist self-defense course.

Although it did not come up in the search of the literature on feminist pedagogy because it is published in a history journal and references literature in critical rather than feminist pedagogy, an assignment in a course on the history of activism explicitly requires students to engage in activism. In their Gender, Race, and Activism course, Holly Blake and Melissa Ooten have the dual objectives of teaching students about the history of social movements and giving them an opportunity to apply their knowledge to current social problems.⁹¹ They write, “These two course objectives reflect our firm belief that neither theory nor practice should be learned in isolation.”⁹² To that end, the course’s “culminating assignment is a social justice action project and a related literature review that historicizes a contemporary social problem. After studying social movements, students identify, research, and take action on a present-day challenge. The assignment

⁸⁹ Nancy A. Naples, “Negotiating the Politics of Experiential Learning in Women’s Studies: Lessons from the Community Action Project,” in *Women’s Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 383.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 392.

⁹¹ Holly Blake and Melissa Ooten, “Bridging the Divide: Connecting Feminist Histories and Activism in the Classroom,” *Radical History Review* 102 (October 2008): 64, accessed February 12, 2014, ProQuest Social Sciences Premium Collection.

⁹² Ibid.

compels students to make connections among history, theory, and praxis.”⁹³ That assignments such as this are rare to find in the literature may mean that they are not common or simply that they are not written about. However, in her commentary on how the institutionalization of women’s studies has affected activism, Grant supports the former explanation, noting that the activist assignment in her course for women’s studies majors is often the only experience with praxis her graduating seniors have ever had.⁹⁴

Feminist Praxis

Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* contributed to the development of feminist pedagogy in the United States and is the foundation for the action-oriented feminist pedagogy discussed in this dissertation.⁹⁵ Freire critiques the “banking” method of traditional education, “an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher, as the authority, issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.”⁹⁶

Similarly, feminist pedagogy critiques and addresses this banking of knowledge in which professors deposit facts into students and proposes “a re-imaging of the classroom as a community of learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Jaime M. Grant, “In Sisterhood? Women’s Studies and Activism,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (Fall - Winter, 1999): 264.

⁹⁵ Frances A. Maher, “Toward a Richer Theory of Feminist Pedagogy: A Comparison of ‘Liberation’ and ‘Gender’ Models for Teaching and Learning,” *The Journal of Education* 169, no. 3 (1987): 92, accessed March 19, 2015, JSTOR.

⁹⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.

with others....”⁹⁷ Unlike the traditional teaching model, Iverson proposes an alternative, for example which relies on praxis, by which educators could “unite feminist theory with practical application to people’s lives.”⁹⁸ Otherwise, as Iverson explains, “theory and practice within the classroom risk existing on two parallel planes. Further, the personalization of theory may be only an academic exercise, a classroom activity in and of itself, distant from the activist ‘front lines.’”⁹⁹ In the Freireian sense of the word, praxis is “action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it.”¹⁰⁰

As a theory of teaching and learning, feminist pedagogy is concerned with liberatory education that is participatory.¹⁰¹ From the beginning of the discipline, feminist pedagogues recognized that actively engaging students in the learning process not only aids students in learning the material but is also crucial for the creation of an environment in which students view themselves as capable of applying their knowledge to social problems.¹⁰² Empowerment is a key feature of feminist pedagogy.¹⁰³ Course content and format empowers “individuals to see themselves as agents of social change, meaning students are able to identify strategies and their own agency for working toward gender

⁹⁷ Shrewsbury, “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” 10.

⁹⁸ Iverson, “Raising Consciousness,” 6.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 112.

¹⁰¹ Shrewsbury, “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” 8.

¹⁰² Ibid., 8.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 10.

equity.”¹⁰⁴ The transformation of self and society occurs through a process of action and reflection.¹⁰⁵

Freire uses the term “praxis” to refer to the reciprocal and essential relationship between action and reflection. According to Freire, “a revolution is achieved with neither verbalism nor activism, but rather with praxis, that is, with reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed.”¹⁰⁶ In applying praxis to feminist research, not teaching, Stanley refers to “a continuing shared feminist commitment to a political position in which ‘knowledge’ is not simply defined as ‘knowledge *what*’ but also as ‘knowledge *for*.’ Succinctly the point is to change the world, not only to study it.”¹⁰⁷

In discussing feminist praxis as a means of bridging theory and action in the college classroom, Iverson describes it as “a dynamic, performative process in which the student negotiates multiple identity statuses circulating simultaneously: the archivist—collecting and organizing a wide range of important information, the pensieve—reflecting, deliberating, and analyzing information, and the activist—advocating for and being an agent of change.”¹⁰⁸

Experiential Education

Current theories of experiential education can be traced to John Dewey’s work on

¹⁰⁴ Iverson, “Raising Consciousness,” 5.

¹⁰⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁰⁷ Liz Stanley, ed., *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1990), 15.

¹⁰⁸ Iverson, “Raising Consciousness,” 7.

pedagogy, specifically his philosophy of experience.¹⁰⁹ Dewey contended that it was the role of education to promote a more moral and humane society, a mission that Carol Geary Schneider refers to as “one of the most hallowed purposes of academe: the expectation that higher learning contributes substantially to learners’ preparation for citizenship.”¹¹⁰ Dewey, a pragmatist, believed that “theories of knowledge, democracy, and education are inextricably intertwined”¹¹¹ and encouraged learning through experiential projects as a practical way to apply his philosophy.¹¹² For Dewey, student projects that generate interest, have intrinsic worth, arouse curiosity and a desire for more information, and span a significant amount of time are the “means of producing learning from experience.”¹¹³

The literature in the field of education, specifically the work of David Kolb on experiential learning, builds upon Dewey’s and Freire’s foundation and further contributes to the background of action-oriented pedagogy.¹¹⁴ Kolb suggests that “learning is a cycle that incorporates a person’s concrete experience through active reflection to the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations; these concepts and generalizations may then be used to test implications of concepts in new situations

¹⁰⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

¹¹⁰ Carol Geary Schneider, “Educational Missions and Civic Responsibility: Toward the Engaged Academy,” in *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, ed. Thomas Ehrlich (Westport, CT: Oryx Press, 2000), 100.

¹¹¹ A.V. Kelly, *Education and Democracy: Principles and Practices* (London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 1995), 91.

¹¹² Dwight E. Giles, Jr. and Janet Eyler, “The Theoretical Roots of Service Learning in John Dewey: Toward a Theory of Service-Learning,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 80.

¹¹³ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁴ David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2015).

leading to a new concrete experience” and that “information gained through concrete experience and processed by observing and reflecting is more likely to be retained and thus become useful knowledge.”¹¹⁵ Kolb’s work is rarely discussed in women’s studies, likely due to the wall between disciplines; however, his work has contributed to the growing body of literature on academic service-learning.

Melding the work of Kolb with that of feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins,¹¹⁶ Schneider proposes a model of relational learning that is still cyclical, as in Kolb’s version, but is grounded:

not in one individual’s experience of understanding alone, but rather in the joining of multiple and disparate experiences and in collaborative dialogue about the meanings of those experiences....Concepts are generated not by one person alone, but by a group of people working through issues together....The final test of theory becomes its usefulness in the intrinsically social contexts of actual practice.¹¹⁷

Actual practice based on theoretical understanding is the basis of experiential education, including one of today’s most popular forms, academic service-learning.¹¹⁸

Academic Service-learning in Women’s Studies

In 1980, a decade after the founding of the first women’s studies programs and just three years after its own creation, the NWSA convened a small group of women’s studies faculty and program administrators for a week-long Service Learning Institute,

¹¹⁵ KimMarie McGoldrick, “The Road Not Taken: Service Learning as an Example of Feminist Pedagogy in Economics,” in *Valuing Us All: Feminist Pedagogy and Economics*, ed. April Laskey Aerni and KimMarie McGoldrick (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 169.

¹¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹¹⁷ Schneider, “Educational Missions,” 115.

¹¹⁸ Eleanor M. Novek, “Service-learning is a Feminist Issue: Transforming Communication Pedagogy,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 231, accessed February 13, 2014, GenderWatch.

where participants engaged in “intensive thought about community and learning, about the engagement of women’s studies students in social change.”¹¹⁹ Based on their experiences at the institute and subsequent workshops and program sessions in the year that followed, the NWSA published a handbook to provide “approaches to women’s studies service learning and an overview of the dynamics of field experience education from a feminist perspective.”¹²⁰ The literature on service-learning does not gain momentum again until the early 2000s. We are now seeing a resurgence; a growing number of feminist teachers are once again discussing academic service-learning as an appropriate pedagogical tool for women’s studies, given the discipline’s activist roots and continued commitment to social justice. As Harvey notes:

It is a truism that the history of feminism is a history of activism. The energy and direction of feminism have always been drawn from social action, resistance to the oppression of women, and the demands and desires for gender justice. Thus, the idea of service-learning, as an active community involvement program for higher education, introduced nothing new to feminism, indeed even to women’s studies programs in the most general sense...[T]he integration of theory and practice, community involvement, and testing and forging ideas in experience have always been the hallmarks of feminist work. In this sense, service-learning projects fit neatly within the basic principles and history of feminism.¹²¹

While activism sparks controversy when required of students in women’s studies courses, service-learning has a reputation for being academically sound and grounded in research in the educational sciences.

¹¹⁹ Barbara Hillyer Davis, “Women Thinking Together: The NWSA Service Learning Institute,” in *The Women’s Studies Service Learning Handbook*, eds. Jerilyn Fisher and Elaine Reuben (College Park, MD: The National Women’s Studies Association, 1981), 5.

¹²⁰ Jerilyn Fisher and Elaine Reuben, introduction to *The Women’s Studies Service Learning Handbook*, eds. Jerilyn Fisher and Elaine Reuben (College Park, MD: The National Women’s Studies Association, 1981), 1.

¹²¹ Irene E. Harvey, “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Service-Learning,” in *Beyond the Tower: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Philosophy*, eds. C. David Lismann and Irene Harvey (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 2000), 35.

Though not explicitly feminist, the academic service-learning model has been viewed by many to be a politically correct tool to teach feminist praxis, because of its emphasis on active engagement with communities and because of widespread institutional support based on a substantial body of research.¹²²

The emergence of service learning as an increasingly valued pedagogy widely embraced by colleges, universities, and professional organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, offers renewed legitimacy for experiential learning and, as Balliet and Heffernan state, ‘provides a critical opportunity for Women’s Studies to connect with its activist past.’¹²³

Academic service learning (sometimes called community-based service learning) is a form of experiential education.¹²⁴ It integrates intentional ways of performing community service with instruction and reflection and is designed to enrich the learning experience through hands-on activity and to teach civic responsibility.¹²⁵ Service learning encourages students to apply what they learned in the classroom and to reflect on their experiences by thinking, discussing, and writing about them. It also teaches students to apply academic knowledge to real-life civic issues and promotes teamwork and collaborated problem-solving; develops life skills; exposes students to the complexity of the human experience and challenges simplistic solutions; and makes learning personally meaningful.¹²⁶

¹²² Novek, “Service Learning is a Feminist Issue,” 235.

¹²³ Karen Dugger, ed. *Handbook on Service Learning in Women’s Studies and the Disciplines* (Towson, MD: Institute for Teaching and Research on Women, 2008), 1.

¹²⁴ Novek, “Service Learning is a Feminist Issue,” 231.

¹²⁵ Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, Jr., *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 12.

¹²⁶ Novek, “Service Learning is a Feminist Issue,” 237-238.

Unlike other forms of volunteerism that college students may perform, a true service-learning experience is reciprocal between the student and the community partner; “the hyphen between the words ‘service’ and ‘learning’ represents the balanced nature of the exchange.”¹²⁷ Both the student and the community benefit from the student’s service.

Research on service learning indicates a positive impact on students’ “grades, writing skills, and critical-thinking skills” as well as “greater motivation to learn, deeper understanding of the subject matter, greater appreciation for the complexity of social issues, and an increased ability to apply what they learned in the classroom to real-life situations.”¹²⁸ Academic-service learning is distinct from other forms of service such as volunteering and internships. The criteria for academic service-learning are: relevant and meaningful service with the community; enhanced academic learning; purposeful civic learning; and reflection. The last component, reflection, is essential for the designation of academic service-learning.

Service alone is not enough to constitute a service-learning experience. As Dugger points out, “History is full of examples and the world replete with individuals who fail to learn from experience. The mechanism through which learning is harvested—the hyphen connecting *service* with *learning*—is *reflection*. ”¹²⁹ Reflection is also important in ensuring that students connect the service experience to course content.

¹²⁷ Tamara Agha-Jaffar, “From Theory to Praxis in Women’s Studies: Guest Speakers and Service-Learning as Pedagogy,” *Feminist Teacher* 13, no. 1 (2000): 4, accessed May 30, 2012, JSTOR.

¹²⁸ Pat Washington, “Community-Based Service Learning: Actively Engaging the Other,” in *Diversity in College Classrooms: Practices for Today’s Campuses*, eds. Ann M. Johns and Maureen Kelley Sipp (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 209.

¹²⁹ Dugger, *Handbook on Service Learning*, 2.

Agha-Jaffar uses service-learning in her women's studies courses at a community college. She allows students to choose from a list of

social service agencies focused on the needs of women and/or children: shelters for battered women; an agency that works with chemically dependent and/or co-dependent women and their families; a teen pregnancy program; YWCA after school activities for children; the Women's Employment Network, a center that houses and schools children who have been sexually, physically, and/or mentally abused, and so on.¹³⁰

Regarding reflection, she notes:

The critical reflection component of the service-learning assignment promotes intellectual growth; develops skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication; and, in very tangible ways, encourages students to see the transformative power of education. Service-learning is, ultimately, a very effective pedagogy for empowering students to become more knowledgeable and more actively involved in their own communities. Furthermore, it provides them with the opportunity to perceive themselves as agents of social change.¹³¹

Critical thinking, empowerment, social change: the outcomes of service-learning echo the goals of feminist pedagogy.¹³²

The connection between service-learning and women's studies is clear, as Agha-Jaffar explains: "Civic learning is the natural extension of feminist pedagogy since both seek to blend knowledge, skills, and values in the service of social change."¹³³ In both academic service-learning and feminist pedagogy, "the critical link between knowledge and practice for student learning" is central.¹³⁴ As Jolly explains, "A curriculum structured around service not only helps students connect theoretical concepts to real

¹³⁰ Agha-Jaffar, "From Theory to Praxis," 5.

¹³¹ Agha-Jaffar, "From Theory to Praxis," 4.

¹³² Novek, "Service Learning is a Feminist Issue," 235.

¹³³ Geraldine B. Stahly, introduction to *Gender, Identity, Equity, and Violence: Multidisciplinary Perspectives Through Service Learning*, edited by Geraldine B. Stahly (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2007), 1.

¹³⁴ Dugger, *Handbook on Service Learning*, 1.

world events, but can even mitigate the resistance that sometimes accompanies feminist or other critical concepts.”¹³⁵ In addition, in both academic service-learning and feminist pedagogy there is a clear concern with empowering the student. “Empowerment is a core value in gender education, and the experiential approach nurtures that goal.”¹³⁶ With both service-learning and feminist pedagogy emphasizing empowerment, social change, and student learning, there is a clear connection between the two, however, academic service-learning has been met with some resistance in women’s studies.

Despite harkening back to an activist past and growing legitimacy in academia, academic service-learning has not been embraced fully by those in women’s studies. According to Bojar and Naples, “The term service learning, with its connotations of traditional charitable work, has long made many feminists uneasy. Although celebrated by some strands of feminist thought as embodying an ethic of care, charitable work has been regarded with suspicion by feminists who have seen such work as reflective of female subordination or as an attempt to prop up an unjust status quo.”¹³⁷ Others warn of the pitfalls of ‘community service,’ which...devolve into a cultural safari of ‘otherness.’”¹³⁸

Bickford and Reynolds point out the threat of further entrenching cultural and social biases by requiring service learning of students. “In most service-learning

¹³⁵ Natalie Jolly, “Seven Strategies to Set Up a Service Learning Project,” in *Handbook on Service Learning in Women’s Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. Karen Dugger (Towson, MD: Institute for Teaching and Research on Women, 2008), 13.

¹³⁶ Stahly, “Introduction,” 1.

¹³⁷ Naples and Bojar, *Teaching Feminist Activism*, 3.

¹³⁸ Kathryn Forbes et al., “Punishing Pedagogy: The Failings of Forced Volunteerism,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1999): 158, accessed January 29, 2015, JSTOR.

situations, relationships are clearly based on difference: I'm homeless; you're not.”¹³⁹

Bubriski and Semaan argue that service learning encourages “passive participation in communities. Passive participation incorporates acts of charity rather than acts of social change. Unlike activist participation, passive participation does not focus on challenging social structural inequities.”¹⁴⁰ Bickford and Reynolds explain that “activism” is rarely one of the words used to describe service projects and point to the “discomfort” in academia with activism.

The question that remains is why service-learning has been embraced in the university setting, while activism makes people uncomfortable. Why do we fear the term activism and the acts of dissent that activism comprises? It is the responsibility of progressive educators dedicated to social justice efforts to insist that our classrooms become places where students examine their resistance to activism and consider what is at stake in recognizing the power of and the need for dissent.¹⁴¹

Although Bickford and Reynolds avoid binaries that preference one form of experiential learning over another, they argue for the “activist potential of service learning.”¹⁴² While recognizing the power of service-learning to teach social justice, Gilbert notes, “The field is still in need of new models for teaching that integrate our best practices and our most innovative ideas for social justice education. We must be ready to map out new dynamic metaphors for the hyphen between service and learning that remind us that there is still

¹³⁹ Donna M. Bickford and Nedra Reynolds, “Activism and Service-Learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Acts of Dissent,” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 237, accessed January 29, 2015, Project MUSE.

¹⁴⁰ Anne Bubriski and Ingrid Semaan, “Activist Learning vs. Service Learning in a Women’s Studies Classroom,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 93, accessed May 24, 2012, Academic OneFile.

¹⁴¹ Bickford and Reynolds, “Activism and Service-Learning,” 247.

¹⁴² Ibid., 230.

considerable pedagogical work to be done.”¹⁴³ Academic service-learning is relevant in women’s studies and merits further exploration as a pedagogical method.

Academic service-learning, first introduced in women’s studies in the early 1980s, reappeared in the literature in the late 1990s and early 2000s,¹⁴⁴ but is its use widespread today, and are there other methods of integrating theory with practice in women’s studies? Given the historical relationship between women’s studies and activism and that feminist pedagogy emphasizes praxis, it is puzzling that there is not more in the literature about how professors teach praxis to their students. Besides giving a few examples of activist projects in the classroom, the literature does not address the *how*. As introduced in the first chapter, this is the central question of my research. I hope to uncover how students are making the connection between theory and practice in their women’s studies courses and what factors affect the implementation of action-oriented pedagogy.

¹⁴³ Melissa Kesler Gilbert, “Educated in Agency: A Feminist Service-Learning Pedagogy for Community Border Crossings” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2010), 290.

¹⁴⁴ Balliet and Heffernan, eds., *The Practice of Change*.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines the place of praxis in higher education women's studies programs, explores how these programs impact students' understanding of feminist theory and practice, and looks at the factors affecting the implementation of action-oriented pedagogy in women's studies programs. In qualitative research, data are gathered from "a variety of sources, and preferably, in a variety of ways."¹⁴⁵ In this study, data collection was performed using two different qualitative methods and techniques: document review of women's studies program mission statements and course syllabi, and interviews with women's studies faculty and alumnae. The interviews were coded using a grounded theory approach.

Qualitative research includes "research that involves analyzing and interpreting texts and interviews in order to discover meaningful patterns descriptive of a particular phenomenon."¹⁴⁶ Feminists have critiqued traditional quantitative research methods, modified existing methodologies, and created new ones.¹⁴⁷ Ultimately, the "criteria for feminist methodology provide the outline for a possible alternative to the distanced,

¹⁴⁵ David A. Erlandson et al., *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), 81.

¹⁴⁶ Carl F. Auerbach and Louise B. Silverstein, *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁴⁷ Toby Epstein Jayaratne and Abigail J. Stewart, "Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences: Current Feminist Issues and Practical Strategies," in *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 44-48.

distorting and dispassionately objective procedures of much social research.”¹⁴⁸ As DeVault explains, “The heart of feminist methodology is a critique that views the apparatus of knowledge production as one site that has constructed and sustained women’s oppression.”¹⁴⁹ Feminist research is “an emancipatory type of inquiry. This means that it not only documents aspects of reality; it also takes a personal, political and engaging stance to the world.”¹⁵⁰ It “is committed to challenging power and oppression and producing research that is useful and contributes to social justice.”¹⁵¹ As Sarantakos summarizes, feminist research

[e]mploys: engaging and value-laden methods and procedures that bring the researcher close to the subject; subjective principles of research, encouraging taking sides and personal commitment to the feminist cause; a political stance to research topics and procedures. Aims to expose the structures and conditions that contribute to the present situation; enlighten the community to the factors that generate this phenomenon and propose ways that can help alleviate the problem; empower women and give them a voice to speak about social life from their perspective; ultimately contribute towards social change and reconstruction.¹⁵²

To address the research questions in this study, a feminist qualitative research approach was employed. In order to effectively answer all of the research questions and to enhance the reliability of the results, a variety of data sources and methods of analysis were used. The review of women’s studies mission statements and syllabi, and an exploration of the nuanced thoughts and experiences of women’s studies faculty and

¹⁴⁸ Marjorie L. DeVault, *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 32.

¹⁴⁹ DeVault, *Liberating Method*, 30.

¹⁵⁰ Sotirios Sarantakos, *Social Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 55.

¹⁵¹ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli, “From Theory to Method and Back Again: The Synergistic Praxis of Theory and Method,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 150.

¹⁵² Sarantakos, *Social Research*, 55.

alumnae as related through open-ended interviews, were crucial in answering the research questions.

Mission Statements

This study looked at the mission statements of the institutional members of NWSA, 375 individual U.S. women's studies programs, to determine if feminist praxis is a priority for them. Before looking at what women's studies programs *do* in terms of feminist praxis, it was important to establish what *they say they do*, or *what they say they want to do*. Analyzing the mission statements of women's studies programs and departments is one way to gauge the commitment of these programs to feminist praxis. "Mission statements condense the meaning and direction of institutions into a few paragraphs or pages of writing. Both researchers and practitioners agree that mission statements are the most common way that organizations express their purpose, vision, and values. They are road maps for the high road that help institutions meet their goals."¹⁵³ Looking at the mission statements of individual women's studies programs and departments is one way to establish whether or not there is a commitment to feminist praxis.

The National Women's Studies Association specifically mentions activism in its mission statement. Analyzing the mission statements of 375 women's studies programs (the institutional members of NWSA) offers insight into the goals and priorities of these programs and if they share NWSA's commitment to praxis. Although it is debatable whether or not departmental mission statements are actual directives or merely academic rhetoric, as Kreber and Mhina assert in their study of the mission statements of Canadian

¹⁵³ Robert B. Young, "Colleges on the Cross Roads: A Study of the Mission Statements of Catholic Colleges and Universities," *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 67.

universities, “Mission statements cannot serve as proof that institutions do enact the goals and ideals through which they portray themselves to the public. An exploration of mission statements is nonetheless worthwhile, as they allow a perspective of those values institutions deem important.”¹⁵⁴ How a program presents itself to the public gives insight into a program’s values.

Analysis of Mission Statement Data

The analysis of documents in qualitative research is often used in conjunction with other methods as a means of triangulating the data.¹⁵⁵

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.¹⁵⁶

The systematic procedure for evaluating documents (also known as “cultural materials” or “artifacts”) involves “counting, coding, or interpreting a set of identified themes contained in the content.”¹⁵⁷ Cultural artifacts have distinctive properties that make them useful in qualitative research: “First, they possess a naturalistic, ‘found’ quality because they are not created for the purpose of study. Second, they are noninteractive, i.e., they do not require asking questions of respondents or observing people’s behavior. Cultural artifacts are not affected by the process of studying them as

¹⁵⁴ Carolin Kreber and Christine Mhina, “The Values We Prize: A Comparative Analysis of the Mission Statements of Canadian Universities,” *Higher Education Perspectives* 3, no. 1, (2007): 63, accessed February 6, 2015, <http://hep.oise.utoronto.ca/index.php/hep/article/view/650/714>.

¹⁵⁵ Glenn A. Bowen, “Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method,” *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (November 2009): 28, accessed February 20, 2014, Academic OneFile.

¹⁵⁶ Bowen, “Document Analysis,” 27.

¹⁵⁷ Shulamit Reinharz and Rachel Kulick, “Reading Between the Lines: Feminist Content Analysis into the Second Millennium,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 258.

people typically are. Instead, scholars can examine a written record or some other type of ‘text’ without interacting with the people who produced it.”¹⁵⁸ Mission statements are one type of cultural artifact available for study.

Approximately 400 universities across the United States offer women’s studies majors, minors, or certificates. Most of the women’s studies programs have a mission statement or program description. Using a list of current U.S. women’s studies programs that is maintained by the Women’s Studies Listserv (WMST-L), I studied the website of each program, specifically looking for a mission statement. In lieu of a formal mission statement, I studied the program description. In the absence of either, I contacted the program administrator and asked if she would be willing to provide me with a mission statement or program description. After locating all available mission statements and program descriptions, I saved and stored them using the online data management program Zotero. The data were collected in 2010.

Zotero works as an Internet browser extension and allows researchers to collect and organize online sources. I was able to save a snapshot of each program’s mission statement or program description and tag each webpage with keywords related to the research questions. After all the data were collected, I was able to use Zotero to run reports to determine the frequency of keywords.

Doing a close reading of each mission statement or program description, I specifically looked for mention of praxis and activism but also tagged language connotatively related to praxis and activism. Relevant words emerged in the analysis as connoting either a direct relation to action or to the development of a commitment to act. These keywords were then grouped into larger value categories.

¹⁵⁸ Reinhartz, *Feminist Methods*, 147.

Women's Studies Course Syllabi

After looking at mission statements to see what programs say about feminist praxis, a second group of documents were analyzed: women's studies course syllabi. It was deemed useful to also look closely at the course syllabi for women's studies courses to determine if and how professors are teaching praxis through the use of any type of action-oriented assignments. All syllabi give information such as course requirements and would include action-oriented pedagogical projects if assigned. When the study began, there were three on-line repositories for women's studies syllabi: The Maryland Women's Studies collection, the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities collection, and the NWSA collection. In total, 583 undergraduate women's studies syllabi were reviewed for the study.

The largest women's studies database, maintained by Joan Korenman, a women's studies professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, contains 336 women's studies syllabi for a variety of undergraduate courses from universities across the United States.¹⁵⁹ The database was formed in 1992 and primarily includes syllabi from the 1990s and early 2000s. The women's studies syllabi are divided into 26 subjects/categories, e.g. Anthropology, Education, History. The collection has not been updated since 2006; however, most of the syllabi are in typescript, so there was no problem with broken links. It is a substantial collection and there is evidence that it is still in use by women's studies faculty.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ "Syllabi on the Web for Women- and Gender-Related Courses," Joan Korenman, last modified July 15, 2006, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://userpages.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/syllabi.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Joan Korenman, email message to the author, January 31, 2014.

The Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities Women's Studies Database offers 211 syllabi in 19 different subjects.¹⁶¹ I was particularly interested in the syllabi for Introduction to Women's Studies and Feminist Theory courses, since these are the courses that lend themselves particularly well to praxis, but as with the University of Maryland collection, I looked at and analyzed the syllabi in all of the subject areas. Each subject list includes the course title, instructor name, and semester and year that the course was offered. This collection was last updated in 2002. Since some of the syllabi links are now broken, only those that I was able to access are included in my statistics.

The third source for syllabi came from the NWSA, which offered two online collections containing 36 downloadable model syllabi for feminist theory and introductory women's studies courses. The collection of introductory syllabi is introduced as "syllabi, lesson plans, and other instructional materials that educators are currently using to introduce students to theoretical and practical foundations of women's and gender studies." Covering a range of dates from 2001 to 2006, this collection provides "a sampling of what is going on – instructionally – in the field today"¹⁶² The NWSA collection of theory syllabi is introduced as "an impressively wide range of approaches to courses in feminist theory, including a variety of pedagogical strategies, texts, and assignments."¹⁶³

The collections of introductory and theory syllabi, published in 2005 and 2007, respectively, were selected by NWSA after a call for submissions from women's studies

¹⁶¹ "Women's Studies Syllabi Database," Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, last modified July 24, 2002, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://mith.umd.edu/WomensStudies/Syllabi/>.

¹⁶² Curtis, Elizabeth M., ed., "Introducing Women's and Gender Studies: A Collection of Teaching Resources," (Baltimore: National Women's Studies Association, Fall 2007), 7.

¹⁶³ Bickford, Donna M., ed., "Feminist Theory Syllabi Collection," (Baltimore: National Women's Studies Association, Fall 2005), 3.

faculty. Although no longer available through NWSA’s website, the files were downloaded in PDF format when the research began and are saved on my hard drive.

Analysis of Course Syllabi Data

Similar to the review of the mission statements, the analysis of the women’s studies course syllabi involved a procedure of “finding, selecting, appraising (make sense of), and synthesizing data....”¹⁶⁴ By first skimming, then closely reading, and finally interpreting the data, I was able to supplement the data from the mission statements and semi-structured interviews and provide additional insight on praxis in women’s studies courses.¹⁶⁵

Semi-Structured Interviews

In this study, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 28 women’s studies faculty and alumnae were used to explore the research questions and supplement the data from the documents. In feminist research, methods such as “ethnography, qualitative interviewing, life history, and narrative analysis,” stemming from the consciousness-raising tactics of the women’s liberation movement, are common.¹⁶⁶ Feminist interviewing can “lessen power dynamics and create research that is more accountable and applicable to participants’ lives.”¹⁶⁷ Specifically, “open-ended interview research explores people’s views of reality and allows the researcher to generate theory.”¹⁶⁸ This method “differs from ethnography in not including long periods of researcher

¹⁶⁴ Bowen, “Document Analysis,” 28.

¹⁶⁵ Bowen, “Document Analysis,” 32.

¹⁶⁶ DeVault, *Liberating Method*, 30.

¹⁶⁷ Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, “From Theory to Method,” 148.

¹⁶⁸ Reinhartz, *Feminist Methods*, 18.

participation in the life of the interviewee and differs from survey research or structured interviewing by including free interaction between the researcher and interviewee.”¹⁶⁹ The approach to interviewing was informed by feminist criticism of traditional, positivist “hygienic research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production” and “the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias—it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.¹⁷⁰ In feminist interviewing,

1. the interviewer presents her own identity in the process, not only asking questions, but also sharing knowledge;
2. reciprocity invites an intimacy that encourages revelations from the researched relating to her material reality;
3. a participatory model of research develops that challenges power relationships between researcher and researched;
4. the resulting work challenges prevailing stereotypes of the researcher and the researched.¹⁷¹

Utilizing this framework, I conducted interviews with women’s studies alumnae and faculty to better understand their experiences with feminist praxis in women’s studies and their understandings of the conditions affecting the implementation of action-oriented

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ann Oakley, “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,” in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1981), 58.

¹⁷¹ Maeve Landman, “Getting Quality in Qualitative Research: A Short Introduction to Feminist Methodology and Methods,” *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 65, no. 4 (December 2006): 431, accessed January 29, 2014, ProQuest SciTech Collection.

pedagogy in women’s studies programs. (See Appendix A and Appendix B for full interview protocols for faculty and alumnae.)

Interviewees were selected through selective and snowball sampling. In qualitative research, purposive sampling allows the researcher to select “information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research.”¹⁷² In snowball sampling, a subset of purposive sampling, “participants or informants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study.”¹⁷³ Considering the nature of this study, purposive and snowball sampling were deemed most appropriate.

In order to reach potential interviewees, a call for research participants was posted on the Women’s Studies Listserv (WMST-L), an international e-mail forum for the discussion of research and teaching in women’s studies (Appendix C). The listserv has over 5000 subscribers from all over the world, mostly faculty and program administrators but also graduate students and alumnae. Several of the individuals who responded to the call were not members of the list but had been forwarded the call by a friend or former professor who is a WMST-L subscriber. All of the initial work of gathering informants took place via email. The initial call for participants did not specify the study’s focus on U.S. women’s studies programs, so a couple of international respondents were turned

¹⁷² Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 46.

¹⁷³ Natasha Mack et al., *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector’s Field Guide*, Research Triangle Park, NC: Family Health International, 2005), 5, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/Qualitative%20Research%20Methods%20-%20A%20Data%20Collector%27s%20Field%20Guide.pdf>.

away. Any individual who was either a faculty or alumna of a U.S. women's studies program and returned an informed consent form was included in the study.

Eighteen alumnae and ten faculty members of varying ranks were interviewed for the study. Participants came from all regions of the U.S. and from schools of varying sizes, both public and private. Faculty participants ranged from adjuncts to full professors, two of whom were program directors at the time of the interviews. In several cases, faculty members were former women's studies students themselves and could answer questions from the perspectives of both a women's studies teacher and graduate.

Women's studies alumnae were interviewed because they have taken a variety of women's studies courses taught by several different professors in order to earn a degree or certificate in women's studies. These accumulated experiences helped to paint a picture of student experiences with praxis in women's studies courses and programs. Because the participants have already graduated with an undergraduate degree, I was able to ask them also about their experiences with social action and activism after graduation.

Interviewees were told that an hour commitment would be typical, and during the interview were alerted when the one-hour mark had been reached; however, in several cases, respondents volunteered to keep going when they had more than they wanted to share on the topic. The longest interview was three hours in length. Although several of the interviews took place in person, in order to reach participants across the country, interviews were conducted via telephone in most cases.

All interviews were digitally recorded using a small, hand-held device that was hooked up to the telephone. Digital files were transferred from the recorder to a personal computer and then transcribed in document format. The interviews with faculty members

amounted to 15 hours and 42 minutes of digital audio recordings, yielding 427 pages of transcripts. The interviews with alumnae amounted to over 18 hours of recordings, yielding 573 pages of transcripts.

All names were changed to protect the identities of the research participants. In the spirit of feminism, research participants were given the opportunity to choose her or his pseudonym. Other identifying information, such as names of cities and universities, were also changed to preserve the anonymity of the informants.

In the interests of full disclosure, I must note that three of the alumnae interviewed for this study were my own students and experienced action-oriented pedagogy as I practice it. These participants have graduated and are no longer my students. One has gone on to a graduate program in women's studies at another university. Although there is the possibility for bias in the responses of former students, I included them because they offer insights on the specific form of pedagogy I am proposing. These former students can speak to the degree to which feminist activism taught in classes enhances civic responsibility and participation post-baccalaureate. Because I attempt in my classes to foster an environment in which student and teacher are as equal as possible and in which open and honest discussion is valued, I am optimistic that my role as former instructor did not greatly influence the responses I received from these participants.

Analysis of Interview Data

The principles of grounded theory coding developed by Strauss and Corbin guided the analysis of the interview data. Coding is defined as "the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways. It is the central

process by which theories are built from data.”¹⁷⁴ In carrying out the actual analysis, the procedures for coding and theory-building outlined by Auerbach and Silverstein were used. Their process of coding moves through six steps beginning with 1) stating the research concerns; 2) extracting relevant text from the raw data; 3) identifying repeating ideas within the relevant text; 4) organizing “a group of repeating ideas” into themes¹⁷⁵; 5) grouping themes abstractly into theoretical constructs; 6) and finally, offering a theoretical narrative that bridges “the researcher’s concerns and the participants’ subjective experience.”¹⁷⁶

Evaluative Criteria

In the qualitative research paradigm, there are certain tools for assessing research and ensuring validity of the results which “take into account subjectivity, interpretation, and context.”¹⁷⁷ This project used Auerbach and Silverstein’s evaluative criteria, namely the concepts of justifiability of interpretations and transferability of theoretical constructs.¹⁷⁸

Justifiability of interpretations refers to the extent to which the interpretation of data is grounded in the data. It is distinguished from the unjustifiable use of subjectivity, which Auerbach and Silverstein define as “interpreting data based on the researcher’s prejudices and biases, without regard to the participants’ experience.”¹⁷⁹ To ensure

¹⁷⁴ Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 57.

¹⁷⁵ Auerbach and Silverstein, *Qualitative Data*, 38.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., Auerbach and Silverstein, *Qualitative Data*, 78.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 83.

justifiability of interpretations, three criteria must be met: 1) transparency; 2) communicability; and 3) coherence.¹⁸⁰

Transparency means “that other researchers can know the steps by which you arrived at your interpretation.”¹⁸¹ To ensure transparency in this study, detailed records were kept throughout each step of the coding process, and for each data source. For the interview data, a step-by-step process was followed, and folders were kept for each step—from the raw text files, to thematic files, to the development of a thematic narrative. Similarly, I retained all of the mission statement data and the keyword reports that I generated using Zotero. For the syllabi data, I kept a record of all the syllabi analyzed, numbers of syllabi by subject (e.g. “Introduction to Women’s Studies” and “Feminist Theory”) and a record of all those that contained assignments that could be considered action-oriented. Additionally, in the findings chapters, these steps are described in detail so that others may understand how the themes developed. In the results chapter, I have also used, as much as possible, long passages of text to forefront the voices of the participants.

The second criterion, that data analysis must be communicable, “means that themes and constructs can be understood by, and make sense to, other researchers, and to the research participants themselves.”¹⁸² In this case, communicability was achieved by thoroughly explaining each step of the process and then by having others read the work to make sure that the explanation was successfully conveyed.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 84.

The last criterion, coherence, means that “theoretical constructs must fit together” and allow the researcher “to tell a coherent story.”¹⁸³ As Auerbach and Silverstein explain, the goal is for the story to organize the data; it need not be the only possible story.¹⁸⁴ In this study, the data analysis procedure produced “coherent ideas by developing constructs that fit into an organized theoretical narrative.” The findings presented in chapters 4 and 5 were logically inferred from the data and presented in a coherent fashion.

In Auerbach and Silverstein’s method of data analysis, transferability of constructs is used rather than “generalizability” (as in quantitative methods). If the theoretical construct is transferable, it can “be extended beyond a particular sample.”¹⁸⁵ It is expected that the theoretical constructs that developed out of the current study will be transferable to other studies about experiences with praxis in higher education women’s studies programs.

Limitations of the Study

This research was exploratory and did not include a large, representative sample of women’s studies faculty and alumnae from across the U.S. Not only was the sample size relatively small, but many of the participants who responded to the call were particularly passionate about the subject; they responded because they had something to say about it, the proverbial axe to grind. A representative sample of women’s studies alumnae may have produced different results. The lack of a large, representative sample limited the breadth of the study. Even though the results cannot be generalizable in the

¹⁸³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 87.

traditional scientific sense, the purpose of the study was not to generalize but rather to begin an exploration into the experiences of women's studies programs, alumnae, and faculty with action-oriented pedagogy.

Another limitation was the availability of current syllabi. The syllabi were the most accessible but not the most current. Most pre-date the academic service-learning push currently happening across the country. Thus, a study of more recent syllabi might find that the landscape has changed and that more women's studies instructors are incorporating service-learning into their courses. Similarly, due to the time period that elapsed between when the mission statement data were originally collected and the writing of the dissertation, it is possible that programs have updated their mission statements to either include or exclude praxis.

Finally, another limitation was my own experience as a student in and instructor of women's studies classes. Although I attempted to remain unbiased and let the data teach me, my a priori knowledge and biases likely impacted the questions I asked of my research participants as well as how I analyzed the data. I acknowledged this limitation at the onset and attempted to mitigate my biases by constantly monitoring myself during data collection and analysis and by strictly adhering to Auerbach and Silverstein's coding process.

CHAPTER 4

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

This study examined feminist praxis in higher education women's studies programs by looking at program mission statements, course syllabi, and interviews with women's studies faculty and alumnae. Themes emerged from the analysis of interviews and the review of documents. This chapter presents the analysis of the data from the mission statements and syllabi and is organized by data source.

Mission Statements

Eighteen keywords relevant to praxis/activism were identified. These terms were used to perform the document analysis of the mission statements and program descriptions. Below are the 18 terms in order of frequency (Tables 1 and 2). I used the frequency of the keywords as an indicator of the priorities of women's studies programs.

Underpinning the value categories discussed below is the theme of empowerment, an element of feminist pedagogy described in Chapter 2. Consistent with the tenets of feminist pedagogy, women's studies programs, according to their mission statements, strive to empower their students to become agents of social change. For example, "Women's and Gender Studies programs at Eastern Washington University empower women to achieve dignity and justice through education, scholarship and social change." The Women's Studies Program at Bloomfield College "exists to empower women at Bloomfield College to correct the injustices that we face in our daily lives and to advance gender equality by developing full local and global citizenship through Women's

Studies courses and grassroots student-centered activism.” The Women Studies program at the University of New Mexico “is committed to educating students about the relationships among identity, power and knowledge toward the ends of social justice and empowerment.” One of the stated goals of the Women and Gender Studies program at The College of Brockport is to “bridge theory and practice, and empower students through mentoring, internships and leadership training initiatives.”

Table 1 Keywords related to praxis in 375 women’s studies mission statements/program descriptions

Keyword	Frequency
Internships	45
Activism	40
Social change	40
Praxis	34
Civic engagement	33
Community outreach	25
Service-learning	24
Advocacy	21
Applied	21
Empowerment	21
Transformation	16
Experiential learning	13
Social responsibility	7
Action	4
Social justice	3
Fieldwork	2
Make a difference	2
Action projects	1

Table 2 Keywords related to praxis in 110 women's studies mission statements

Keyword	Frequency
Social justice	33
Community outreach	25
Civic engagement	18
Service-learning	18
Activism	17
Advocacy	15
Empowerment	15
Social change	14
Praxis	10
Transformation	9
Internships	7
Social responsibility	4
Action	3
Applied	3
Experiential learning	3
Action projects	1
Make a difference	1
Fieldwork	0

Students in women's studies programs are empowered to engage in the value categories relevant to the research question that emerged during data analysis: praxis, civic engagement, experiential education, and social change.

Praxis

Although all of the keywords extracted from the mission statements are related to praxis, some mission statements more directly addressed the topic, either by specifically mentioning praxis, or by mentioning the connection between theory and practice, i.e. the

definition of praxis. In addition to “praxis,” other keywords included in this category are “action,” “activism,” and “applied.”

Although only two of the programs specifically use the word “praxis,” an additional thirty-two imply praxis by mentioning a connection or interaction between theory and practice. In its vision statement, the Women’s Studies program at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire describes itself as a “unique academic program that incorporates praxis--practice that is informed by theory and gendered analyses.” According to the mission statement of the Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Wisconsin-La Cross, “We maintain the connection between theory and practice, issues and advocacy, throughout our curricula and in all our programs.” The University of Minnesota has as part of its mission “to create an environment where theory and practice interact and build communities of allies across the university, state, nationally and transnationally.” Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies students at Gustavus Adolphus College are to “put feminist theory into practice through their involvement with campus and community organizations.”

In the mission statements, the second most frequently mentioned keyword relevant to the research question is “activism.” If the mission statements are indicative of values, women’s studies programs clearly promote and support activism. For example, Eastern Kentucky University’s Women and Gender Studies Program mission statement mentions a commitment to “service and activism to the Appalachian region.” According to its mission, the Women’s Studies Program at University of North Carolina-Asheville strives to “act as a resource and guide on issues relating to women through community activism and service.” The University of New Orleans’ women’s studies minor promotes

“social justice in both an intellectual and activist context.” Women’s Studies at George State University promotes “transformative thinking and activism toward ending oppression and working for freedom and justice.”

Closely related to activism are “action” and “action projects.” The mission statement for the Women’s and Gender Studies at The College of New Jersey, for example, says that their majors gain experience “in translating academic learning into social action.” And Women’s Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire says that “outreach and action projects are integral” to their mission.

The application of theories learned in women’s and gender studies is another commonly mentioned idea in mission statements. Twenty-one of the programs specifically use the word “applied.” “Emphasizing the connections between theory and practice, Women’s and Gender Studies” at Sonoma State University “encourages applied learning through required internships, community involvement projects, research, and service learning courses.” According to the mission statement of California State University—Fresno, “more than simply a body of knowledge, Women’s Studies encourages students to apply their learning to transform their lives and their communities.” According to Eastern Washington University’s Women’s and Gender Studies mission statement, “Through our theoretical and applied curricula, we help to prepare broadly educated, articulate, thoughtful students, ready to enjoy meaningful careers and enrich lives as engaged citizens in a culturally diverse world.”

Civic Engagement

One of the most frequently mentioned keywords in Women’s Studies program mission statements is “civic engagement.” Thirty-three programs mention either “civic

engagement” or “civic responsibility” in their mission statements. Part of the mission of the Gender and Women’s Studies program at the University of Denver is “to promote civic engagement within DU and the wider community.” The Gender and Women’s Studies program at the University of Illinois has as part of its mission to “develop knowledge and skills to enable students to continue their academic and professional development, civic engagement, and critical analysis of pressing social issues...”

Women’s Studies at Towson University aims “to provide students with the knowledge, analytical skills, and community engagement that will...empower them to become active citizens for a more just global order...”

There are frequent references in the mission statements to engagement with and outreach to the community. The Gender and Women’s Studies program at Oklahoma State strives “to make our teaching, research, and outreach activities integrated, so that students, faculty, staff, and community members engaged in Gender and Women’s Studies have a sense of how our intellectual work derives from and extends into everyday lives, especially those of women.” The Institute for Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Missouri-St. Louis states that one of its three central missions is “to sponsor events and provide community outreach.” The University of Florida has as part of its mission “to furnish services related to gender issues to the local community.”

Another frequently-mentioned keyword connotatively associated with praxis and civic engagement is advocacy, a term implying active espousal of a cause. The Jane Hibbard Idema Women’s Studies Center at Aquinas College sees as part of its mission the empowerment of “students and community members to become advocates for gender equality and social justice.” The Institute for Women’s Studies and Services at Metro

State University encourages “engagement in critical dialogue and advocacy for social justice.” The term advocacy is often mentioned in conjunction with “social justice” and “social change.”

Social Change

Depending on the branch of feminism using the term, social change in the context of women’s studies may refer to either the addition or inclusion of women within the existing structure (equal-rights), or a complete restructuring of patriarchal institutions (radical feminism).¹⁸⁶ The references to “social change” in the mission statements do not make clear which type of social change graduates are to pursue, but there are ample references to the goal of social change. For example, Women’s and Gender Studies programs at Eastern Washington University “empower women to achieve dignity and justice through education, scholarship and social change.”

Social justice implies working toward equality on behalf of those who are marginalized or disenfranchised. “Women’s Studies at the University at Albany has as its mission feminist undergraduate and graduate education and research for social justice.” Students at the University of Dayton are expected to integrate “the quest for intellectual understanding with the pursuit of social justice.” One of the goals of the Women’s & Gender Studies program at the University of Wisconsin—Steven’s Point is “to prepare women and men to serve as engaged global citizens, committed to preserving and furthering the ideal of equality, freedom, and justice for all.”

Although not quite as strongly connected to action as social justice and social change, the term social responsibility is also related to praxis and civic engagement.

¹⁸⁶ Maggie Humm, “Social Change,” in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, ed. Maggie Humm, 2nd ed., (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1995), 269.

Coursework in Women’s Studies at NC State University enables students “to examine academic disciplines and public policies from a feminist perspective, using research and analytic methods that encourage the translation of research into committed and responsible social involvement.” The Center for Gender in Global Context at Michigan State University claims in its mission statement that “students will be prepared to be socially responsible citizens, professionals, and leaders of the 21st century.”

Also included in this category is “transformation,” a term commonly referenced by programs, sometimes referring to personal but usually to social transformation. At Bates College, “The goal of the Program in Women and Gender Studies is to enable learners to recognize, analyze, and transform gender relations as they appear in everyday life.” According to the mission statement of the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia, “Courses encourage students to analyze the world in which they live, in order that they might act to transform it.” Lewis and Clark College’s Department of Gender Studies “engages students in the political and philosophical exploration of strategies for transforming coercive and unequal gender systems and enhancing individual choice and our common humanity.” Women Studies at Loyola Marymount University describes itself “as a department committed to transformation through education.” “The intention” of the Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies Program at Morehead State University “is to equip students with the knowledge and analytical abilities needed to recognize and transform gender inequality in their own lives and in the world at large.” The Women and Gender Studies Program at Grand Valley State University offers “a theory-based and broadly engaged curriculum that focuses on transforming the campus and the larger community.” The program description

for Women's Studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania explains, "Courses in women's studies address social equity issues and encourage students to perceive themselves as capable of transforming society." Similarly, Western Oregon University's mission statement states, "the goal of gender studies is to better understand and ultimately to transform our lives and the world in which we live."

A final keyword in this category is "making a difference," a vague and lofty term implying social betterment or change. At Arizona State University, "the Bachelor of Arts in women and gender studies offers a comprehensive program of study that empowers students to make a difference in the world."

Experiential Education/Learning

In this value category, in addition to experiential education/learning, I include three specific forms of experiential education: internships, fieldwork, and service-learning. When combined, this is the largest category related to the research question, with 60 references in the mission statements. At Columbia College (South Carolina), "Through coursework, service, and experiential opportunities, the Women's Studies Program provides a laboratory where students put into practice the college's mission for the development of critical thought and expression, lifelong learning, acceptance of personal responsibility, and commitment to service and social justice." Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln "encourages learning experiences outside the classroom." Towson University's Women's and Gender Studies program intends "to promote active learning strategies in our courses, and to integrate service-learning and civic engagement activities into the Department's undergraduate and graduate curricula, with the goal of fostering active participation in civil society, and an

appreciation of the diversity and complexity of social life and social issues.” Two programs make references to field experience: At Mills College, “majors and minors learn to use interdisciplinary methodological approaches for feminist and queer research and, through supervised fieldwork and study, become familiar with the relationship between research and activism;” and students in the graduate program in Women’s Spirituality at The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology are required to complete a community service practicum, which “may take place in a social service agency, a school or other institution, or may be a series of courses or workshops developed and offered by the student to the larger community.”

The single most frequently mentioned keyword in the mission statements is “internship.” Usually the programs simply list internships as an option available to students. However, some programs specifically link internships to activism in the mission statements. The Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Wisconsin-La Cross emphasizes “service-learning, internships, and involvement that puts learning into action.” At Wake Forest University, “WGS offers extensive opportunities for internships, promotes service learning and activism on behalf of women’s and gay/lesbian rights, and strives for a non-gender-biased, open-minded society.”

Twenty-four of the programs mention service-learning in their program descriptions or mission statements. According to the mission statement for Berry College’s Women’s Studies Program, “the program encourages students to understand and value diversity by exploring differences among people, promoting dialogue on issues of diversity, and providing service learning experiences in the community.” Women’s

Studies at the University of Tennessee—Chattanooga provides “opportunities for service learning and community engagement from a feminist perspective.” The Women’s and Gender Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin—River Falls “promotes students’ development of ethical and engaged citizenship through a commitment to academic excellence, social justice, and service.” Similar to the mission statement of the National Women’s Studies Association, “Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of South Carolina promotes an understanding of the experiences of women and other underrepresented groups through a complete program of teaching, research and service to the University, the local community, the state, the nation, and the global community.” Specifically, “Emerging from an activist tradition, Women’s and Gender Studies serves University, local, state, national, and global communities by acting as a resource and guide for issues related to women and gender.” The program description for Women and Gender Studies at Dominican University of California espouses, “Service learning is an important component of the curriculum.”

As shown above in Tables 1 and 2, 18 relevant words emerged in the analysis as connoting either a direct relation to action or to the development of a commitment to act. These keywords were then grouped into four larger value categories. After establishing the terms, I calculated how many programs mention at least one of the terms related to praxis in their mission statement or program description.

Out of 375 programs, 53 percent ($n=197$) either directly or connotatively mention praxis or activism. For the 110 programs with mission statements, 75 percent ($n=83$) either directly or connotatively mentioned praxis/activism. This analysis demonstrates that individual women’s studies programs and departments claim to have a commitment

to feminist praxis/activism, similar to the mission of the NWSA. Although I did not find a significant difference between programs at private versus public universities, or Ivy League versus non-Ivy-League, women's studies programs at schools with religious affiliation were more likely to mention praxis. And women's studies programs that offer graduate degrees, especially those offering a doctorate, were less likely to mention praxis.

The data from the mission statements indicate that women's studies programs claim to have a commitment to feminist praxis. The majority of the statements use language that echoes the NWSA's mission for social change. The interviews with the alumnae, discussed in further detail in Chapter 5, provided an opportunity to see if and how the missions are being carried out. Another way to gauge feminist praxis is to look at the course syllabi of women's studies courses to see if and how faculty are teaching praxis to their students.

Women's Studies Course Syllabi

If women's studies programs have a commitment to feminist praxis, as demonstrated in their mission statements, how does this commitment make its way into the courses students are taking? The data presented in this section came from the analysis of 583 women's studies course syllabi. The decision to focus on syllabi rather than course descriptions found in university catalogs was intentional, since many courses that are "on the books" are seldom offered. In addition, syllabi give more information such as course requirements that might involve praxis. Focusing on syllabi of actual courses offered to women's studies students provided a better appraisal of how the mission for praxis is being carried out in classrooms. This data was triangulated with interviews with women's

studies faculty and alumni. The interviews are discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

In the syllabi databases, there were several examples of good action-oriented pedagogical projects. For example, in the Maryland database, one introductory course assignment had an “activism assignment”; students were required to write letters to protest or express concern over an issue relevant to women’s studies. The professor quotes the NWSA mission in her syllabus and specifically states that “Women’s Studies seeks not only to understand the world but to change it—starting right here in our own back yard (think globally, act locally).”¹⁸⁷ A “take a stand” project was listed as a requirement in one of the NWSA feminist theory syllabi. The professor, an adjunct at a small, private liberal arts college, emailed the assignment guidelines to me upon request. She asks students to identify a social injustice, determine an audience for an action, formulate an action plan, carry out the action, and write a response paper describing the project, its objectives, and its impact on the student and others. The other type of praxis assignment mentioned in the data is academic service-learning, however, these assignments were not common.

The “liberating act,” “take a stand,” and academic service-learning assignments were not common in the syllabi. Most courses had traditional requirements: a midterm exam, a final exam, and papers. This finding was supported by the interviews with women’s studies faculty and alumnae discussed in Chapter 5.

Especially in introductory courses, syllabi that provide the topics to be covered usually list activism at the bottom of the list. In fact, most popular introductory women’s

¹⁸⁷ “Gender, Race, and Class Syllabus,” Ellen Cronan Rose, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://mith.umd.edu/WomensStudies/Syllabi/Intro/intro-rose>.

and gender studies textbooks offer a chapter on activism at the end of the book.¹⁸⁸

Assigned reading on activism is typically the way the subject is addressed in women's studies courses, however, there were several assignments directly related to activism.

According to the syllabi data, when instructors give assignments related to activism or praxis, the method they typically use is to require students to interview an activist or analyze a feminist organization. Several of these assignments appeared in the data. For example, two of the syllabi in the NWSA collection require students to analyze an activist organization. These types of assignments, although engaging students with the subject of activism, do not require them to take action or to actively participate in efforts to solve contemporary social problems.

The syllabi revealed that praxis is largely missing from the requirements in women's studies courses. There were very few examples of action-oriented assignments. For example, in NWSA's collection of 24 model introductory course syllabi, only three (13 percent) had an assignment that could be classified as praxis, and one of those was a service-learning option in lieu of a paper, not a firm requirement. This result was typical of the other databases, which included over 500 syllabi. In other words, only a small handful of the syllabi I studied contained mention of action-oriented assignments.

The data from the mission statements and syllabi suggest that women's studies programs claim to have a commitment to feminist praxis and that the mission to educate students in feminist praxis does not take the form of action-oriented projects in women's studies courses. Although most courses do not require students to take action, many

¹⁸⁸ See for example, *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives* by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey; *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions* by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee; *Feminist Frontiers* by Laurel Richardson, Verta Taylor, and Nancy Whittier; and *Women: Images and Realities: A Multicultural Anthology* by Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Schniedewind.

women's and gender courses do examine activism as a subject. The themes found in the documents are realized in the actual experiences of alumni, as discussed in greater depth in the following chapter. The interviews further contribute to understanding the role of praxis in women's studies courses and programs.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS: ALUMNAE AND FACULTY

Interviews with women's studies faculty and alumnae are the foundation of this research, and this chapter gives voice to some of their experiences with praxis in women's studies. As discussed in Chapter 3, I interviewed ten faculty and eighteen alumnae of women's studies programs. The semi-structured, open-ended interviews allowed me to better understand the role of praxis in women's studies courses and programs and the factors affecting the implementation of action-oriented pedagogy.

I went into my interviews with graduates of women's studies programs hoping to hear about their experiences with action-oriented pedagogy. I asked specific questions about any assignments they could recall that could be defined as action-oriented or activist. With the exception of the three students I interviewed who were my own and a couple others, the rest of the alumnae had no such experiences they could share with me. The course of the interview then turned to more general questions about opportunities for experiential education in other forms, such as internships and service-learning, whether or not activism was encouraged by their women's studies programs, hypothetical questions about how they would have responded to action-oriented pedagogical assignments, and questions about their activism during and after college.

Using Auerbach and Silverstein's process for coding interview data, the transcripts were reviewed several times and then text was extracted and grouped into relevant text files. From these groupings, three predominant themes emerged: 1) alumni

perceive a disconnect between women's studies and action; 2) alumni are making the connection between theory and practice; 3) more than other forms of experiential education, action-oriented pedagogy is an effective and welcome method for teaching feminist praxis.

Interviews with Alumnae

Women's Studies and Action

The strongest theme to emerge from the interview data with alumnae was a perceived disconnect between feminist theory and action and a wish for women's studies courses and programs to teach feminist theories as well as real world applications of those theories. All of the respondents were aware of the relationship between the women's movement and the creation of academic women's studies programs. And all of them were drawn to the discipline because of its promise of social change. As Anne, my former undergraduate student, but a doctoral student at another university at the time of the interview, said:

I think the debate between theory and activism has been going on for decades now, but I do think it is such a central part of the movement, and as a field we really are kind of produced out of that movement. And it really doesn't make sense to me for there to be a disconnect, and unfortunately I think once you've entered into academia there's no real incentive for you to keep engaging in maybe the causes that—or be socially engaged in the causes that maybe brought you to this field. And you kind of have to seek them out elsewhere, which I believe is unfortunate and really not the impetus for why you get into it in the first place.

With a couple exceptions, most of the respondents valued studying feminist theory and spoke highly of feminist theorists, including Judith Butler. (Coincidentally, almost all of them used Judith Butler as their example of the most esoteric of feminist theorists.) Thus, the complaints were not of the anti-intellectual “theory is boring” variety. One exception was Caroline, who completed her master's in women's studies

while in her 30s and is working as a volunteer and community education coordinator at a domestic violence agency. Like other respondents, she suggested that her program should have made praxis a requirement, but there was an underlying lack of enthusiasm for the intellectual rigor required in graduate school.

I think there should be a class. There should be a core requirement. If I had to take something as ludicrous as—sorry—History of Feminism I thought was totally boring, and it went way far—it went back too far; it did not spend enough time; it just felt very dated to me. But I mean if I have to take something like that, I should have to take a class on activism. I should have to take a class on figuring out, finding out how I can be of better service to the greater world or my small community around me. I mean that's basic to me.

Similarly, M.K., a recent master's graduate, complained about the lack of real-world application in her graduate courses as she now faces the job market. She admits her naivety about the rigor of graduate work before beginning her master's program in women's studies.

When you first get in, they're like, 'Okay; what's your name and what are your research interests?' And I was like—I don't know what my research interests are at all.' And because it's graduate level, they sort of frown upon "I'm interested in domestic violence; I'm interested in reproductive rates" because to them, that's not advanced thinking enough. We've already talked about all these things in all your 200-level classes and your 300-level classes. So it wasn't easy for me to kind of think ahead, I guess, and think about 'Okay, I want to work on something that's actually going to come to fruition, and it's going to help me after I graduate.' To me I was like, 'Okay; I'm going to think of a research topic that I'm interested in that maybe if I want to go on to get a Ph.D. I can do, but for the most part, it's something that I'm interested in and it could have no real-life value at all,' which it turns out it didn't.

When I asked her how her program helped her make the connection between theory and practice, she said,

I think that a lot of it is just lip service, and it's sort of a shame because you go into it thinking one thing and then when you have these experiences it's like—‘Well, am I just being an idiot, and are my expectations so incredibly out of whack?’ But I think that most people go into it having these expectations that they are going to do something and they're going to change the world, and then it's like—well no, you're not going to. You're going to listen to someone's research interests and they're going to push their book on you.

Placing the blame on faculty for the perceived lack of praxis was a common response across the interviews with graduates of women's studies programs.

Alumnae were aware of the “publish or perish” dictum faced by faculty who are attempting to gain tenure and promotion within the university and how this pressure forces faculty in women's studies to focus on their own writing and research, rather than spending time on experiential learning opportunities for students. There was also an acknowledgement that women's studies graduate programs are under pressure to produce scholars. When I asked her what kind of relationship she thought ought to exist between the discipline of women's studies and praxis, Lily said:

Much more than what I had. [*Laughs*] I think a lot of times academic departments really get lost in the idea of academia, and they're so centered on getting themselves published or getting their students published or getting their students to—in the case of grad schools into Ph.D. programs and whatnot. Then I think at least in my experience [praxis] was—it was lost, and I think that having that support and having that connection be taught in every classroom—not just women's studies, but especially in women's studies, to me is absolutely imperative. It has to happen in my opinion to have a real impact on not just the students but everybody that those students talk to.

For Lily and most of the other participants, a disdain for theory and difficult courses was not the predominant problem. The majority of them clearly respected and appreciated feminist theory and enjoyed the challenge of reading and discussing theory in their courses. They did, however, have an expectation that there be at least a discussion of, if

not actual instruction on or opportunities for, applying theories in the real world in order to redress the social problems exposed in women's studies classes.

Gloria recently finished her bachelor's degree in women's studies with a minor in ethnic studies. Of all the respondents, she was one of the least disgruntled about the lack of opportunities for praxis, which she said came from her ethnic studies courses more than women's studies. Now she is concerned about what she might find elsewhere as she contemplates the pursuit of a Ph.D. in women's studies. In the selection below, she questions the purpose of theories that are not applied in the real world.

I think it's necessary that there's a relationship [between action and women's studies] because like I said, it's great—I mean you know obviously I think that Judith Butler—I don't know why I keep saying her; she's not the only one, but I just keep thinking of her—that that's important work, and certainly talked about. But if we're just going—and I'm not saying she's saying this, but if we're just going to sit around and read about it and write papers about it, that's great, but you have to apply it to things that are real—to things that are actually happening in the world. Otherwise what's the point, I guess?

The graduate students with whom I spoke, especially those in doctoral programs, were more aware of the necessity of theory and less concerned about opportunities for praxis. Lucy, a doctoral student who teaches introductory women's studies courses as part of her graduate assistantship said:

I think there's an expectation when you get to the PhD level that your work—that you're really theoretical in your work. I mean you should be because you're being challenged to think about these theories and these abstract concepts, and you're being taught to be able to converse with other people in the academy about these same issues. And when they prepare you to go in the job market they want you to represent their program as best as you can.

The graduate students were also aware of the challenges of feminist praxis in academia. Yet all of the students with whom I spoke said that women's studies courses and programs need to help students make the connection between theory and practice, and

most reported that it is not happening at their universities, despite good intentions as in mission statements.

Before beginning each interview with the alumnae, I printed the mission statement for her program and asked if and how the program carried out this mission, particularly with regard to praxis. The alumnae indicated that mission statements are not indicative of what is actually happening on the ground, a couple using the term “lip service.” For example, when I asked Lily, a recent graduate of a women’s studies M.A. program, about the mention of social justice, social change, and feminist praxis in her department’s mission statement, she said: “I mean in all honesty that was the reason I chose [this university]. It really was—it sounded like exactly what I wanted. [Laughs] And it unfortunately fell short....Yeah; it was disappointing to say the least.” When I read their program’s mission statement to them, most of the participants said that it was not an accurate depiction of what is actually happening.

The interview data revealed that the disconnect between theory and action in women’s studies is especially evident on campuses with both academic women’s studies programs and women’s resource centers. Alumni spoke of the lack of connection between these offices, one even giving the example of visiting a campus to look at their graduate program and asking the women’s center for directions to the women’s studies office and being told that they did not know where it was located. Repeatedly, alumni spoke of this fraught relationship and how it is emblematic of the theory/praxis divide.

Joy: This is a big problem overall, the academics versus the reality of it all. Too much arrogance on the part of the women’s studies departments wanting to keep it academic, for sure. I recall no meetings or situations where I was with [the director of women’s studies] and [the director of the women’s center] working on the same thing. I don’t think I ever saw them in a room together. I have no memories of even considering that it was a weird thing, though I think it now. So

that is very sad and unhelpful to women's studies students who want to be in the trenches, which is most of them I would guess. And I'm sure the women's center did not reach out to the women's studies program. I think the relationship is not an easy one, it is difficult to bridge those differences, but it is necessary on both sides to keep current on the issues.

Joy earned dual undergraduate degrees in women's studies and educational/counseling psychology and went on to become the director of a women's center at an urban, state university in the Midwest. She spoke about the ideal relationship between women's studies and women's centers.

Women's studies and activism should be intertwined, perhaps even running out of the same space, GASP! Women's studies needs to get over their fear of being associated with the action of the women's centers. They need to take pride in their work. I know they are in a spot where they feel they need to justify their existence as an academic discipline, I get that, but you know, over in engineering, the faculty research it and teach the students how to practice it, and no one has a problem with that. I know there are differences between professional tracks and liberal arts in terms of training, but really when it comes right down to it, they are the same. Engineers with penises come up with ideas that make the world a safer and better place, and there is no embarrassment in the association between theory and practice. Why can't women's studies? I just think it's weird that the study has to be so different from the practice, when really the practice should demonstrate the academic gains in the field of women's studies and thus be the centerpiece of it all. So you can see how the male creation of higher education is fucked from the start, built on presumptions about what is academic and what is pedestrian. Fuckers! I think the women's studies people fear they will be associated with 'girly' causes maybe? That studying domestic violence should be separate from the place where beat-up women come for help? What is that all about? There is a disconnect and I think it's because we have internalized the sexist idea that women's causes are not worthy of academic study. That's bullcrap!

When she became the director of a campus women's center, Joy sought out the director of women's studies and fostered a relationship with her to benefit the students on their campus.

I made a point to meet with the women's studies director regularly. We were in agreement that we should do things together or at least attend each other's programs to show our support for each other. I went to classes and talked about sexual assault and such. I had her come and do programs, she attended programs

just to be there to be seen and supportive and answer questions, she was good, not sure who she was because I have repressed all of that, but I could probably figure it out. But our working together was a positive thing. Not at all suggested or encouraged by anyone though; I sought her out and she was thrilled I did and then she was very willing to do it. She got a lot of women's studies students in classes due to coming to things at the women's center. She was very academic for sure, but she had that 'Okay, how does this play out in the real world?' that was much appreciated. And granted, there was a giant chasm between her world and my world, hers being books and mine being women getting the shit beaten out of them by their meth-head boyfriends who also stole their baby's winter coat. But we at least knew they needed to connect because they are two sides of the same coin, one is useless without the other. The disconnect shows what happens when the mind does not match the feet on the ground. And yes, there is good in being academic and researching the past and all that jazz, but I think the goal of higher education is to learn that stuff, then use it to make the world a better place. Right?

Joy's concerted effort to connect the women's studies department to her work in the campus women's center is emblematic of the second predominant theme to emerge from the data: despite the real or perceived lack of praxis in women's studies programs and classes, the alumni with whom I spoke are making the connection.

The Connection between Theory and Practice

Although many of the alumni were already civically engaged or showed an inclination to apply theory outside the classroom through service work or volunteerism before they came to women's studies, this study did not attempt to answer the question of whether or not women's studies creates action-oriented individuals or if action-oriented individuals are drawn to women's studies. Some respondents attributed their interest in social justice and their collegiate and post-baccalaureate civic engagement to parental influence during formative years, others to the requirement of volunteer work during secondary education. Very few of the respondents credited women's studies for their current praxis. One exception was Lynn:

To be quite honest, I cannot ever remember being active or involved in any activist activities before starting my women's studies coursework. Coming to [the university] and starting my women's studies minor really coincided with me becoming active in the feminist and LGBT groups on campus. Through these groups, I have participated in marches—Take Back the Night, Counter Proposition 8 demonstration and march, and so on.... I have also networked and forged relationships with other students who have gotten me involved in pro-choice groups, canvassing at music festivals, on the streets, and at marches for other groups.

Although not all of the respondents attributed praxis to their education in women's studies as directly as Lynn, almost all of them were making the connection between theory and praxis as women's studies alumnae, although not always consciously. Caroline, for example, works as a community educator at a domestic violence agency. When I asked her if she applies the feminist theories she studied as a graduate student in women's studies to her work at the agency, her answer was emphatic:

No, no, no; no, no, no. I mean no, and that seems like that would be a natural connection because I don't know; I guess if we really get into it then we could say—hmm. I would say not; I mean one of the things that I learned in my training, in my hotline training was that we really want to hold that woman to be a whole person and we don't want to treat her as if she's something that's broken and needs to be fixed, and we want her—it was like women's centered advocacy and we want to treat her like she is capable of making her own decisions because she is, and we don't want to say that we know better because we are safe in essence. So it seems like it could be a natural segue somehow. But I wasn't actively thinking of anything that I had learned.

Although she was not "actively thinking" about feminist theories, Caroline was using the feminist theory of female empowerment that she had learned through women's studies in her work with domestic violence callers on the agency hotline.

Similarly, when I first asked Gloria about how her program helped students apply theory, she said that it was not a topic of discussion:

Gloria: I'm saying nobody talks about [the disconnect between theory and action]. It's just kind of like well you either do or you don't. I know people who are all about theory and that's all they want to think about and they want to talk about Irigaray and [*Laughs*] that sort of thing, and they don't really do a lot of activism—those folks. So maybe there is a connection there too because I would much rather have somebody else read Irigaray and then write about it [*Laughs*] and then read that, which is terrible, and it sounds anti-intellectual, but I just—I've got to go [*Laughs*] DO something; I can't sit here for hours and read this and not really understand it.

Yet as she went on, she explained how she used one of Derrida's theories in a documentary about abortion that she was part of:

We talked a lot about Derrida in one of [my women's studies] classes, and it was like, 'That's great,' and I really actually did take away from that the whole idea of the space in between. And in fact [the director of the documentary]—the footage [she] put of me in the film is talking about that. Because it's true; you're either anti-choice or pro-choice, and there is no in between. You're one or the other, but clearly there's a lot of middle ground there. There's a lot of space in the middle, and it's that space that will—if we can get in that space or wiggle in that space and crack it open, that's how it's going to happen. It's not going to happen with us standing over here and them standing over there and yelling at each other, or them killing doctors—that's not going to make a difference. But it's the common ground. And in fact, I just read an article; there's a man who—I forget his name, but he's a legislator from somewhere and his whole thing, though he's anti-choice, he's pro-birth control, and I had no idea that there was this whole anti-birth control movement within the anti-choice movement where they don't want you to take birth control. I think that's insane, but you know okay, fine; that's how a lot of people feel. And so he's built a coalition with Planned Parenthood and NOW because the whole point is not to have unwanted pregnancies. And if you can stop unwanted pregnancies, you can stop abortion, or at least lower it....There's a lot more chance of that coming from it—because obviously people on the pro-choice side were not like, 'Yeah, abortion—kill them all.' You know it's not like that; it's about helping women who are in situations that they shouldn't be in, and I know for a fact most of the pro-choice people are all for birth control. And so if we can talk about that with each other, that's some of that middle space that's going to make a difference. So yeah—Derrida and that whole idea that's huge if you can apply it to something.

Although not all of the respondents mentioned specific theories and how they have applied them outside the women's studies classroom, and despite the criticism many

of them lobbed at their women's studies programs for not teaching praxis, most of them found opportunities for praxis while they were students.

Students with a preexisting interest in activism took advantage of any opportunities for praxis, such as using assignments with loose guidelines to create their own action-oriented projects. Joy described a few "self-assigned activist projects" in her women's studies program. For example, she worked with two other students on a project for her "Women, Race, and Class" course. The assignment as written by the professor simply required them to research a topic relevant to the course and present it to the class at the end of the semester. Her group picked the topic of female genital mutilation, but instead of just presenting their research, they created an entire program called "Make a World of Difference" to help their classmates address the problem being exposed to them during the presentation. "We were sick of just studying problems. We wanted to DO something," Joy said. During their presentation, Joy's group provided a handout with the steps for engaging with a social justice issue and ended by giving each student a letter addressed to the United Nations asking for international attention to the problem of female genital mutilation. After the semester ended, they continued giving the presentation to other groups on campus, using the same "action plan" but changing the social justice issue as necessary, such as confronting sexual violence during Rape Awareness Week. Joy said she recalled doing projects like this in a few of her women's studies classes but said it was never required.

In addition to self-assigning activist projects while still students, now as alumnae most of them were directly using their women's studies education in the "real world" through their occupations or volunteer work, for example, Suzanne, a freelance writer

focusing on how gender, sexuality, and reproductive health intersect with popular culture; Ruby, a counselor at an abortion clinic; and Simone, a violence prevention educator.

These alumnae are making the connection, and as Lily explains, an education in women's studies provides the foundation for social change:

I think because education and academia—I guess, planted the seed of activism, it gets in your head. So if you read about the oppressed and you care about it and you want to do more about it, then [women's studies] is definitely the place to start. There are hundreds of situations that I wouldn't know anything about just by Google searching. I don't know how else I'd find out about it if not for a women's studies class. It's definitely stuff that's not brought up—at least as far as I've seen—in any other disciplines. And it's that idea of putting action first, and making the connection is so important, and it's something that at least even if the professors aren't mentioning it, it's constantly in the articles and the books that we read. So like I said, it gets in your head, and you go home and it's stuff you want to talk about. It's not, 'I learned how to connect a computer, let's chat.' [It's] 'Do you remember that lady down the street—you know she's scared of her husband? Let's talk about that.' It's stuff that I think everybody has at least some scope of—unless you're a sociopath; there's some sense of connection there—the human kind I guess if you want to go that broad, but at least to womankind and to the oppressed, whoever that may be in whatever instance.

So I do think while if that's where it stops, and all you do is learn about it and that's it and you don't discuss it with anybody and it doesn't create any kind of dialogue and then you go home and you do whatever you were going to do anyway, I don't think that education is enough. But I do think that for the majority of people, it does create at least some sort of dialogue, which I think is very basic for what needs to happen.

The fact that the graduates in the study are making a connection between theory and praxis in their post-women's studies lives may suggest that even without action-oriented pedagogy, women's studies gives its students the tools to make the connection on their own. However, action-oriented pedagogy is an intentional effort that might assure that all women's studies students graduate with practical experience in engaging with communities to improve the conditions faced by women and in field-testing the theories learned in their courses.

Action-oriented Pedagogy Effective for Teaching Feminist Praxis

Research participants with experience taking women's studies courses with action-oriented assignments made a clear connection between theories discussed in the course and the requirement to apply the theories outside the classroom. As mentioned previously, most of the students who experienced action-oriented pedagogy as it is described in this dissertation were my own students; however, there were a few exceptions. Suzanne, for example, took a class that required an application of theory to a social problem. She was already involved in activism outside of the classroom, but when I asked her to talk about the experience with the course requirement, she said:

At the time I guess I just felt like this is just one more project that I'm doing.... But thinking back about it now [*Laughs*] I think that's something that's hugely missing from women's studies is the activist element because I think that one needs to learn those sorts of tools. They're not innate; you know what I mean? Like you don't wake up knowing how to, you know, get the media attention that you want for a particular direct action protest that you're doing. And if one of the goals of Women's Studies is to produce people who are social and political activists I think that it would be responsible to include that in the curriculum itself. So in a reflective sense I feel like that's what I gained from the class is being able to go—oh, so I was learning in this institutional setting exactly what I needed to put into practice outside of it.

Students who had experienced action-oriented pedagogy compared it to their women's studies courses that did not have a requirement of praxis. In the selection below, one of my former students, Anne, describes her reaction when she learned about the course requirement to participate in an action project.

I remember feeling excited because up to that point I had been in several women's studies classes and there had been no external engagement or incentive to go out and do things—at least as part of the course requirement. So I remember being very excited and kind of relieved, like this was finally encouraged among our students and not looked at as taking time away from reading or other important parts of scholarship. So I was excited. I could tell that some of the other students maybe were a little apprehensive about it because I don't think it's anything that

they had experienced, at least in a college course before, but....at the end of the day everybody seemed pretty onboard.

When I directly asked her to compare the two types of classes, action-oriented versus traditional pedagogy, Anne described the relief she experienced in the courses that required her to take action:

Yeah, it's an interesting question to think about. I don't know; I mean both types of courses always felt work-intensive. You put in a lot of hours. And you definitely did a lot of reading and all of that, but to me, the courses that incorporated more activist projects always seemed more fun in a way, you know what I mean? Like they would always be the ones that you would turn to first and were, I don't know, a little bit less dour than just the constant reading and learning how else the world is screwed up. **[Laughs]** Like you were actually doing something about it; so even though you were working maybe sometimes twice or three times as hard, it was never that drudgery that sometimes you do have to come back and read these things because you felt like you were able to kind of expunge some of that frustration somehow. **[Laughs]**

Most of the alumnae I interviewed explained that they were rarely given action-oriented assignments in their courses. When I asked Caroline if she was given opportunities to put theory into practice in any of her courses, she explained,

You know it should be part—there should be some sort of—like what one of your questions alluded to; was the volunteering piece encouraged or anything like that? Yeah; it should have been. It should be—I feel like that's so much the core of what women's studies is all about, but that's not a required piece of the program, not in my program anyway.

Although most of the research participants did not have direct experience with action-oriented projects in their women's studies courses, many of them did have experience with other forms of experiential education, namely internships, required volunteerism, academic service-learning, and for several of the Master's students, special projects in lieu of a thesis. Many of them described the experiences, especially internships, as either unorganized or not directly related to course content.

Internships, typically elective courses that women's studies majors or minors could opt to take, were often described as unorganized and entirely student-initiated. As Caroline said, "If you wanted to do something like that you could, but I don't feel like it was necessarily encouraged." M.K. explains that she decided not to do an internship because it was not required and taking a course seemed like less work, a decision she now regrets:

I think [theory and praxis] should go hand-in-hand, and I think there's no reason they shouldn't make you do an internship or make you do some sort of work share or something like that. An internship was offered, but at the time, I was—I think how they make you do it is—they'll give you a list and you have to contact someone and you have to set it up and you have to do a lot of the legwork, and then you come in for class and to me that just is not appealing. And at the time I was like, well, 'I'm not going to do that; I'm just going to take a class; that would be much easier.' But thinking back on it, I wish that I had [done an internship] because it would have allowed me to make some connections within the community. It would have maybe told me, oh, I really like volunteering at this—or working here and interning here; maybe I should look into this as a career. Or, I hate this; I never want to do this again. But they really didn't push it; I mean someone would send out an email and say, 'Hey, take my internship class,' but beyond that they don't give you information about where you can go and what you can do, what you need to do, how easy it is—things like that. It was more for people who actively knew going in there's a place I want to go and want to work, or maybe someone already worked there—then they would be able to use that [for their internship], but it wasn't—to me the information wasn't forthcoming.

Even when encouraged or required, internships were not always helpful in giving students meaningful experience with applying feminist theories they were learning in women's studies courses to work with agencies outside the university. Lily initially wanted to do an internship but decided not to because of the type of work she would be required to do.

Internships, they seemed to be—every couple of years there seems to be a wave where they really push it. So my first year, no one even mentioned an internship. And I sought it out and I wanted to do one and then wasn't—it would be for class credit and it would be through a certain group of agencies that they had connections with and it really was volunteering more than an internship. It was a

lot of—from what I—I never went through with it because what I gathered when talking to people is that I would be doing a lot of paper filing and, you know, meaningless work [*Laughs*], stuff that definitely needs to be done but that volunteers should be doing, not someone that's trying to, you know, reach out and create a better understanding of anything.

Other issues that repeatedly came up with other forms of experiential education are the lack of relevancy to course work and accountability. Suzanne directly addresses both of these:

Well, there was no connection made in the course in terms of a direct connect between what we were doing and what was being taught in the course. So I just used something that I was already doing. I didn't go and seek out another volunteer opportunity because I was already involved in so many things. And the few women who were in the group with me, they just said, 'Oh okay, well we'll just do the thing that you're doing,' but they only came once and then lied on the number of hours that they said that they came. And then I was the one who ended up writing the majority of the paper anyway because they didn't take it seriously and I did. You know what I mean? So I think that while I wouldn't discourage anyone from having this service-learning part of their class, I think the way to make it more meaningful to the students is to simply engage with it during the class time and make those connections between the course material and what people may or may not be learning in their volunteer placement.

The alumnae interviewed for this study were enthusiastic about opportunities for experiential education but wanted those opportunities to directly connect to their studies and expressed frustration when professors did not monitor projects to ensure fairness.

Although I asked them about any experiences with academic service-learning, most of the alumnae I interviewed were unfamiliar with the concept and only one had personal experience with service-learning. Sarah recently earned her B.A. in women's studies from a large, public university in the Northeast and was required to do ten hours of service-learning for one of her courses. She did fundraising for a domestic violence agency.

I really enjoyed it. Not so much the fund-raising part because I hate having everyone hang up on me, [*Laughs*] but it really made me realize that's what I want to do—you know I wanted to work for a women's shelter—for like a sexual violence or a domestic violence prevention or education group locally. So it really only cemented that that's what I want to do.

At the time of the interview, Sarah was looking for jobs with sexual violence and domestic violence agencies.

If the opportunities are well-organized, are made directly relevant to the course through discussions and assignments, and if students are held accountable for their participation in projects, action-oriented pedagogical assignments are an effective and welcome method for teaching feminist praxis. The interviews with the alumnae also revealed that students understand the historical connection between women's studies and action and perceive a disconnect in today's courses and programs. However, despite this perception, they are making the connection between theory and practice on their own by self-assigning activist projects while students and by using feminist theories in their jobs and volunteer work post-baccalaureate. The interviews with faculty provide an opportunity to understand how those who teach women's studies believe they are helping students make the connection between theory and practice and what factors might be preventing professors from embracing action-oriented feminist pedagogy.

Faculty Interviews

The data for this section came from interviews with ten women's studies faculty members of varying ranks. As per Auerbach and Silverstein's coding process, relevant text pertinent to the research concern was taken from the interview transcripts. The relevant text was then grouped into repeating ideas, which were further honed into themes. From the themes, four theoretical constructs emerged: 1) establishing Women's

Studies' legitimacy in the academy; 2) fear about repercussions from university administration; 3) teaching is activism; and 4) action-oriented pedagogy takes more time.

With a few exceptions, almost all of the faculty members admitted that they do not require praxis of students. Clare, an associate professor in higher education administration at a large Research-I university in the Midwest, teaches courses cross-listed with women's and gender studies. She explained that as a graduate student, she took a women's studies course that required her to join an activist organization. This assignment directly led to her dissertation topic and her current research interests. She said, "For me [that assignment] was huge because it really solidified what I was going to study as a scholar." However, when I asked her if now as a professor she ever requires such an assignment in any of the courses she teaches, she said,

I haven't, but part of that is [*Laughs*] because my course is actually not housed in women's and gender studies, and I think that if it—I know that if it was a women's and genders studies course, rather than a course that was cross-listed, it would look different. This particular course that I teach is a higher education administration course, and it's also a required course for all of our students who are going into Student Affairs. And so it's a really good question because as I'm saying this out loud I think, 'Gosh what a cop-out.' [*Laughs*] Now I'm thinking, 'Yeah; suck it up and make them do activist work.' [*Laughs*]

Despite having had experience with activist requirements when she was a student, until my interview with her, it had not occurred to Clare to require praxis of her students. Since this was the case with most of the professors I interviewed, the conversations turned to the factors affecting the implementation of action-oriented pedagogy. Through the process of coding this data, three theoretical constructs emerged and are discussed below.

Legitimacy in the Academy

Participants expressed that the need for Women's Studies programs to be seen as

legitimate within the academy resulted in a distancing from anything related to activism, such as action-oriented pedagogy. According to Lela, a full-time instructor of women's and gender studies at a large, state university in the South, "We prove ourselves in a lot of ways to the University that we are academic and that we are not just an activist program...." However, all faculty referenced women's studies' relationship to the activism of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Frank, a junior faculty member who was recently denied tenure at the same time that the women's studies program at his large Midwestern, state, Research-I university was becoming a department, expressed this idea most candidly:

I mean women's studies came out of a political movement, and as far as I'm concerned, basically continues to owe its existence to a political community and is answerable to that even within an academic institution, and its main purpose in being in academic institutions, in my mind, is to do something different and to essentially critique the values of that academic institution from the inside and to train students to be critical thinkers of the societal institutions around them—to figure out what their place is going to be....

Although they credited the women's movement for the creation of the discipline of women's studies, the faculty participants in this study conceded that activism, if it exists at all in today's women's studies programs, does so at the periphery. Clare is an associate professor at a large, state, Research-I university in the Midwest. Her home department and Ph.D. are in Education, but she is an affiliate faculty of women's and gender studies and teaches cross-listed courses. She explained the shift away from activism in women's studies this way:

Well, part of what I think, and I actually had the great fortune of while I was a doctoral student at [a large state university in the West], I did a—I collected some data for the Women's Studies Department there and talked to some of the women who founded the Women's Studies Department—well initially it was a program that ultimately became a department. And so I got to talk with them about what that process was like and what I learned from that is that as a program, I think

there was—they had a much easier time keeping activism as one of the primary foci...because women's studies by and large grew out of the women's movement, which was about activism, and so to me and to many I spoke with, the issue of activism and women's studies was nearly synonymous.

Ultimately over time what happened, and this kind of relates to the activism and some of the findings that I have in my own work, the need for legitimacy in the academy became paramount. And that pushed the concept of activism to a certain extent to the margins, so that other people needed to do the activist work—whether it was the Women's Center or whether it was a Women's Faculty Group or whether it was the Commission on the Status of Women, which oftentimes are ineffective, but—exist nonetheless. You know that's where the activism was supposed to happen, so that the Women's Studies Department could really focus on ultimately moving from a program to a department from legitimizing the kind of scholarship that was going on as valuable scholarships—scholarships worthy of promotion and tenure. You know that it wasn't just this kind of navel-gazing, and more often than not, it was women who were in women's studies who were kind of interested in just looking at themselves and looking at—I'm not saying that this is what women's studies scholarship is, but I think people were perceiving it as that, and so I think until Women's Studies was able to anchor themselves in this high theoretical point of view and was able to get closer to the market in terms of getting grant dollars and all of those things, which ultimately in the academy make a program or a department legitimate, something had to give, and I think unfortunately activism had to give. And so I think even now women's studies absolutely struggles nationwide for its legitimacy. You know there are definitely places who are like, "Let's look at women's studies; we don't understand the reason for it. We have equity now," you know all of these kinds of things. **[Laughs]** So we know that those battles are still going on, and I think that because of that activism still kind of has this—it kind of is—a shadow—when it once was the reason why women's studies existed.

Recent accounts of women's studies programs fighting against being eliminated are examples of the battle for legitimacy that Clare describes.¹⁸⁹ And as NWSA Executive Director Allison Kimmich relates, even the discipline's professional association is vulnerable:

¹⁸⁹ For example, The University of South Carolina Upstate's Center for Women's and Gender Studies closed in 2014. Women's studies programs at Florida Atlantic University, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, and the University of South Florida have had to fight for their survival.

When NWSA applied to the American Council of Learned Societies for membership last year, our application was rejected because of a supposed disjuncture between public engagement and scholarship in the eyes of the admission committee. Quoting the NWSA bylaws, which stipulate that, ‘scholarship, activism, and teaching are inseparable elements of a single whole,’ the admission committee noted the ACLS policy statement on admission says: ‘a society’s primary focus must be on the advancement and support of scholarship.’ In other words, ACLS demands ‘pure’ scholarship—whatever that means to them—and views our organizational commitment to public engagement as a lesser form of intellectual inquiry.¹⁹⁰

For programs that wish to become departments, associating with activism is a risky endeavor.

The movement from program to department status, and the creation of doctoral programs, were mentioned by several of the participants as explanations for the decreased emphasis on praxis and growing importance of theory as proof of academic rigor, as departments sought legitimacy and resources within the university. As Lucy, a women’s studies doctoral candidate and instructor at a large, Research-I university in the Midwest, explained, women’s studies programs “have to demonstrate the credibility to have funding from a university to have a doctoral program. And so I think one means of establishing that credibility is to engage in these theoretical abstract conversations...” as opposed to engaging in praxis. When asked about the presence of words like “praxis,” “activism,” and “social change” in their department mission statements, most of the faculty admitted that mission statements are not the most accurate depiction of reality. According to Frank: “There’s this gigantic hypocrisy essentially that the students at my institution at least were kind of quick to point out; they were like, ‘Hey, you’re saying that you’re doing something different, and yet you’re acting in exactly the same way as every other department...’” The mission does not match the reality.

¹⁹⁰ Allison Kimmich, “Scholars Strike Back,” *University of Venus Blog*, March 25, 2014, accessed February 19, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/university-venus/scholars-strike-back>.

Despite women's studies' historic connection to the activism of the U.S. women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, faculty in today's women's studies programs recognize that there is pressure to be seen as a legitimate program deserving of funding, and part of establishing legitimacy in the academy is engaging with high theory. Although this need not preclude also engaging in praxis, the need for legitimacy is one explanation that faculty in this study gave for the disconnect between theory and practice.

Fear of Repercussions

An uncertain job market and the politics of earning tenure are big factors in the unwillingness of faculty to engage with action-oriented pedagogy, in terms of time commitment (discussed below), but also due to fear of repercussions from university administration. Faculty all along the continuum—from adjunct instructors finishing their dissertations and entering the job market to program directors with tenure—admitted to me that getting a job, earning tenure, being promoted, maintaining program funding and staff, as the case may be, put faculty members at the mercy of university administrators who may not understand or be supportive of the goals of women's studies, leading to a de-emphasis on service, teaching, and praxis, and an increasing importance on scholarship and publishing. The fear of reprisal for action-oriented pedagogy was most vividly discussed by Carey, who had just defended his dissertation and was preparing to enter the job market. At the time of the interview, he was a visiting instructor at a small liberal arts college.

In creating my course syllabus for my Transgender Studies course that I'm going to be teaching this fall I had considered implementing projects for students to—or for the entire class to basically construct and create a review of what the status is for transgender people at that institution and then come up with some resolutions of how we could kind of progress whatever that status is, whether it's trying to figure out whether there aren't any anti-discrimination policies or whether there is

a bathroom issue or whether there are sports teams—you know, take the temperature of the institution and see what sort of education or kind of policy changing we could do as a class. Now I thought that would be an awesome project except I'm a visiting instructor and [*Laughs*] I—this isn't a tenure-track position, nor do I have tenure. I'm just a young instructor, and so for me it wasn't so much an ethical [question] of whether I think it's right for my students to do it; it's whether or not it's safe for me to do it as an instructor—as someone who is not tenured, someone who is still on the job market.

When I pressed him on what exactly he feared would happen, he said:

I'd be afraid to run into problems with the administration and that I would get a horrible review—that I would get bad references or recommendations to try and teach at other institutions. I mean there—the job market is so competitive right now....And I am just fearful that doing something like that if there is any backlash from students, from administration—any of that—that I'd be really screwed. And so I'm kind of tip-toeing until I feel a little more comfortable wherever I'm at in terms of my employment.

That a transgendered instructor on the job market would have fears about assigning a project that might create waves is unsurprising. As Gwendolyn Beetham points out “...people of color and other marginalized groups are often hesitant to publicly engage for fear that their already tenuous foothold in academia will be jeopardized....”¹⁹¹

Even for those faculty already employed but on the tenure track, the necessary emphasis on scholarship in order to earn tenure and on appeasing those in charge of promotion decisions dictates how their time is spent. Emma, an associate professor and program director of women's and gender studies at a large, public university in the Midwest, referred to the “changing expectations of faculty” within the university bureaucracy as one explanation for the lack of praxis in women's studies courses.

¹⁹¹ Gwendolyn Beetham, “Women and Public Scholarship,” *University of Venus Blog*, February 14, 2014, accessed February 16, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/university-venus/women-and-public-scholarship>.

I think that it's not unique to where I am that faculty are really expected to do so much—I don't know, so much crap now that was not—I don't think was as much a part of faculty jobs—ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. There really is just so much more bureaucracy that we have to deal with that could easily distract a person from perhaps what their political commitments are. It's unfortunate, and I think that again, it's sort of—I feel that it's my duty as a women's studies person to do it anyway and to persevere throughout all that, but I can understand how it would become overwhelming to somebody who didn't have tenure, who wanted to make sure the Dean was happy with what they were doing and so on that they would be more focused on their career—on publishing...than on, you know, activist engagement.

The changing expectations of faculty and the pressure to emphasize scholarship over teaching and service are also factors for tenured faculty. Bea, an associate professor and program director at a large, public university in the West, said:

Well, during the course of the years that I've been here, nine years now, there has been greater emphasis on publications, so we don't—I got through tenure okay—no problem, but will I make full professor next year? We'll have to see, because I don't—you know as the director of a program, I was spending a lot of time on administrative work, and because I'm an active—I'm just very focused on programming, even though my program doesn't have any money for it, and activism, and being very involved in the NWSA...so I didn't get as many publications out as maybe I should have, right.

The fears voiced by the faculty participants in this study—along the continuum from adjunct instructor to program directors—are common ones. Beetham makes the point in an *Inside Higher Ed* article. She writes,

What “counts” for hiring, tenure, and promotion at U.S. institutions of higher education are peer reviewed journal articles, books, and prestigious grants from the Ford Foundation and the like....Those of us who do take on this work [of engagement], then, do so at significant personal risk, against a dominant anti-intellectual culture, and in addition to all of the other “requirements” that we need to succeed in the neoliberal university.¹⁹²

The root cause of faculty fear, as Beetham alludes to in the above quote, goes even deeper than university administrations. All of the senior faculty members with whom I spoke referred to forces outside the university: the donors, the parents who pay

¹⁹² Ibid.

tuition, and as Bea explains, the emphasis on “bringing grant money, bringing in research that is still profit related, and the new corporatization of the university—or it’s not so new, but the more explicit corporatization in times of economic downturn have definitely been you know—align ourselves to the business community.” University administrations’ fears of forces outside the university may be related to misperceptions about activism, that it is only about, as Carey said, “holding picket signs” or “lighting fires in garbage cans.” Edna explained:

I think activism is viewed as a very liberal idea, and it’s about getting out there and marching on the White House or marching on the Capital Building and throwing your fist in the air and all that kind of thing. And that doesn’t always have the best representation I think in the contemporary media, and administrations of colleges tend to be a little leery of that I think because they’re trying to keep their peace with the wealthy donors and [Laughs] the parents and all of that.

According to the participants, the perception outside of women’s studies that activism is radical and has no place in academia impacts how faculty engage with activism and may be one factor in the lack of action-oriented pedagogy in women’s studies courses. Add to this the anxiety about finding and keeping a tenure-track faculty position, and fear emerges as a primary reason for not requiring students to actively address the problems discussed in women’s studies courses.

Teaching Is Activism

Another theme to emerge in this section is the belief by women’s studies professors that their teaching is activism. This idea came up spontaneously in one of the first interviews I conducted, so I directly asked subsequent interviewees about it. Many of the instructors interviewed for the study used this as their explanation for why they do not implement action-oriented pedagogy in their classes.

Edna: I'll tell you personally how I look at it. I mean for me, teaching is my activism; it's not all of my activism, but with the time I have, it's most of my activism. So being able to teach women's studies classes, but even in all the English classes I teach, I talk about feminism and teach things about it and we talk about what does it mean and how does it help other people. And for me, feminism is not about just self-empowerment of women. It's not [just] about helping yourself; it's about helping other women and minorities and people who are discriminated against.

So I make that link for my students, but then I also encourage them to do activism, and it can be in small ways and just things on campus they can do as far....You know we do the big annual—it's the LAF event, so it's Lesbian and Friends event on campus where they chalk the sidewalks with quotes from famous feminists and those kinds of things. Or, if they want to go and do marches....I encourage them to get out in the community and in the wider world and bring what they've learned in the classroom out there.

This notion that teaching is activism gave faculty satisfaction that they are doing enough to inspire their students to take action and that taking further measures to encourage praxis is unnecessary. Several referred to the “light bulb moment,” almost as a measure of success:

Edna: I feel like when you have that light bulb moment with a student—you know when they go, ‘Oh my God; I never thought about it that way before’ —boom. You’ve just changed somebody’s life; you’ve just changed the way they think and then that person might go out and change the way somebody else thinks, so it becomes this—I think that twenty of them a year, even if it’s only twenty of them, that’s still twenty people who you have gotten to think about things in a new way and in a critical way and they take that out with them into the world. So yeah; I mean—if activism is about changing people’s lives for the better, I think critical awareness of gender is about changing people—is a way of changing somebody’s life for the better. When they learn that, and when they can look at their own lives and say, ‘You know, maybe I need to go and fix this; this isn’t really working in my life and now I can kind of understand why.’ Then yeah; I definitely think it’s activism.

Frank admits that “teaching as a form of activism is really kind of a very safe and tame form of activism. But I can clearly see from my students the ways that their lives have been significantly changed....” Many of the faculty recounted “feel-good” moments with their students. Bea, a women’s studies program director at a Northwestern state

university, got emotional several times during the course of the interview when she described how her students are impacted by her classes: “And I swear to God it—I’m sorry. [*Crying*] I don’t change their lives; *they* change their lives. But I make a space for them to take those steps.”

The belief that teaching is activism because of the effect women’s studies classes have on the lives of individual students came up frequently in the interviews and is one explanation for faculty not implementing action-oriented pedagogy. For many of the faculty members in women’s studies, their teaching is enough to produce change in their students’ lives, which in turn leads to societal changes.

Action-oriented Pedagogy and Time

The final theme to emerge from the faculty interview is the idea that action-oriented pedagogy takes more time for faculty than a traditional pedagogy of giving lectures, leading discussions, and assigning and grading papers. Although all of the faculty participants recognized the importance of praxis in women’s studies, for the faculty not engaged in action-oriented pedagogy, a common explanation is the amount of time required on top of myriad other personal and professional responsibilities. Edna expressed this idea most candidly:

We probably should be doing something more; there probably are people doing something more, but again I think—I don’t know. I think all right; this is—this is a total generalization, so I’m laying out that caveat before I even say it. But I think a lot of women try—feel like they have to do everything and it’s that whole Superwoman thing, like you have to do everything. You have to be everything. You have to—you have to just get it all done and I think that can be harmful to us sometimes, you know. And so I think you have to do what you can; we can’t all do everything. We can’t all be the big community activists while we’re also teaching a full load of courses and writing five books, you know? I mean we can’t do it all, so you have to do what you can and effect change in the ways that you can. And you know—and create—and teaching, I think we can create good citizens. We can help our students to become not just people but citizens in a

culture, in a society where they have responsibilities and they recognize that you know things like voting are important to do—that they need to be a part of this community that we live in that we call our country as well as in the community of the world. And if we can invoke a kind of civic responsibility, which I think is what a lot of women's studies courses do, I mean it—maybe that sounds strange, but it's about civic responsibility. Learning to speak and to write and to act in a way that is thoughtful and aware—then we're doing something; we're making a contribution. And we might not be doing everything, but we're making a contribution. And I think that's all any of us can do. We can't—we can't do it all; I can't do it all. I've got two little kids and I've got a full-time job and I try to do scholarship outside—you know what I mean? When you get in that position where you're like, 'Oh my God. I should be doing this; I should be doing that,' and then sometimes you have to step back and think, 'Okay; well I'm going to do what I can right now. And if I can raise my two kids to be good citizens as well as perhaps raise some of my students to be good citizens then that's—that's an accomplishment and something we have to be content with.'

Even the few faculty members with whom I spoke who actually do action-oriented pedagogy (in the form of academic service-learning) admitted this. William assigns academic service-learning projects in all of his courses, usually picking one community partner with whom all of his students work. He said,

The idea that this sort of pedagogy takes more time is in a way true, just like adopting a new book or adding a new assignment or anything we do to keep our courses current or up to date with our fields. And it is a different sort of time and preparation—finding a service-learning project that fits the course objectives, possibly spending time negotiating with an outside community agency, getting students all acquainted with professional behaviors or even just the parameters and purposes of service learning, etc.

Lela also teaches a full load of courses and assigns service-learning projects in each of them. Her students partner with many different agencies every semester. She confessed, "It is daunting; it is a lot of work. It seems overwhelming especially now when we're so underfunded and understaffed and overworked."

The lack of resources and institutional support for academic service-learning and other experiential learning methods means that the brunt of the work to facilitate such

projects falls on faculty members. According to Kimmich in an *Inside Higher Ed* editorial,

Promoting engagement is hard work, and few campuses have adequate resources to support it. For example, finding and maintaining successful relationships with community partners, training students to be effective and respectful contributors in settings outside of the classroom, and assessing students' learning requires a complicated set of skills and infrastructure that go well beyond traditional classroom teaching.¹⁹³

The belief of faculty members that action-oriented pedagogy takes more time to do is substantiated by research on experiential education. For example, Su-I Hou's study of 362 faculty members about the perceived benefits and barriers of service-learning found that time constraints are a factor given by faculty with and without experience teaching service-learning courses, ranking even higher than their concern that faculty promotion and tenure policies do not support service-learning endeavors.¹⁹⁴ Whether service-learning takes more time to do than other forms of pedagogy is a topic that warrants further research. What is clear, however, is the benefits of service-learning for faculty who choose to employ this method.

In my interviews, both Lela and William discussed in great detail the benefit of academic-service learning for their students and for faculty who choose to incorporate it into their courses.

William: Although incorporating service learning—in any form—into my courses does affect the course design, it really doesn't affect it any more than having students do extended research projects, which require an initial proposal, a first draft, a final draft, and at least a few in-person conversations. The benefit of experiential learning for me and for my colleagues who use it in their courses is that it connects that experience to course materials and our discussions are taken

¹⁹³ Kimmich, "Scholars Strike Back."

¹⁹⁴ Su-I Hou, "Developing a Faculty Inventory Measuring Perceived Service-Learning Benefits and Barriers," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 16, no. 2 (2010): 87, accessed February 19, 2015, Academic OneFile.

to an entirely new level. Now students have actual, sometimes shared, always current experiences to use as they encounter our course concepts and terms and readings. In addition, as part of my larger commitment to my department and my university's strategic plan, experiential learning prepares students for the "real world" and this is an invaluable addition to my own promotion and evaluation. And as a complete side note, my students' work also connects me with new contacts and resources in the community from which I can draw in my other courses—experts who have specialized knowledge they can share with my classes as guests or panelists, resources on which I can depend to direct me to current on-point information and statistics as I build my courses, and people who become both professional and personal friends.

As William explains, the time faculty put into experiential assignments such as academic service-learning does not necessarily differ from the amount of time required for more traditional forms of pedagogy such as the assignment of research projects. Additionally, there are payoffs for students and for faculty.

Wanting to emphasize the benefits for faculty, in a follow-up email to me after our in-person interview, Lela explained:

While benefits to students and the university tend to be emphasized in the majority of research on service-learning in higher education, not as much speaks to the benefit(s) for faculty. While it takes time, creativity, connections to students, and establishing relationships with community partners, if conducted effectively, service-learning does not necessarily have to take substantially more time than other more common or traditional teaching practices and the benefits are exponential to the time invested on all ends. The availability of awards through one's university, Campus Compact, and faculty centers are one potential benefit. Another is the ability to include such work on one's Curriculum Vitae, annual reports, and for alternate employment possibilities (i.e. applying to other universities that value service-learning, working outside the academic sector, building community relationships). If one plans appropriately, replacing assignments rather than "adding to," service-learning can change the teaching load in a way that does not require as much additional work as one might expect. I cannot overstate the emotional and visceral benefits of using service-learning in my classes, particularly within an interdisciplinary subject such as Women's and/or Gender Studies, as the benefit for both students and myself is profound. As an activist, not only a teacher, I find extreme fulfillment through student outcomes from these projects. Reading service-learning reflection and research papers at the end of a term trumps any final project I have ever assigned in terms of student and self-fulfillment. The benefits of service-learning for students, community

partners, AND faculty, despite expected challenges cannot be replicated through any other academic means.

Although the benefits of service-learning for faculty are less-researched than the benefits for students, the faculty members with service-learning experience in my study were quick to point out its merits for both students and teachers.

My interviews with Lela and William support the existing research on academic service-learning, which has found that students' acquisition of course content is improved in service-learning courses and that faculty who assign service-learning often use it as a catalyst for their own research on service-learning, as well as for the development of community partnerships; these relationships with agencies can also lead to research opportunities for faculty.¹⁹⁵

The interviews with women's studies faculty explored the factors affecting the implementation of action-oriented pedagogical projects. The data revealed that women's studies faculty members are concerned about the discipline of women's studies being seen as legitimate within an academy that they believe values and rewards research and high theory, thus resulting in a distancing from anything related to activism. Further, faculty members in women's studies fear that creating opportunities for praxis in the classroom might result in repercussions, such as being unable to secure full-time employment or being denied tenure. Most of the faculty members interviewed for this study believe that they are educating their students to be good citizens and thus fulfilling the mission of women's studies programs; for them, teaching women's studies *is*

¹⁹⁵ "Faculty Guide to Service-Learning," Community Service Center at American University, accessed February 19, 2015, <http://www.american.edu/ocl/volunteer/upload/Faculty-Guide.pdf>.

activism, echoing Marilyn Jacoby Boxer's assertion, "Knowledge empowers, and education—all education, if it 'takes'—produces change."¹⁹⁶

The final theoretical construct, the claim that experiential education takes more time to do, requires further research. The experience of the few faculty members in this study who use action-oriented pedagogy, as well as my own experience assigning activist and service-learning projects, indicates that action-oriented projects, as with any new assignments faculty may develop and implement in the classroom, do not necessarily take more time once established. In the following chapter, I offer several examples of action-oriented pedagogical projects that may serve as blueprints for feminist pedagogues who wish to employ praxis in their curriculum.

¹⁹⁶ Boxer, *When Women Ask*, 187.

CHAPTER 6

EXAMPLES OF ACTION-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY

The interviews with women's studies faculty discussed in the previous chapter revealed that one of the reasons why faculty do not use action-oriented pedagogy is because of the perception that it takes more time to do than traditional pedagogy. In this chapter, I describe several action-oriented projects that I have created for women's studies courses: *Take Back the Night*, *That Takes Ovaries*, *The Vagina Monologues* (V-Day), YouTube and Feminism, and Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse. I offer them not necessarily as perfect examples of activism, but as teaching techniques that provide students with some tools to engage in activism. The projects discussed below might serve as templates for others wishing to use action-oriented pedagogy

My first attempt at employing action-oriented pedagogy was an action project assignment in my introductory women's studies classes. Each student would pick a social problem that we were studying during the semester and design and carry out a small project to address the problem. I told each student to pick a topic from our course material that interested her or made her angry or empowered her. Once they each had a general topic, I worked with them to narrow the focus; if, for example, the topic of interest was sexual assault/sexual violence, I suggested that they might focus on a certain aspect, such as acquaintance rape, myths about sexual violence, the survivor's healing process, our legal system, prevention, our rape culture, education, or the African-American perspective. They then had to research all sides of that issue. After learning

more about the topic, they had to design an action project to address the problem. Finally, in addition to writing a paper about what they had learned, the actions they had taken and how the project related to the class objectives, at our final class meeting, each student gave a presentation and shared with the rest of the class the social problem they had researched and the action they had taken.

This approach had limitations; some students embraced it wholeheartedly and were empowered by their accomplishments, and others signed a petition the night before the project was due. In some cases, it was difficult for me to gauge how much work a student had actually put in. Although the project was designed to show students that one person can make a difference, it was difficult for an individual to pull off a significant project over the course of one semester. Although the project was created in the spirit of feminist consciousness-raising, as Naples points out, pedagogical projects such as this fail to incorporate “the group process and collective action that had been central aspects of CR during the women’s movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed, another factor in the decision to move beyond individual action projects was my own experience with collective action. Having planned local events such as Take Back the Night and attended large national protests in Washington, D.C., I knew first-hand the rewards of planning and being part of a large-scale project.

When I volunteered to teach a new course, “Feminism and Social Action,” I realized that it would be impossible for *me* to teach the history and examples of social action without *being* active, without giving the students an opportunity to experience collective feminist activism. I decided to have the entire class plan two events. The largest of our projects was a Take Back the Night rally, march, and speak-out.

¹⁹⁷ Naples, “Negotiating the Politics of Experiential Learning,” 385.

Take Back the Night

“Feminism and Social Activism” is an upper-division special topic course in women’s studies. The objectives of the course, according to the syllabus were to “explore feminism in all its different forms and the history of women’s movements for social change, primarily in the U.S. Topics for discussion include issues such as female bonding, leadership, and women’s goals and strategies to achieve them within local, national, and global contexts. As a class we will engage in various service-learning projects throughout the semester.” The largest of the projects was Take Back the Night. Take Back the Night is “a collective method of reclaiming public life,” through which women refuse the fear of going out after dark by walking together through city streets at night. Inspired by a candlelight march at a 1976 international feminist conference held in Belgium, the march has become an annual ritual on college campuses throughout North America. Marchers may walk silently with candles or carry banners and shout slogans such as “Survivors unite, take back the night.¹⁹⁸

Because of its place in the history of the women’s movement and because of its emphasis on collective action, a Take Back the Night event was selected as one of the course projects. To increase the scale of the project and give more opportunities for student participation, a pre-march rally and a post-march speak-out were included.

Using an event planning guide downloaded from the Take Back the Night Foundation website¹⁹⁹, a list of tasks and committees was developed. During class, students were given the opportunity to sign up for a committee based on their strengths and interests. They were also encouraged to try something outside of their comfort zone

¹⁹⁸ Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine, 2002), 286.

¹⁹⁹ “Plan an Event—Take Back the Night,” Take Back the Night Foundation, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://takebackthenight.org/plan-an-event/>.

to gain experience in a new area, or to pick something that would strengthen their resumes.

The first 20-30 minutes or so of each three-hour class meeting was devoted to the project: giving updates, asking for assistance, determining what still needed to be done, and tying up loose ends. Because the rest of class time necessarily was spent discussing the required reading, students had to do a lot of the project work and communication with each other outside of class. To facilitate this, an on-line discussion board with threads for each committee was created.

Students were initially worried about pulling off such a large event and the amount of time the project would require of them, however, they quickly realized that dividing tasks among 24 classmates made the workload manageable. Although every student was somehow involved, as with most group projects, a handful of eager students put in an inordinate amount of time and picked up the slack for less involved students. For example, a few weeks before the event, the student responsible for making arrangements with the campus police department claimed that she could not get in touch with someone. Without a permit from the police department and a police escort for the march, the event could not take place. Another student got frustrated that this important detail had not yet been handled and volunteered to take over the job. Within 24 hours, the task was complete, indicating that the first student had never actually attempted to make contact and had just been making excuses for her own negligence.

Thanks to the committee responsible for press releases, a local newspaper wrote a story about the march two days before the event. Approximately 75 people attended. On the day of the event, the crowd began to gather outside the university's administration

building. The mood was festive and energy was high. Students had made arrangements with local organizations that work with women and children to set up tables with information around the perimeter of the pre-race rally location. One student arranged for her karate sensei to do a self-defense demonstration with the march attendees. Another student had invited the mayor, who kicked off the march with a speech. The march itself was well organized; the crowd moved from the campus to the local downtown area with a police escort. One student led the chants. The marchers moved our way back to campus and into an auditorium for the speak-out portion of the event. A committee had set the mood with flowers and dim lights. The stories shared by attendees were powerful and moving. Perhaps the most touching moment came when one of the class members shared, for the first time in public, her story of being molested as a child and raped as an adult. This particular student was an active participant in class discussions and was very popular among classmates, but until that moment, no one knew her personal experiences with violence. There was not a dry eye in the room.

During the march, several students overheard a little girl who was walking nearby with her father; she pointed to the crowd and asked her father what we were doing. The father told her, “Those women are marching for YOU.” The students were very touched by that moment and many of them mentioned it in their reflection papers after the event. Almost all students commented on the impact of hearing that a beloved classmate was a survivor of sexual violence, and in light of that revelation, how empowering it was to march and speak out about violence. Years after the first Take Back the Night class project, I still get messages from former students who tell me how that class and the project empowered them and shaped them.

That Takes Ovaries

That Takes Ovaries: Bold Females and Their Brazen Acts is a collection of first-person essays by women and girls who have performed bold and brazen acts that defy gender stereotypes about women.²⁰⁰ The book's editor, Rivka Solomon, has created a play and open mike movement based on the book to publicly celebrate the courage of women and to empower other women to behave boldly and courageously. Audience members at open mikes are invited to share their own “That Takes Ovaries” stories. Funds raised at open mike events are donated to local organizations that help women and girls in need.

That Takes Ovaries is listed as required reading on the course syllabus. The book ties in fluidly with discussions about the social construction of gender and is always a class favorite. It is easy reading, thus providing some relief from the heavier, theoretical pieces students are asked to read.

In addition to reading the book, students are required to write their own “That Takes Ovaries” story, which they may volunteer to share at the open mike event.

In planning the event, I begin by making a list of tasks that we need to accomplish. The That Takes Ovaries website makes this easy by providing an excellent guide to planning an event. Rivka Solomon personally communicates with organizers, gives advice, and answers questions as they arise during the planning phase.

As with other action-oriented projects, I ask students to sign up. I stress the importance of signing up for something that they know they can accomplish. I set up an on-line discussion forum for them to share information and brainstorm ideas with each

²⁰⁰ Rivka Solomon, ed., *That Takes Ovaries!: Bold Females and Their Brazen Acts* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002).

other outside of class. We spend the first 15 to 20 minutes of class each week giving updates and tying up loose ends. We designate a beneficiary that somehow benefits women and girls and invite the beneficiary to attend the event and to talk about what they do. At the end of the evening we donate all proceeds from admission and raffle tickets.

The students hosted a beautiful event on the outdoor patio of a lovely local restaurant. Approximately 50 people attended. The mood was celebratory and supportive. To begin the event and give an example That Takes Ovaries story, one of the original That Takes Ovaries essayists attended the open mike and read her story directly from the book. We also had a local actress read one of the original stories. A steady stream of attendees eagerly shared their stories as well. Everyone who shared a story received a Golden Ovary Award, a plastic egg filled with chocolate. Ticket prices were kept low to encourage students' attendance. However, more money was raised through a raffle of items collected from local businesses by the students. The beneficiary of the event attended and spoke about her agency and their mission.

The "That Takes Ovaries" open mike was a fun, easy, and empowering action-oriented project that tied in easily with women's studies' themes of exploring gender socialization and empowering women.

The Vagina Monologues (V-Day)

Every year since 1999, Eve Ensler has granted universities the rights to produce her play *The Vagina Monologues*²⁰¹ as a fundraiser for a three-month period. Organizers donate the proceeds to local organizations working to end violence against women and

²⁰¹ Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard), 2001.

girls. Ensler's global program, known as V-Day, has raised over 100 million dollars.²⁰²

Because of the play's themes of female sexuality, the body, gender-based violence, and female empowerment, it aligns easily with topics covered in introductory women's studies courses.

Before beginning work on the production, students enrolled in the course are required to read the script as well as criticism of *The Vagina Monologues*. Early in the semester, significant time is devoted to discussion of these materials in class.

The V-Day organization provides the script as well as abundant online resources for organizers. I signed up as the V-Day College Campaign organizer for the campus and recruited a couple of alumnae to assist with organizing. Performing on stage was just one possible job for students in the class; a benefit production involves many tasks that could be delegated to students. A list of roles was passed around in class and students were asked to sign up based on their interests and availability. Students were encouraged to suggest roles not already listed if she or he had a particular skill or talent that might be useful. For example, one student fluent in American Sign Language offered to do sign language interpretation for all of the performances, making ours the only production in the country that year accessible to the deaf community. The long list of tasks included costume design, ticket sales, sponsorship, marketing, and refreshments.

Once everyone had signed up, I listed all of their names and responsibilities on the V-Day web site as part of our production to help each student feel important and to let them know they were part of something big. Each week, we used the beginning of the

²⁰² "About V-Day," V-Day: A Global Movement to End Violence Against Women and Girls, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://www.vday.org/about.html#.VMvaYiwRTfY>.

three-hour class meeting to discuss the project. Those who signed up to perform had to meet after class for rehearsals.

After participating in the event, students were required to write a reflection paper. This is an important part of the process, not only because these are academic courses and I want the students to understand the action project in the context of the course material, but also because reflection is an important part of activism. Those of us who are activists must constantly assess the actions we have taken before acting again.

In the guidelines for the V-Day reflection paper, I ask them to address the following questions:

- What did you learn about violence against women and female sexuality from this project?
- How did you decide what actions to take?
- How did the project affect you?
- How do you think it contributed to the public good?

The assignment requires them to integrate narrative, personal and critical reflection in their responses and to grade themselves on the assignment based on how much effort they put in, how much they learned, and how meaningful the act may be or become for others. Furthermore, they must provide supporting rationale for the grade they have given themselves.

The V-Day College Campaign window originally was between the end of January and the beginning of March. Because I was assigning this as a class project, I had to ask the V-Day administrators to allow me an extension past the V-Day period. They were enthusiastic that I was doing it with my students and granted me the extension. Both

years that I organized the event, we held it in mid-April. Today, the V-Day season is February 1- April 30, making it much easier for an instructor to produce it as a class project.

Many of the students in the course were concerned about an equitable distribution of labor: that the students who elected to perform on stage would be doing more work than someone who made the flyer for the event. I assured them that all of the jobs were important and necessary to make the event a success and that their grades would be based on a number of different factors, not just the amount of time spent.

Some of the students did want to perform, but most did not. Both years that I produced *The Vagina Monologues*, I opened it up to the entire campus. Most of the logistical work was done by students in my class, but many of the performers were from outside the class. In terms of the (wo)manpower needed to make an event of this scale successful and also giving more students an opportunity to experience the impact of V-Day, it was certainly beneficial to open it up to the campus community. However, it complicated things for me, just in terms of keeping track of everyone.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle was an unexpected one. The first year, a small group of evangelical Christian students enrolled in the course and objected to *The Vagina Monologues* for moral/religious reasons. They objected to what they viewed as the play's vulgarity, particularly the language, but also the theme of homosexuality in several of the monologues. Because the project was mentioned in the syllabus and on the first day of class, students had time to drop the course. When one student approached me at the start of the semester to voice her concerns, I suggested that she first read the script before making a judgment. Reading the script only amplified her objections. Because the play

deals directly with course themes, I suggested that if she had a problem with the assignment, she would have a problem with the course as a whole and perhaps she should consider whether or not she wanted to stay enrolled. My suggestion that she drop the course seemed to vex her further. I realized that she, out of principle, would rather get an "F" on the assignment than participate in it. After discussing the problem with a trusted colleague from the philosophy department who specializes in ethics, I decided to offer the entire class an alternative assignment. Those who objected to direct involvement with *The Vagina Monologues* were given the option of organizing a cell phone drive for survivors of domestic abuse. Used cell phones in good condition can be utilized by survivors of domestic abuse in emergency situations or to keep in touch with family members. Cell phones no longer useable can be refurbished, and the proceeds from sales of these phones go to domestic violence agencies. By placing boxes and flyers in the community, students who organized the cell phone drive raised awareness in the community about domestic violence and also complemented the production of *The Vagina Monologues* and its theme of ending violence against women. In addition to collecting phones throughout the community, cell phones donations were collected outside the auditorium before and after *The Vagina Monologues* performances.

All of the evangelical Christian students in the course opted for the alternative assignment. None of the objecting students who organized the cell phone drive attended the performance. Because the students' objections to *The Vagina Monologues* mostly took place in private conversations and correspondence with me, the rest of the class was not aware of the rationale for the addition of the cell phone drive.

The second time that I did *The Vagina Monologues* as a class project, I did not announce it at the beginning of the semester. After reflecting on the previous experience, I had decided prior to the semester's start that I would not do another production without the participation of all of the students. If a group of students did not want to participate, I would have given the entire class a different action project, such as Take Back the Night. On the syllabus, I listed the play as required reading and listed an "action project" as a course requirement with a general description of what an action project entails. After the class discussion of the play, I asked the students how they felt about doing a production for our action project. Although some students were more enthusiastic than others, there were no conscientious objectors in this particular group. The V-Day project went forward and was a great success, this time raising even more money than the previous production.

Between managing the campus bureaucracy, the student objections, and all of the other work associated with producing a play, V-Day as a class project was without a doubt more work for an instructor than simply assigning a paper or giving an exam. However, the outcomes made the work worthwhile.

Between the two years I assigned *The Vagina Monologues* production, the students in my courses raised \$6000 for non-profit agencies working to end violence against women and girls.

Although the monetary benefit was an accomplishment of which the students and I were proud, the most poignant moment came after one of the productions. I had just wrapped up my post-performance speech about why we were doing *The Vagina Monologues* and how the money would benefit our local domestic violence shelter. Students had passed around baskets for audience members to give additional donations.

In the lobby after the show, a representative from our beneficiary stopped to speak with me and introduced me to her companion, a woman who was residing in the shelter. With tears in her eyes, the woman explained to me how she and her daughter were living in the shelter right now and how moved she was by our performance. “I can’t believe that people at a college would care about someone like me,” she told me. I shared this encounter with my students at our next class meeting, and they were touched by it. Several of them mentioned it in their reflection papers as evidence of how and why our project mattered.

The impact on the students was evident. They were excited to come to class and to discuss the planning of the production. After the productions, the students were impressed by what they had accomplished as a group. Even one of the objectors wrote in her reflection paper that, although she still believed that homosexuality is a sin, her mind had been opened and she was proud of her classmates for putting on the production and disappointed that she did not attend it.

In their papers, students easily made the connection between the production and the course objectives, quoting other course materials and referencing class discussions.

YouTube & Feminism

YouTube, an online venue for sharing and reviewing video clips, is the fourth-most-visited website in the world (after Yahoo, MSN, and Google). Launched in 2005, YouTube has quickly permeated the culture. YouTube videos are being used by instructors in college classrooms, can be viewed on smart phones, and are often shared by users through social media sites such as Facebook.

When uploading videos to YouTube, users enter tags, or keywords, to describe the video, and also select a category (e.g. Comedy) from a list of twelve. The categories and keywords help other users find videos of interest.

Anyone may watch videos on YouTube without being a member. However, part of YouTube's popularity comes from the feature that allows viewers to post comments about videos viewed on the site. To post comments or to upload videos, one must become a member.

A recent YouTube search using the keyword “feminism” brought up 1340 videos. Many of the videos are clips from professional documentaries such as *I Was a Teenage Feminist* by Theresa Schechter and *Cultural Criticism and Transformation* by bell hooks. However, most clips fall into one of two categories: comedians talking about feminism, such as “Bill Maher on Feminism,” “Ali G—Feminism,” and “George Carlin—Feminist Blowjob,” or homemade videos, such as “Converting a porn hating feminist into a porn addict!” and “Feminist women hate MANLINESS, they hate MEN!” The latter category is dominated by young, white men. Regardless of the video’s message about feminism, typically the comments about any videos with the keywords “feminist” or “feminism” are derogatory, such as “I 100% agree with you feminism is a rediculous sexist movement promoting the hatred of men and it worries me too” and “Fuckin feminists. They spout about how men r stupid and evil and then call us sexist bcos we point that out! im not sexist and I dont agree wiv it, but the word ‘Feminist’ is just another word for ‘pissed off woman who has a bit of an issue with real life.’”

A project was designed to debunk the myths of feminism on YouTube.²⁰³ The “YouTube and Feminism” assignment is an example of media activism, which is a new form of activism that utilizes Internet media such as YouTube to “organize and deploy novel strategies of self-education and social transformation.”²⁰⁴ Students enrolled in Feminist Perspectives on Gender, an introductory women’s studies class that explores, among other topics, the meanings of feminism, were divided into four groups of five-six members. Each group was facilitated by a senior member of the class. After engaging in several small- and large-group community-building exercises, the small groups were asked to pick one of the many stereotypes of feminists generated by the class (e.g., lesbians, angry, man-hating, etc.) and create a video response to that stereotype. Through discussion and based on course readings, the group had to come to a consensus that the chosen stereotype is in fact a myth. Once the myth to address was determined, the next step was to decide how best to dispel the myth in a three- to five-minute video for YouTube. Each group member had to be involved in the process in some way, although not necessarily in front of the camera. Possibilities for involvement included writing the outline or script; securing the film location(s); coordinating with the camera crew; securing any necessary props and costumes; conducting background research; facilitating the involvement of individuals from outside class, such as experts, if necessary; and being filmed.

²⁰³ Shereen Siddiqui, “YouTube and Feminism: A Class Action Project,” *Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women’s Studies Resources* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 24-25.

²⁰⁴ Douglas Kellner and Gooyong Kim, “YouTube, Critical Pedagogy, and Media Activism,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 2010): 7, accessed March 19, 2015, Taylor & Francis Online.

The student-run campus television station agreed to assist with filming and editing the videos, but in some cases, students opted to use their own equipment or convert a PowerPoint presentation into a video.

Many of the students were initially skeptical and somewhat apathetic when presented with the assignment. There were questions and concerns about the logistics and timeline. Many were unfamiliar with YouTube and needed a tutorial. Others questioned the potential efficacy of a video about feminism on YouTube. The consensus requirement slowed down the process, causing frustration in some groups.

The requirement of consensus caused students to be extremely respectful of each other and to diplomatically deliberate each idea presented. Despite the initial apathy, once each group had its idea, the students grew more enthusiastic. When all of the videos were shown to the entire class, the energy and excitement in the classroom was palpable. In the reaction papers required after the project's completion, all of the students offered positive comments, most often about how much fun they had working with their groups. Many expressed pride at the final results.

Since being posted on YouTube in December 2007, the videos have been viewed thousands of times (11,666 times altogether at current writing).²⁰⁵ When the videos were first posted, a handful of YouTube users left comments. Of those, a few were positive, but most were typical of the anti-feminist rants found on YouTube. To protect the students from potential cyber-bullying, the commenting option was disabled by the moderator after a couple months.

²⁰⁵ The videos are posted on YouTube as a four-part series. To view them, visit <https://www.youtube.com/user/GenderEd/videos>.

Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse

Students enrolled in “Feminist Perspectives on Gender,” an upper-level, introductory course, are exposed to the major topics in the discipline of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Among the various topics covered in the course are feminist theoretical perspectives, sex/gender differences, identities and social location, sexuality and personal relationships, women’s health, violence against women, women and the environment, popular culture and the media. According to the syllabus, “The goal of this course is to provide students with a broad overview of how the construction of gender and sexuality impacts representations of the feminine and the lives of women in western culture. Through the study and analysis of the course topics, students will gain insight into the ways in which paradigms of gender are defined and work to shape cultural mores, ideologies and discourses on both the theoretical and practical levels. They will also gain an understanding of feminism, both historically and currently, and will develop skills to assess the need for continued feminist activism in western culture and elsewhere.” Keeping the course themes and objectives in mind, as well as the circumstances and interests of the students enrolled, an action-oriented pedagogical project was designed.

Contact was made with a few prospective agencies in the community to find a good match. A representative from a local domestic violence agency was very enthusiastic about establishing a partnership with the university and designing a project that would benefit the students and the agency. The design of the project began as a brainstorming session between instructor and community partner over lunch and was hammered out over subsequent email communiqués. The criteria were: class participants

would spend a minimum of ten hours over the course of the semester on an academic service-learning project; the project would address a need in the community; involve a connection between the campus and the world around it; challenge students to be civically engaged; and involve structured student reflection. The outcome was a true collaboration between the instructor, the agency, and the students.

The community partner for this project, Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse (AVDA), is a Certified Domestic Violence Center providing Palm Beach County with emergency shelter, a 24-hour hotline, support services for victims of domestic abuse, and prevention and education programs for the community. Academic service-learning is a mutually beneficial relationship between students and the community partner. An agency such as AVDA that serves so many communities within a large county has a long list of needs. The agency and the instructor had to determine which of those needs could realistically be met by college students over the course of one semester, while aligning with course content and fulfilling course objectives. It was determined that students could assist with educational programming by reaching parts of the community that AVDA had not been able to reach due to limited contacts in those areas or because of staffing limitations. Because AVDA depends on grants, if students collected data about their presentations, AVDA could count these numbers toward maintaining grant funding.

One month into the semester, after students had studied the foundations of women's studies, including feminist theories and methods, and discussed violence against women, AVDA met with the class for a three-hour training to teach the students to become violence prevention educators. In this "train the trainer" approach, students participated in a typical presentation given to youth groups and were then provided a

template curriculum to use for their own presentations. The curriculum included a template PowerPoint presentation, links to videos, and suggested ice breakers and other activities. They were then asked to find a group in their own community, tailor the curriculum for that group, and organize and deliver a three-hour presentation for the group.

The requirements for the project included a minimum of ten hours spent on service, including training (three hours), preparation (four hours), and the actual presentation in the community (three hours). The ten-hour minimum requirement gave students enough hours to qualify for an academic service-learning designation on their official academic transcripts. In organizing their violence prevention events, students were given the option to work alone or with others in the class. The first tasks were for them to find a group in their community that could benefit from and would be willing to listen to a violence prevention presentation and then find a location for the presentation. They were encouraged to design flyers, create Facebook invitations, or send targeted emails to publicize their events. Once their audience and location were determined, the students had to figure out the best way to present the material to their group. Students were encouraged to seek assistance from the agency and the instructor in obtaining additional resources if necessary.

Not included in the ten hours were the reflection components of the assignment, which included an online time log, participation in class discussions, and a 4-5 page final reflective/critical paper that connected their activities to the course objectives, texts, and subject matter. They were also asked to reflect on what they learned from the process and how the project affected them, as well as how they believe the project contributed to their

communities. At the end of the paper, students were required to give themselves a letter grade on the project with rationale. They were also required to show documentation, or “proof,” of their work through artifacts such as photographs, testimonials from participants, and their tailored PowerPoint presentations. Finally, the students were asked to submit the data from their presentations to AVDA by a specific deadline for statistical entry into a live system. The data included the date of presentation, length of presentation, number of youth, number of adults, location of presentation (facility name), city of presentation, and county of presentation.

There were three major concerns students had when presented with the assignment: 1) finding time to complete the project on top of other school, work, and family obligations; 2) finding a group and location to give their presentations; and 3) not feeling qualified to educate others about violence prevention. Concerns were addressed as a group during class discussions, and in some cases, private meetings and correspondence with individual students.

Once students realized the flexibility of the assignment—that they could use established contacts, such as friends and peers, as an audience, and that they could personalize the presentation and make it their own—they became less intimidated and more excited. Many of them spent over the required amount of preparation time, doing further research to educate themselves and seeking new resources to augment their presentations. Two students teamed up to give a presentation; the rest did them alone.

In their reflection papers, students made clear connections between the course material and the project. Many of them wrote about feeling empowered and like they had made a difference. The sense of accomplishment was obvious. For a few students, it was

truly a life-changing experience. Several expressed that as a result of the project, they were changing their majors or careers. One student in particular found her calling when she gave her presentation and ended up getting a full-time job with AVDA when she graduated at the end of the semester.

The community impact was also substantial. In total, there were 20 presentations. Students spent 57 hours of time in the community and reached 197 people (124 youth and 73 adults) throughout three counties. The agency was able to use the data for their grant and would like to replicate the project.

Crossing the Line (A Community-building Exercise)

Students don't usually like group projects. *I didn't like group projects when I was an undergraduate student. In thinking about how to improve the group experience for students and help them work together, I pulled from my background in Student Affairs and began doing community building exercises with my classes to prepare them for the projects described above. I start out with low-risk icebreakers the first couple weeks of class to help students learn each others' names and to give them an opportunity to share information about themselves. On the third week of the semester, I facilitate Crossing the Line, a diversity awareness and community-building exercise.*²⁰⁶

To set up the Crossing the Line exercise, the desks are moved to the perimeter of the classroom so that there is a large opening in the middle of the room. The students gather together on one side of the room and a series of identity statements are read aloud

²⁰⁶ I was unable to confirm the origins of Crossing the Line. Online sources attribute it to workshops done at Stanford University around 1985 by Dennis Matthies. Mr. Matthies is no longer at Stanford, but I was able to find and contact him online. He was shocked to learn that the exercise is still in use. In email communications with me, he said that he had modified a workshop by Bay Area activists Isoke Femi and Linda Gonzales, but he was uncertain if they were the original creators. I was unable to reach either of the women to confirm.

by the facilitator. Statements range from low risk (e.g. cross the line if you are an only child) to higher risk (e.g. cross the line if you publicly identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender). If the student identifies with the statement, she/he will cross an imaginary line in the center of the room and turn and face the students remaining on the other side. After a few moments, the facilitator asks them to return to the starting side. In the instructions given before the exercise, students are informed that they are not required to cross the line if they do not feel comfortable for any reason. The entire exercise is conducted in silence; no talking is allowed once it has begun. After all of the statements have been read, the students and facilitator sit in a circle to process the experience. At this time, students may wish to clarify why they did or did not cross the line on a particular statement. They also talk about how the experience impacted them.

The goals of Crossing the Line are to build diversity awareness within a group as well as facilitate individual self awareness. The activity builds community by helping class members learn more about each other. It bonds the group, makes them more respectful of each other, and helps them to trust each other. It builds a “learning community” in the classroom, a positive effect, regardless of whether or not a group project is required. I have found that after we do Crossing the Line, our discussions are more productive, group projects become fun instead of a chore, and students initiate connections with each other outside of class.

Alumna Case Study: Ruby

I conclude this section with the case of a women’s studies alumna who experienced action-oriented pedagogy as defined in this dissertation. She participated in

several of the projects described above. This extended interview provides further insight into how action-oriented pedagogy can achieve the feminist goals of women's studies.

Ruby is 32 years old and a recent college graduate. She attended several colleges over the years and eventually earned a degree in General Studies and a Certificate in Women's Studies from a state university near her home. She and her husband have been married for seven years but have been together for 11. Ruby has followed her husband from city to city, out of state, and back again, as he has furthered his education and career. Soon after Ruby's graduation, she got a part-time job as a counselor at a local women's health clinic that provides abortions. She got pregnant shortly after that and gave birth to her first child, a son. Her son is now almost two years old, and Ruby continues to work at the clinic on a part-time basis. She also does volunteer work and is a feminist activist.

I met Ruby when she was my student in an undergraduate women's studies class. It was her first semester back in college after a long hiatus, and she signed up for my class because the title sounded interesting. She said, "I didn't anticipate it being anything that was really going to be great, because I didn't think school was great. I didn't think classes could be fun or really inspiring or anything like that...."

Ruby had some inkling about gender issues because her father is gay and because she was raised by a single mother. She also had experienced sexual violence as a child and as an adult. Ruby later realized that what attracted her to the course was her latent feminist consciousness and that she has a passion for women's issues. Within a year of that first course, she completed the requirements for the Certificate in Women's Studies. Over the course of two semesters as my student, I got to know Ruby fairly well. She was

an active participant in class discussions and on our on-line discussion board. We traveled with several other students in my class to the March for Women's Lives in Washington, D.C. I attended her graduation party. I held office hours at a coffee shop near campus, and even after she graduated, she and a few other former students would stop by for group rap sessions on a weekly basis. I visited her in the hospital the day after she gave birth. The student-professor relationship developed into a friendship. We are close in age and share similar interests. Her husband and my significant other have also become friendly, and the four of us have gone out to dinner on several occasions.

Despite my personal relationship with the interviewee and the obvious bias that can come from personally knowing an interview subject, I selected Ruby for my field project because of the amazing transformation I observed when she discovered women's studies. Although I was a witness to this transformation, we had never talked about it, and I wanted to find out how she went from having no interest in activism to becoming one of the most politically involved people I know. I was also curious about what turned her on about women's studies and what role, if any, women's studies played in her activist, volunteer, and career endeavors after graduation. In addition, because I know that she experienced activist-oriented pedagogy as I practice it and write about it, but also took women's studies courses with other instructors, I felt that she would be able to compare and contrast the different pedagogies. Even though I am her former teacher, Ruby has never hesitated to share her opinions with me. Despite our personal relationship, I expected her to be open and honest and unaffected by my roles as her former instructor and friend.

Ruby is vivacious, talkative, and funny. Although she says she is not comfortable with public speaking, she is quite eloquent and has recently been tapped by organizations with which she works and volunteers to speak on their behalf. I expected her to be an easy interview for these reasons, but because of our personal relationship, I suggested that we meet for lunch before the interview to catch up on our personal lives, so as not to be distracted during the interview. We met at the local mall and had a leisurely lunch. We then drove in separate cars to the designated interview spot, a library that has quiet study rooms for reserve. Ruby had to pick her son up from the babysitter after our interview and kept her cell phone out so that she could monitor the time and take any calls from the sitter. Other than the occasional glance at the time and one phone call interruption from her husband, she was at ease and fully present for the interview.

Feminism and activism were not apart of Ruby's life until she took her first women's studies class. She considered herself "semi-connected" because she watched the news and listened to NPR, and she expressed frustration at injustice when she experienced or observed it, but she never felt compelled to take action. She says that she doesn't understand how any student in a women's studies class that requires social activism cannot be affected by the experience but explains that she, in particular, was searching for her path and was completely open and ready by the time she came back to school to finish her bachelor's degree.

...it was just the classic—what am I going to do with my life; where am I going? And all of the sudden I'm being forced to go out and be, you know, active and loud and passionate and creative about all of these things that I've always kind of known that I was interested in and it sparked me. And it really made me understand that—that was my purpose. I didn't know exactly how or where but I knew that this was what I wanted to do and actually throughout several of the courses I kind of put myself in the process of quitting my job and not having a job and freaking out [*Laughs*] and then ultimately getting a job that I love all based

on women's issues that I learned about and really got a deeper understanding of during those classes.

Although Ruby does not directly attribute her subsequent involvement in feminist activism to her personal history, it is likely that being a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and rape were catalysts for her fervent embrace of women's studies and feminist activism:

I think that maybe just because I was so open and because I connected with so many of the things that we talked about and learned about on such a personal, profound level, and I felt like the only way that I could be you know—I think that the only way I knew that I could continue being in the world was to create change so that other people wouldn't suffer the way that I had suffered in the past. And I think going out there and seeing that it was really going on to other people besides myself and you know and different types of oppression—really getting to see it and really getting to understand it—how could I not be a part of that? How could I not be a force in line with that—aligned with that, you know? Bigger than obligation; I have no choice but to—to do that kind of work and to be that kind of person.

Ruby makes it clear, though, that without women's studies, specifically a course requirement that forced her to take action, she would never have gotten involved in activism.

A few days before her first women's studies class, Ruby experienced sexism in her volunteer work with Habitat for Humanity. Although she had shown up at the site with prior Habitat experience, prepared to help with building a house, the foreman gave her the task of raking dirt, while her husband was put to work hammering the house's frame. Ruby finished her task quickly and was told to take a break and have a snack. When she asked for a different job, he asked her to get drinking water for the men on the worksite. She recalls, "I convinced myself that was still helping, walked around the site like a bar maid handing out drinks and smiles to all the hard-working, deserving men.... I'd had it. I finally yelled up to the man on the roof if he needed help and he said, 'Sure,'

but I had to check with the foreman.” When Ruby told the foreman she wanted to help the men on the roof, he explained:

‘Well, it’s just that we’d prefer to send someone up on the roof with more experience.’ But that’s when I saw my husband and another man I knew had no idea what they were doing, up on the roof, hammering the beams! So I pointed out that the two guys up there now don’t have their own tools nor are they experienced builders. Now we are in a sort of back and forth piss match and I’m worked up, red in the face, and totally humiliated as not only the only woman but the youngest one there too. After pointing these obvious realities out to the foreman, he finally says, ‘We don’t like to send our women up the ladders or on the roof because it’s dangerous and we prefer to leave it to the men to handle so you don’t get hurt. There is plenty of work for you down here.’ I said, ‘That’s bullshit!’ And I knew I was about to say more and cry, so I yelled up to Adam and said we had to go. He came down and I stormed off to the car and we left. I was so humiliated and I cried all the way home.

Although she was upset by the incident, it wasn’t until she sat in on a couple women’s studies classes that Ruby realized that what she had experienced was sexism. Because the course required students to take action on an issue or address a problem that was of interest to them, Ruby decided to address her problem with Habitat for Humanity. By the end of the semester, she had written a letter outlining the problems she’d witnessed and met with a program administrator who admitted the sexism in construction work and promised to work with her to make a change in the organization. They scheduled a “woman’s work day,” and Ruby followed through by recruiting a sizeable group from her class to work at a Habitat site. Ruby received a personal letter from Habitat thanking her for taking initiative and inviting her to become an active member of their governing board. When I asked Ruby if she would have addressed the problem had it not been a course requirement, she said:

I think that I would have just—been mad and, you know, called my friends and my family and talk[ed] about what a bad experience I had and never had done anything to change it and to make it a positive situation because I don’t want to constantly—or didn’t at the time and still don’t want to—have these experiences

happen over time and just be another thing to be upset about. I want them to be positive; I want to be a part of Habitat. I don't want to just say, 'Well screw Habitat; I'm never doing that again.' So it was really great to be able to confront it and make it positive and say: Listen, obviously you just don't see what's happening—and to educate in a way that maybe people working there didn't see before. So it was great and I never would have done that without the class.

Ruby believes that women's studies gave her the confidence and the "educational piece" that she was missing: "That's how you make change instead of just raising your fist and yelling; I was actually making sense in getting people to stop and think about how they were treating me."

Ruby says that applying course material to social change and real-life situations helped her to learn the material, but she considers it more than a learning style.

You can only get so much in the four walls of a classroom; you can only get so much out of a book, and I think in order to get the full extent of what it is that you're trying to learn, you have to be able to apply that information somewhere. And so being active with that information, being an activist, being someone who passionately takes that information and brings it to somebody else—you're getting a whole different feel for that subject as opposed to just the learning—you're seeing a whole different side of it. So it's not—it's more than a learning style; it's—it's really a different type of appreciation for the subject.

Although Ruby took subsequent women's studies courses, she found that after experiencing action-oriented pedagogy, other courses, even those with feminist content, were dull.

I felt bored, I felt unchallenged, and I didn't really feel like the information connected with me personally on such a deep level because it never really left the room. Whereas with—in the activism classes, the things that I may not even have known that I was passionate about having been in the situation where I had to do something outside of the classroom, outside of my own comfort zone, I really was able to connect with it and understand it.

In courses that did not require her to be active, Ruby found herself yearning for connection and took it upon herself to make those connections outside the classroom, even if the course did not require it. In a humanities course, for example, she was having

a difficult time connecting with the material, and after discussing it with another student who was having a similar experience, decided to go to a museum exhibit that was related to their course material. After that outing, “It all kind of sunk in.” Not only did the material sink in, but on a bigger level, the way she viewed herself as a student and an activist became solidified:

At that point, the fire was lit under me so I remember taking everything that I was learning and really applying it outside. Like I had already begun working on a campaign and I had already started volunteering with Planned Parenthood and the Young Activist Team and I had already become a member of NOW and did a lot in a very short period of time, so I can’t really decipher the two. Like I had already started my life at that point in being an activist, so all the classes that I was taking even though I wasn’t doing anything active in the classes, I was doing so much outside of school but—and I was trying to apply it to class, you know—like the things that I would learn, I was doing it on my own. I was becoming—using my information I was learning in class as my activist self outside of class if that makes sense.

She feels that it not only changed the way she learns and experiences education but also changed the way she thinks about teaching. If she were to teach a class, she says that she would definitely require students to get involved with activism because it’s the only way to “get it.” She recognizes, however, that not everyone will respond the way that she did. But without an activist element, she says, it’s impossible to determine how you feel, one way or another.

For Ruby, one of the greatest influencers of her future activism occurred not as a course requirement, but after she heard about something in a women’s studies class. During her second semester in women’s studies, several of her classmates were planning to attend the March for Women’s Lives in Washington, D.C. She recalls being excited at the prospect of being part of a national protest but not really grasping yet the full meaning of the event.

It was like the biggest thing ever; I had no idea you know and I knew that it was important—like we need to go talk about women's reproductive rights, but I didn't really even understand how in danger they were—still are, the political ramifications of it—none of it. I didn't understand any of it and now looking back that will be one of the greatest memories of my lifetime that I was a part of that. That was a history-making weekend. I mean it was huge. And I didn't even know that was going on in the world.

The march on Washington, though not a course requirement, may have been enough to set Ruby on her path to becoming a feminist activist, but she contends that it was women's studies classes, specifically the activist component of some of her courses, that motivated her to learn more and become involved. Until she took these courses, she didn't believe that she could change anything, and she says that she never would have gotten involved or gotten her current job as a patient advocate at an abortion clinic.

With the activist projects acting as a springboard, Ruby quickly became involved with local feminist and gay rights organizations and began meeting like-minded individuals. She quit her corporate job and began doing volunteer work through which she met some of the movers and shakers in the local feminist community. They quickly noticed her energy and enthusiasm, and when a position became available at the women's clinic, she was recommended for the job.

She describes her position as "crisis counseling." Most of the women she sees are at the clinic to terminate a pregnancy, but Ruby's job is to help them make sure that they're comfortable with the decision. She talks through the options with them and refers them to other agencies when necessary. If they decide to stay for the procedure, Ruby walks them through the steps. She also advises them on after-care and discusses birth control options. She describes it as the most rewarding work she's done in her life.

It's rewarding because abortion is a reality—pregnancy—unwanted pregnancy is a reality, so it's just something that we have to deal with and to know that I helped

somebody make a really tough day a little easier and for her to hold my hand and say I couldn't have done this without you or for me to be the only person in her Catholic family to say you're not—you know, I don't know if you're going to hell or not. I'm not going into that with anybody because I don't talk religion, but just to say, "You know what? You're not a bad person. This is going to maybe be painful for you, but it's okay; you've had—you're doing the best that you can do right now and let's look at the positives in your life." I might be the only person that said that to her and if this is the choice that she feels that she has to make and she wants to make to know that I made it okay for her and that I made her feel safe—it's huge you know. When they leave at the end of their appointment and they're getting dressed from the recovery and for them to just say, "Thank you; I don't think I could have done this without you," that's—that makes my job a real—it makes my job an honor to help them get through that.

Ruby says that her education in women's studies prepared her for the job because it made her aware of the myriad other issues that women are dealing with when coming in for a procedure. Many times the women are rape or incest survivors or in abusive relationships. Often they are illegal immigrants. Understanding the complexities of women's lives and the different issues women face has helped her in the job, she says.

Women's studies and activism have also assisted her in her role as a mother. She says that she really can't separate her feminism from anything else in her life anymore because it's apart of everything she says and does. She gives the mundane example of not ordering pizza for dinner from Domino's because they support anti-choice groups but also talks about how she brings her son to protests, Planned Parenthood events, and gay pride parades, where he "passes out condoms."

My second interview with Ruby took place a month later. We arranged the meeting through e-mail correspondence. As before, we met for lunch first and conducted the interview afterwards at a nearby library. I had not seen or spoken to her since our last meeting but had e-mailed her the transcript of the first interview.

In my own review of the transcript from the first interview with Ruby, I deduced that she attributes her current activism to her involvement with activist projects that were required of her when she was taking certain women's studies classes. Furthermore, she believes that her activism led to her getting the job at the abortion clinic. She did not lead me to believe that there is something about her personality or even her life experiences that led her down this path. In our second meeting I wanted to explore this topic further because clearly not all students who experience action-oriented feminist pedagogy go on to become activists who work at abortion clinics. I also wanted to clarify her definition of activism. I began by asking her about her reflections on our first interview, whether or not she wanted to elaborate on anything we'd talked about, and if anything surprised her about the interview after looking over the transcript. Ruby says that she wasn't surprised by anything because she's well aware of how much the drastic changes in her life are directly related to the classes she took. She remains emphatic about how profoundly the activist projects she participated in as a women's studies student shaped the person she is today.

Ruby says if some students of action-oriented pedagogues become activists while others do not it's likely because of timing: "I think if you're in the right place to take one of those classes and you're open and you're done being apathetic to whatever is going on in society, you can't help but feel like you have to be active in some way...."

Ruby introduced the subject of defining activism without any prompts from me. Her definition of activism is quite broad and includes sharing information with others, an act that, she claims, makes just about any student in a women's studies course an activist.

I think there's different degrees of activism; surely, I mean, there's the people that get out there and hold signs and march and whatnot and then there's those that are

just quietly sitting next to somebody sharing information, but they're taking action. So I would venture to say that there isn't anybody that's going to come out of one of those classes and in some way [not] be an active participant in their world with the information that they've learned in class... I think we don't necessarily have to define what activism is, but we need to broaden the image of what we think an activist is.

Despite this broadened definition of an activist, Ruby holds that activist projects in women's studies classes are what help students make the information they learn in textbooks "real." Ruby thinks other types of assignments that require students to develop a plan to address a social problem but that do not require the student to actually carry out the plan are "silly."

That's like taking a Home Ec class and being required to put together a recipe but not make the recipe. I mean how do you prove that the ingredients that you have are actually going to work together unless you follow it through, and then truly what's the point in knowing that it's going to work? Don't you want to see what the end result is?

There is a difference between action-oriented pedagogy and participatory learning, and Ruby sees the value in both. She says that participatory learning, such as going on a field trip or meeting guest speakers in the classroom, are profound experiences that can be motivating and moving, but there are limitations;

...it's still missing that element of how does this affect me and how--what am I going to do with that feeling? What am I going to do with that knowledge? You know, you want to have that impact when a Holocaust survivor comes to your class, when an HIV—a person living with HIV comes to your class, when a survivor of domestic violence comes to your class—you want to walk away from that I would think saying, "Okay, so now what? So what? What do I do?" Otherwise, really what's the point; I mean, it makes you feel emotional and you heard somebody's story and that's all great, but what do you really get from that unless you can say, "Okay, well how do I get involved? How do I take what I've learned and share that with somebody, or how do I get involved and make sure that this doesn't happen again, or how do I get involved and educate myself more outside of school?" I mean I think it's definitely effective. It's much more effective than opening a book and reading or watching a movie about it for sure because you have that personal private element. But I don't think it's nearly as

effective as creating some type of activist project surrounding that speaker or that field trip.

Requiring activism of students raises ethical questions because oftentimes conflicting values may be an issue. When I asked Ruby what she thought about the ethics of action-oriented pedagogy, she said that she doesn't believe it's a problem because students know what they're getting into when they enroll for a class, and if they don't like the content or the requirements, they can drop the class or ask for an alternate assignment.

She also discounts accusations that activist projects, such as Take Back the Night, are ineffective.

Is [Take Back the Night] really making the night safer for women—no; [Laughs] You know, I'm sure that any one of those people that were at a Take Back the Night march and is home by 10:00 and in bed at 11:00 and turns on the 11 o'clock news is going to see that there was a rape or some type of gender crime. But that's not what it's about....What we're out to do is just enlighten ourselves and maybe one other person and that person is going to enlighten somebody else and so on and so forth and it's about awareness. And it's about like I said that personal responsibility and that personal sense of power, because even if one person participates in that march in that Take Back the Night event that never had—has done anything like that before they have a sense of "Wow; I didn't know that there was even a need for something like this and look how good it feels to be able to march through the streets and know that I'm safe." And maybe that will encourage that person to—to spread that message....

Ruby criticizes the women's studies program at her alma mater for not providing enough opportunities to learn outside the classroom. She says that she was hungry for connection and would have attended any event relevant to her studies if the opportunities had existed. She said, "I think that again it goes back to that sense of I'm not alone in this; look at all the other people that are interested too. Look how powerful we can be—all of us together." She believes that everyone, regardless of whether or not a student of women's studies, has something to learn from studying women's issues because:

...we as women make this world. I mean we—we on so many levels are the caretakers and the providers and [sighs] there isn't a job, there isn't a society where you're not interacting with women, so even if you're not a woman I think it's imperative that we create this culture on campus to learn about women's studies....

Ruby does not place the burden solely on women's studies; she also blames the entire "academic culture" for not being supportive of women's studies programs and events.

The data from interviews with faculty discussed in Chapter 5 support Ruby's assertion that there is a lack of institutional support for women's studies. Her observation about any possible ethical dilemmas with requiring praxis of students is also supported by the interview data, though the faculty members in this study were certainly cautious, to varying degrees, about requiring students to engage in action-oriented projects. Future interviews with Women's Studies professors should explore these issues further.

What is clear from Ruby's experiences as a student is that action-oriented pedagogy fostered in her a sense of civic responsibility and played a role in her becoming an activist. Although generalizations cannot be made based on the experiences of one women's studies alumna, this case does support the claim that action-oriented feminist pedagogy promotes feminist activism. Future research with women's studies graduates should explore to what degree personal history plays a role in becoming an activist.

CHAPTER 7

ACTION-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY AND THE FUTURE OF FEMINIST PRAXIS

Women's studies without activism was like the ocean without salt.

—Pauline B. Bart, “In Sisterhood?”

I began this project because I was perplexed by what I perceived as a disconnect between theory and action in a discipline that grew out of a social movement. Is women's studies still the academic arm of the women's movement, or as a women's studies founder, Pauline B. Bart, suggests, has it become the “women's arm of the academic movement”?²⁰⁷ I wanted to understand the role of praxis in U.S. higher education women's studies programs today and find out how other alumnae of women's studies programs experienced praxis. By speaking with those who teach women's studies, I hoped to determine the factors affecting the use of praxis in women's studies programs and courses.

The data revealed that women's studies programs claim to have a commitment to feminist praxis. This conclusion was based on the analysis of the mission statements of women's studies programs. The mission statements frequently mention the empowerment of students to use their education in women's studies to become agents of social change. The relevant value categories that emerged consistently in the data were praxis, civic engagement, experiential education, and social change.

²⁰⁷ Pauline B. Bart, “In Sisterhood? Women's Studies and Activism,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4, (Fall - Winter, 1999): 257, accessed February 21, 2015, JSTOR. pp. 257-267.

Although the majority of programs have the mission to educate students in feminist praxis, this study found, through a review of syllabi and interviews with alumnae and faculty, that action-oriented projects in women's studies courses are not the method through which this mission is enacted.

Bea, a women's studies associate professor and program director at a large state university has a requirement in her introductory course called the "liberating act assignment." She asks students to challenge a gender stereotype or identify a social problem relevant to women and engage in an action to address the problem. The problem can be personal or societal. In my interview with her, she gave examples of the types of projects students typically tackle for the assignment:

I've had students who have done things like—and this is now in the Introductory class—stuff around weight or appearance or trying to—not be so hooked on those issues, trying to get a better understanding of how they get entangled in those questions. And just to pick one that I thought was kind of fun—a student and her mother wanted a tool shed built. They did a lot of work, and the student's grandfather who lived with them said, 'Oh yeah; I'll get around to it. Yeah; I'll do it—I'll do it,' and he never did. So they finally looked at each other and said 'The hell with this.' [Laughs] We're going to build the damn tool shed. And you know the grandfather said, 'You can't—you just can't do that right.' They did it and they had it done, and he was like 'You are so right and I was so wrong.' [Laughs]

Bea said that the assignment helps students have "better confidence in who they are and what they can do in the world."

The other type of praxis assignment mentioned in the data is academic service-learning, however, these assignments were not common; only two of the syllabi and two of the professors mentioned a service-learning requirement. Lela, a full-time tenure-track instructor of women's studies at a public university in the South, requires service-learning in all of the courses she teaches, including online classes. She said,

I mean definitely service-learning I think is the best thing that's happened to women's studies in a long time in the sense that activism is being recognized as something that's valuable academically. It's being recognized in an ideal situation, which I consider [my university] right now. I mean it's pretty ideal in that sense of valuing and being onboard with service-learning, and not all departments, but women's studies—we don't have a WST course that's NOT service-learning....

Although academic-service learning has been institutionalized at her university and within her women's studies department, Lela recognized that "based on WMST listserv exchanges and—NWSA conferences—that it's not like that at other universities." The lack of service-learning opportunities in the syllabi and offered by the professors I interviewed was reinforced through the interviews with women's studies alumnae. Most were unfamiliar with the concept of service-learning and only one had personal experience with service-learning.

The few examples that I found should be the norm, not the exception. Other than the exceptions above, most of the alumnae had no experience with action-oriented pedagogy, and the faculty had traditional requirements in their courses, such as exams and papers.

Although most courses do not require students to take action, many women's and gender courses do examine activism as a subject. This is typically carried out through readings about activism at the end of the semester, and in some cases, analyses and papers about activist organizations.

The findings revealed that alumnae understand the historical connection between women's studies and action and perceive a disconnect in today's courses and programs. Many of them described a natural connection between women's studies and social action and expressed frustration that they were not given opportunities for active learning in

their women's studies courses and that existing experiential opportunities such as internships were not well organized.

Despite their perception that women's studies programs are not making a connection between theory and practice, the alumnae in this study are making the connection themselves in their lives after graduation. Most of them were somehow engaged in social change work, either through their occupations or through their volunteer work.

For those students who have experienced action-oriented pedagogy, it is an effective and welcome method for teaching feminist praxis. Alumnae with experience taking women's studies courses with action-oriented assignments made a clear connection between theories discussed in the course and the application of those theories outside the classroom.

One reason for the lack of action-oriented pedagogy is the desire of professors and programs to be taken seriously within academe. As a fairly young discipline, women's studies is still establishing its credibility in the academy and is vulnerable to attack from both within and outside the ivory tower. Faculty participants expressed that in order for women's studies to be taken seriously as an academic discipline, it has been necessary to distance itself from the activism that originally formed women's studies programs and adopt the language and customs of the academy. The threats to close women's studies programs on some campuses and NWSA's rejection for membership to the American Council of Learned Societies on the basis of its promotion of activism are recent examples of women's studies' precarious position in academia.

Furthermore, faculty expressed fear about repercussions for their own careers if they deviate from traditional pedagogy. Those just finishing graduate school and entering a competitive job market expressed concern that associating with anything activist might hurt their chances of getting hired. For junior faculty, the fear was over earning tenure and promotion. Although I could not find any studies that substantiate the fear of repercussions for faculty members who engage in action-oriented pedagogy, it is well documented that faculty perceive inequalities in tenure decisions.²⁰⁸ It is also true that faculty feel pressure to focus on research and publications rather than service and teaching.²⁰⁹ In a working paper for the American Enterprise Institute, Emory University Professor Mark Bauerlein “examines the pressure on humanities professors to ‘publish publish publish.’”²¹⁰ He determines that “demands for production have encouraged a corporatist model of the university, turning professors into ‘publish-or-perish entrepreneurs’” leaving little time for engagement with students.²¹¹ The situation is especially dire for female faculty, who are less likely to be promoted to full professor than men.²¹² Studies have found that tenured women “devote more time to teaching, mentoring, and service, and particularly to activities that may be seen as building bridges

²⁰⁸ Janet H. Lawrence, Sergio Celis, and Molly Ott, “Is the Tenure Process Fair? What Faculty Think,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 85, no. 2 (March/April 2014): 174, accessed February 20, 2015, Project Muse.

²⁰⁹ April L. Few, Fred P. Piercy, and Andrew Stremmel, “Balancing the Passion for Activism with the Demands of Tenure: One Professional’s Story from Three Perspectives,” *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 48, accessed February 21, 2015, JSTOR.

²¹⁰ Frederick M. Hess, foreword to “Professors on the Production Line, Students on Their Own,” by Mark Bauerlein (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2009), 1.

²¹¹ Stephen J. Mexal, “The Quality of Quantity in Academic Research,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 22, 2011, accessed February 20, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Quality-of-Quantity-in/127572/>.

²¹² Joya Misra, et al., “The Ivory Ceiling of Service Work,” *Academe* 97, no. 1 (January–February 2011): 23, accessed February 21, 2015, JSTOR.

around the university. Yet, these pursuits hold less value in promotion cases in many institutions, especially at research-intensive universities.”²¹³ There is a culture of fear among university professors regarding tenure and promotion.

Even if the fear about repercussions did not exist or is unsubstantiated, faculty explained that implementing action-oriented pedagogy takes more time than traditional assignments. With plates already overflowing with teaching, research, publishing, committee work, and outside responsibilities, such as family and volunteer work, faculty did not feel that they had time to add another chore to the workload. Although more studies are necessary to evaluate the claim that experiential teaching takes more time to do, at least one survey found that faculty who do and do not use service-learning in their courses believe that it takes more time to do than traditional pedagogy.²¹⁴

Faculty members assuage any guilt they might feel about not using action-oriented pedagogy with a belief that, through assigned readings and class discussions, they are creating civically-minded graduates. Many of them view their teaching as a form of activism and believe that, through teaching and mentoring, they are inspiring and empowering their students to engage in social change work after graduation.

Through the process of coding and analyzing the data using a grounded theory approach, it is evident that the goal of feminist pedagogy to empower students to engage in social change work is not taking place through action-oriented projects. Students desire and benefit from this type of learning experience, but the opportunities to put theory into practice in the context of the college classroom are scarce. Women’s studies programs

²¹³ Ibid., 24.

²¹⁴ Hou, “Developing a Faculty Inventory Measuring Perceived Service-Learning Benefits and Barriers.”

point to internship programs as an opportunity for students to connect theory with practice, but these programs are often poorly organized or are not required. This is not to say that students are not making the connections on their own. Despite the absence of action-oriented pedagogy, students are creating opportunities for praxis themselves, and the ones I interviewed for this project, are connecting theory and action on a daily basis through their jobs and volunteer work. This finding may be a result of my small sample size and the fact that those who responded to my call for research participants were interested in participating in the study *because* they are activists. My sample is not necessarily representative of all women's studies alumnae. Although most of the alumnae in this study engage in praxis without having had the opportunity for action-oriented assignments in their women's studies courses, it is possible that even more women's studies students will go on to engage in praxis after graduation if they are given the opportunity to put theory into practice while women's studies students. This suggestion is supported by the research on students in academic service-learning classes versus non-service-learning courses, which has found that students who participate in service-learning are more likely to be committed to civic engagement than non-service-learners.²¹⁵

The university appears to not provide an atmosphere conducive to action-oriented pedagogy. Faculty are worried about repercussions, particularly with regard to their own tenure and promotion, but also related to the precarious status of their programs. With colleges across the country facing economic crises, many women's studies programs fear that their budgets will get cut, they will be subsumed into other departments, or worst-

²¹⁵ Mary Prentice and Gail Robinson, "Linking Service Learning and Civic Engagement in Community College Students," Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community Colleges, 2007: 8, accessed March 17, 2015, ERIC.

case-scenario, they will be completely annihilated. Faculty are doing what they feel is necessary to keep their programs alive. This means engaging in scholarship and teaching that fits within the traditional university model. Although women's studies was born from activism, the association with activism now, at a time when women's studies programs must fight for survival, is risky business.

Bauerlein argues that the current model of scholarly production is hurting undergraduate education; students are unengaged and retention rates are abysmal.²¹⁶ Engagement is especially important in women's studies, a discipline born from activism, created to transform the university and society. If praxis is to remain a goal of women's studies programs, we must find a way to teach it to our students. This does not necessitate a rejection of theory. We must remember our roots; in the beginning of the discipline it was accepted that theory sprung from practice. We can use our experiences working in and with communities through our experiential teaching efforts to create theory and to add to the body of literature on feminist pedagogy and service-learning. We need not choose either theory *or* action, to privilege the political *over* the intellectual; it is possible to join them as equal partners, and to flourish in the academy if we choose to engage with research-based and institutionally-supported forms of experiential education such as academic service-learning.

The service-learning model is one way forward for women's studies programs interested in giving students opportunities for praxis. Qualitative and quantitative studies have measured numerous benefits of service-learning on students, including personal and interpersonal development, the development of social understanding, and a commitment

²¹⁶ Mark Bauerlein, "Professors on the Production Line, Students on Their Own," Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2009, 20-21, accessed March 17, 2015, ERIC.

to service.²¹⁷ In their quantitative, longitudinal study of 22,236 undergraduate students from a sample of colleges and universities across the United States, Astin and his colleagues found that

Service participation shows significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures: academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college.²¹⁸

The outcomes of academic service-learning align easily with the goals of feminist pedagogues: participatory learning, validation of personal experience, development of confidence, development of critical thinking and open-mindedness, and the development of political/social understanding and activism.

Because there is a substantial amount of research on the benefits of academic-service learning, and it is being institutionalized at universities across the country, women's studies can fulfill its activist mission through these programs. The types of projects described in chapter 6 of this dissertation can be tweaked to fit the academic service-learning model. Although this type of pedagogy may take more work initially, the rewards to students and faculty are significant; research indicates that academic service-learning improves students' academic performance, leadership skills, and commitment to activism, among other positive outcomes.²¹⁹ Furthermore, research "findings suggest that both faculty and students develop a heightened sense of civic responsibility and personal

²¹⁷ Lori Simons and Beverly Cleary, "The Influence of Service Learning on Students' Personal and Social Development," *College Teaching* 54, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 307, accessed March 18, 2015, Taylor & Francis Online.

²¹⁸ Astin et al., "How Service Learning Affects Students," ii.

²¹⁹ Astin et al., "How Service Learning Affects Students," ii.

effectiveness through participation in service-learning courses.”²²⁰ If women’s studies continues to have as its mission a commitment to social change and social justice, we need to be intentional in our efforts and offer students more than rhetoric.

Previous research has looked at the goals of women’s studies practitioners, which include participatory learning and a commitment to inspiring in students a commitment to social change.²²¹ And research has found an increase in social activism among students who have taken courses in women’s studies versus those who have not.²²² This research found that, despite the mission of women’s studies to give students opportunities for praxis, most programs fall short of this goal. The findings suggest that we could be doing more. The dissertation explains the pedagogical strategy of requiring students to engage in praxis, offering a bridge between theory and practice, rather than assuming that students are going to make the connection on their own. Even if some students, as the ones in this study, do in fact make the connection on their own, their experiences in women’s studies programs will be improved if they are given more opportunities such as the action-oriented pedagogical projects described in this dissertation. The research on academic service-learning offers an alternative template for women’s studies. This literature indicates a relationship between service-learning and students’ future civic engagement as well as students’ positive feelings about the educational experience when required to engage in academic service-learning.²²³

²²⁰ Ibid., iv.

²²¹ Hoffmann and Stake, “Feminist Pedagogy in Theory and Practice,” 90.

²²² Jayne E. Stake and Frances L. Hoffmann, “Changes in Student Social Attitudes, Activism, and Personal Confidence in Higher Education: The Role of Women’s Studies,” *American Educational Research Journal* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 26, accessed November 14, 2007, JSTOR.

²²³ Astin et al., “How Service Learning Affects Students,” ii.

The theory of feminist pedagogy guides the teaching/learning process in women's studies classrooms and provides established "criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes. These evaluative criteria include the extent to which a community of learners is empowered to act responsibly toward one another and the subject matter and to apply that learning to social action."²²⁴ This study contributes to the research on feminist pedagogy by providing examples of action-oriented projects, including service-learning, to assist women's studies instructors in teaching praxis, thus helping students in the application of learning. Feminist pedagogy and its unique strategies of participatory learning and commitment to social change formed as a direct response to the unengaged passive, authoritative traditional pedagogy we are currently in danger of replicating. This study also contributes to the literature on experiential education by exploring the experiences of women's studies students and faculty who have thus far had limited experience with academic service-learning.

Recommendations for Educators/Implications for Practice

Women's studies educators should consider how they are teaching praxis to their students. Is it enough to require students to read books and write papers about activism, or is it possible to somehow incorporate action into the curriculum? Action-oriented pedagogical projects as the ones discussed in chapter 6, and academic-service learning, are methods to teach praxis. The amount of work required is substantial, especially at the onset, but the payoff is also substantial. An easier option for most professors would be to use the existing infrastructure and institutional support for service-learning programs and find a way to incorporate these types of experiences into women's studies courses. Often

²²⁴ Shrewsbury, "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" 6.

universities have offices that work with faculty to develop such projects from the ground up and offer support to faculty and students engaged in service-learning projects. Faculty should take advantage of these opportunities to fulfill the activist mission of women's studies. In the current political climate, it would behoove faculty members to stay away from the loaded and misunderstood word "activism" and instead use the accepted and more benign language of academic service-learning. It is possible to get the same results using the service-learning model.

Faculty need not "recreate the wheel." Projects such as "Take Back the Night," "That Takes Ovaries" and "The Vagina Monologues," all described as class projects in Chapter 6, are already established with clear step-by-step organizing guidelines. For these projects, faculty just need to modify the guidelines to suit their own needs, rather than create a new project completely from scratch.

Although this research focused on praxis in the discipline of women's studies, there is a place for action-oriented pedagogy in any discipline concerned with issues relating to social change and social justice, such as African American Studies; Latino Studies; Native American Studies; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies; Peace Studies; and Ethnic Studies. As Elizabeth Segran points out, like women's studies, many of these disciplines were born from activism and social movements and were created "to respond to student demands for courses that would give them the knowledge and skills to tackle problems in their communities. Without their activist spark, these fields lose their purpose."²²⁵ Furthermore, if we subscribe to Dewey's belief that the purpose of higher education is to help students realize their full potential and to use those

²²⁵ Segran, "If We Want Feminism to Have a Real Impact."

skills for the betterment of society, then action-oriented pedagogy is useful in any discipline.

The responsibility for adopting action-oriented pedagogy should not fall entirely on faculty; there needs to be institutional support. More campuses need to create centers for civic engagement that will develop the partnerships with community agencies and work with faculty to create the opportunities for students in their courses.²²⁶ This will alleviate the burden on faculty. Furthermore, if faculty are going to be expected to incorporate innovative experiential teaching methods, institutions must “reward their efforts or, at the very least, not penalize them for taking time....”²²⁷ Benefits for faculty should also include financial support for developing service-learning courses and “consideration in the tenure or promotion (peer review) process.”²²⁸

California State University-Long Beach has developed a “Retention, Tenure and Promotion Document” to help faculty who engage in service-learning to put their service-learning course development and teaching experience into the language required for their tenure and promotion reviews.²²⁹ Other universities should develop similar documents to help faculty utilize their experiential teaching efforts in the service of their tenure and promotion reviews at their respective universities.

Areas for Future Research

One of the limitations of this study was that very few of the participants I

²²⁶ Astin et al., 2.

²²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²²⁸ Astin et al., 3.

²²⁹ “Community Service Learning Center: Retention, Tenure and Promotion Document,” California State University-Long Beach Faculty Affairs, accessed February 21, 2015, <http://web.csulb.edu/divisions/aa/personnel/evaluations/rtp/documents/CSLC%20Vals%20RTP.pdf>.

interviewed had direct experience with action-oriented pedagogy. As instructors begin to employ action-oriented pedagogy, more studies will be necessary to evaluate the efficacy of this method in teaching feminist praxis. Because the issue of time is a common concern for faculty, future research should evaluate the claim that experiential education takes more time to do than other forms of pedagogy. We should also look further at how faculty benefit from experiential education; the bulk of the research mainly concentrates on the benefits for students.

As I was conducting the interviews, I noticed that many of my participants had grown up with politically engaged parents or been involved in volunteer work at a young age. It raises the question if women's studies creates graduates committed to social change, or if those individuals with a personal history of civic engagement are the ones who will naturally gravitate to women's studies and feminist praxis. Future research should consider this question.

This study noted a theory/praxis divide on campuses that have women's studies programs and women's resource centers. Future research might also look at differences between women's studies departments and women's studies centers to see if women's studies centers are more engaged with praxis and activism than the purely academic programs.

Finally, another limitation of this study is that the syllabi were outdated. For future research on feminist praxis, we need to create and maintain a current online database of women's studies course syllabi.

The discipline of women's studies envisions the end of all forms of oppression and strives to achieve this goal through feminist research, teaching, and activism. Yet

praxis is rarely required of students in women's studies classes. Feminist theorist and professor, bell hooks, commented: "As long as we have a feminist movement in which the bulk of our ideas is shared only through books, we will never have a mass-based movement. We have got to have other kinds of strategies. I would like us to name what some of those strategies might be, because it's not enough to make a critique."²³⁰ Requiring students to take theory outside of the classroom and apply it in the community is one such strategy. Asking students to transfer classroom knowledge to "real world" communities and problems creates citizens who are empowered and prepared to work for the social changes that the discipline of women's studies imagined at its inception and remains committed to today.

In the prologue, I mused about a title I had considered using for this dissertation: "Theory Meets Action: A Love Affair?" Although I opted instead for an academic-sounding, keyword-rich, search-engine-friendly title, it is my hope that this research answers the question. Is it a love affair? Oh yes! Yes, indeed! It is the beautiful, messy kind of love affair with all the hard work and arguments, but with such extraordinary payoff—so much joy and fulfillment—if the commitment is there. Modeling this relationship for our students is essential if we want to fulfill our mission as educators. The "light bulb moment" that so many feminist teachers experience with individual students becomes instead a mass, organic, feminist-powered energy source that can fuel social change. That is the promise and potential of an action-oriented feminist pedagogy in women's studies.

²³⁰ hooks, bell, et al., "Let's Get Real about Feminism: The Backlash, the Myths, the Movement." *Ms.*, September 2003, 36.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Questions for Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Interviews with Women's Studies

Faculty

What is the relationship between Women's Studies and activism? Historically? Presently?

How is praxis generally viewed by your department? by your university? by the academic community in general?

Do you consider yourself an activist? If yes, how?

Do you view your teaching as a form of activism?

Have you ever required an action project of your students? Why or why not? If yes, describe the project(s).

If there is a Women's Center on your campus, describe the relationship between the Women's Center and Women's Studies.

In your mind, what are the goals of Women's Studies?

What would you think if a colleague was requiring students to participate in a non-partisan political event such as Take Back the Night?

Do you see any ethical dilemmas with requiring students to take action on a social justice issue?

Marilyn Boxer, one of the founding mothers of Women's Studies, has written that "Knowledge empowers, and education--all education, if it 'takes'--produces change" (187). What do you think of this assertion? Does what we do in Women's Studies produce change? If so, how? If not, should it? And if it doesn't but should, how do you think we might we bring these changes about?

Appendix B

Questions for Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Interviews with Women's Studies

Alumnae

How did you become a Women's Studies major?

Describe your interest, if any, in women's issues before you took the class.

Do you consider yourself an activist?

Were you an activist before college? Before Women's Studies?

What sorts of activist events have you participated in? Have there been any that were particularly influential in your development as a feminist?

Was there a Women's Center on your campus? What was the relationship between the Women's Center and Women's Studies?

What kind of relationship do you think ought to exist between Women's Studies and activism?

Did you have any classes that required you to be an activist? Would you have enjoyed such an opportunity?

What could have been better or improved about your experience in Women's Studies?

Talk about the differences between the two Women's Studies programs you've been apart of in terms of commitment to feminism and activism.

What experiences with activism did you have, if any, before you started taking Women's Studies classes? Did you have any experiences that you would say were activist in nature?

You've taken a Women's Studies class that required you to do an activist project; when you saw that activism was a requirement of the course do you remember how you felt about that?

Did you think there was anything strange about requiring students to do activism? Did you think there were any ethical problems with it?

After having that experience (action project) how did that affect your sense of going forward with your life and your choices about classes that you were going to take or projects you were going to commit your time and energy to? Did it?

Do you think the requirement that asked you to be active helped you connect with the material you were learning in the class? If so, how?

Do you think that's just a learning style that some people have? Some people maybe do better when they have to do something active and you're one of those people or do you think that in general it's a good strategy for anyone? Do you have thoughts about that?

Do you think that you could do that kind of thing in any class or do you think Women's Studies lends itself particularly well to that kind of technique? Is there something inherent about Women's Studies?

Why and at what point did you decide to pursue a certificate in Women's Studies?

So you took a lot of Women's Studies classes to get the degree, the certificate and not all of them required activism of you. What was your experience with the classes where there weren't activist projects? Did you find yourself connecting with the material in the same way?

If you were going to teach a Women's Studies class, for example, you were hired to teach Introduction to Women's Studies, do you think you would require students to do some sort of activism?

How have you been civically engaged since taking Women's Studies classes?

Appendix C

Call for Research Participants

Date: Tue, 21 Jul 2009 11:12:43 -0400
Reply-To: Women's Studies List <WMST-L@LISTSERV.UMD.EDU>
Sender: Women's Studies List <WMST-L@LISTSERV.UMD.EDU>
From: Shereen Siddiqui <siddiqui@FAU.EDU>
Subject: Request for research participants--women's studies & activism

Dear List Members,

I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Studies at Florida Atlantic University. For my dissertation research, I am conducting interviews with women's studies faculty and graduates of women's studies programs. The purpose of the study is to determine the extent to which feminist activism is prioritized in women's studies courses and programs.

To qualify for the study, you must either: a) teach courses in women's studies, or b) be a graduate of a women's studies program. Interviews will be conducted by phone in most cases and will last approximately one hour. All interviews will be confidential.

If you are interested in being interviewed, please respond privately (siddiqui@fau.edu). Your assistance in sharing this request with others who may be interested in participating would be greatly appreciated.

Kind regards,
Shereen Siddiqui
Florida Atlantic University
siddiqui@fau.edu

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