

## Women's Studies in Focus

# Tuesdays at Laura's: Four Graduate Students Reflect on the Significance of their Thesis Support Group

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In the spring of 2000, we four Women's Studies graduate students from Memorial University of Newfoundland came together for the first meeting of a thesis working group. Two had started the program the previous year and two had been in the program for several years. As shown in the following essays, each came to the group with the motivation to finish her thesis and the program. As we worked together through different stages of interviewing and thesis-writing, questions arose about where some insecurities came from and discussions ensued about the frustrations each experienced outside the writing and editing. As we talked through issues of class and identity, we came to different understandings of our work and our place in the academic world. We offer insight and personal reflection here as to why the group was successful.

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### **LEARNING TO EXPERIENCE GRADUATE SCHOOL, NOT FINISH IT**

I completed the course work for my two-year Master of Women's Studies degree in my first year. After that, I found myself going days without ever seeing or talking to another graduate student. It was easy to forget that I was a student, especially when I worked from home and, like many graduate students, had part-time employment and family obligations to attend to. I feared that without formal structure and deadlines I would now procrastinate and not complete my thesis in the two-year funding period, which was a very important thing to me. I had no intention of joining the ranks of students

who, even after having straight A's in their courses, were stuck in a Master's program for years. It seemed to me a thesis support group might provide the structure I needed, so I sent an email to other Women's Studies graduate students asking if anyone else was interested in starting one. From previous extra-curricular and work experiences, I knew how unproductive some meetings could be. When we first met, I made my expectations clear. I did not want a social group. I wanted a working group that was focused and productive, and would help us finish our theses by the appointed date. (I even wanted to take minutes in the beginning as a way to make us accountable at each meeting.) Each time we met we gave updates on our progress (or lack thereof). Before each meeting, I found myself being motivated to look for that particular reference, or write that next paragraph, rather than reporting that I still had not done it. I was making myself accountable to the others in the group. The group provided the structure I needed to keep to a schedule for my proposal and thesis.

The space created by our group provided a safe place to voice insecurities and make mistakes. Some of us were producing original research for the first time, a situation that we found both exhilarating and petrifying. Questions we hesitated to ask in the chair of our supervisor's office we could ask there. At the beginning we made a commitment to keep confidential the personal things we discussed and to always try to be respectful of each other's thoughts, feelings and fears. My trust in that pledge allowed me to ask what I thought might be stupid questions. Furthermore, the thesis group alleviated isolation, which we all encountered in various forms.

As graduate students, we found ourselves isolated as we embarked on our thesis research, much of which was too specialized to lend itself to hallway conversations. We became familiar with each other's work so we could ask specific questions and request particular kinds of feedback. Also, thesis-writing in the disciplines we had come from (Psychology, English, Political Science and Women's Studies) is usually considered an individualistic, rather than collaborative, effort. While writing our theses, we were expected to spend less time with other students and more time in isolation in front of computers or in libraries or labs.

In addition to the isolation which many graduate students experience, as Women's Studies students we experienced an isolation based on lack of acceptance of Women's Studies as a legitimate field of study. We found ourselves becoming ambassadors of Women's Studies in other circles, expected to explain and justify not only the value of our specific research, but of Women's Studies in general. Comments ranged from practicality of the degree to the scholarly value of feminist research. We were often singled out to speak on behalf of "the feminists." These experiences at times were intimidating and belittling, but could be shared and put in context with others in the group.

The group mitigated a further kind of isolation which arose from our working-class origins. I grew up in a small rural Newfoundland outport. My family relied on the inshore fishery and the local fishplant for employment and sustenance. For my parents' generation, formal education was often considered unnecessary, as jobs were easily secured fishing with family or working at the fishplant. Later, higher education became a way of "getting out" of the fishing industry. Once a community was struck by the realization that fishing could no longer be relied upon to provide the necessities of life for its families, children were encouraged to finish school and further their education to get a "real job." Attitudes toward education were pragmatic. It was a means to an end. You were to go to school to get a "trade," to get good work, or better work. You were "something" when you finished. A Master's degree remains a mystery to my family and my community, an attitude that can manifest itself in such questions as,

"What is a Master's degree again? Will it help you find work? What will you do when you are finished? What will you be when you are finished?" The fact that my Master's degree was in Women's Studies did not make it any easier to explain. I found the simplest course was to keep answers to a minimum.

My decision not to talk about my work to family and friends made that work invisible. I downplayed its importance to me because talking about it with my relatives meant running the risk of it being devalued or ridiculed. Not sharing this huge part of my life, with all its ups and downs, meant losing some of the supports that I usually gather around me in times of need. My family did not sympathize with writer's block or appreciate the satisfaction that comes from transcribing the last few sentences of a three-hour interview. At one of our thesis group meetings, I remember expressing frustration with my family and friends who thought that because I did not have "classes," I had endless hours of leisure. The conversation in our support group that evening was enlightening and reassuring. Until then we had not realized we were all from working-class backgrounds, and all faced common difficulties arising from that similarity. That was an important conversation for me, as it was only then that I realized what my frustration was all about. With this understanding came a new way of dealing with it more effectively. We recognized each other's difficulties in trying to balance our respect for the working class culture we come from even as each of us was adapting to a middle class existence. Considering the marginalization we faced in the academy by virtue of being Women's Studies students, and by our emerging from working class backgrounds into unfamiliar territory, in retrospect, the necessity of a peer support group should have been obvious.

As the group progressed, my perception of what a successful thesis group was began to change. I learned that our exchanges did not have to be about feminist theorists or proper referencing techniques in order to be useful. Our feelings and experiences as graduate students were just as important, and sometimes more important, than the actual content of our theses. Early in the process I stopped worrying that our meetings would not be productive, even when I did not have minutes to

prove it. I know it worked because we made steady progress throughout the time we worked together. I have also realized that my thesis group enabled me to go beyond my original goal of "finishing" graduate school, to "experiencing" it. Graduate school afforded me the luxury of writing; it gave me the opportunity to produce original research, to set my own agenda. It also broadened my horizons, enabling me to examine my own beliefs and the world around me more critically than I had before then. The benefits I experienced could not have arisen from independent and solitary research on its own: these needed to be developed through discussions and interactions with other graduate students, from different perspectives and areas of expertise. When I recall my graduate school years in the future, I know it will be an image of our group sitting around with coffee and discussing our strategies for keeping motivated. I can look back with satisfaction, knowing that I have produced a thesis that is valuable and relevant to my career interests. I feel I have grown as a person as a result of being part of this group.

*Lynn Hartery*

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## WOMEN'S SUPPORT GROUPS

I entered the Master of Women's Studies program at Memorial in September 1999. By the second year I too had finished my course requirements and faced isolation, lack of structure and other challenges similar to those described by Lynn. So I took the plunge and joined the group.

I found our time together provided important opportunities for learning, support, solidarity, and friendship. Even though we annoyed each other occasionally, each of us tried to be honest, compassionate and respectful, and to share work and responsibilities evenly. On the whole we succeeded.

The thesis group gave me the space I needed to talk through theory, to engage with other women about their theoretical viewpoints and to relate this learning to my research. I love to debate theory, and in our graduate classes there was never enough time. As relational learners in this context,

each of us was able to make connections between ourselves and others: through cognitive processing, subjective knowing and intuition, in processes of listening and questioning, affiliation and bonding (Belenky et al. 1986).

The thesis support group did more than fill a structural gap once our course work was completed. Because of the relational learning and friendship that such a group encourages, it provided opportunities for us to generate our own theories related to women writing and doing research within the university. Even though we each had our own research topic, we had enough in common for the process to really work for each of us. Meeting as a group gave us a way to do research together just when we needed it most: during the lengthy process of understanding complex theory, working out an appropriate methodology, and dealing with writing blocks and the scary notion of having to explain our research to people and ask them to participate in it. This kind of support and solidarity allowed me to enjoy this time for writing, to get on with my work and graduate from the program.

For me there are many connections between being in a Women's Studies program, being part of this thesis support group, and my research, which focused on the gendered aspects of adult women's learning in the fisheries. As a graduate student, I see the gender lines that are sometimes drawn around women's learning both inside and outside the academy. Inside the university, the marginalization of Women's Studies presents a number of challenges to graduate students. One of these lies in acknowledging and bridging the gap between focussing on one's individual thesis research and the way women generally like to work and learn, which is collaboratively. Like most institutions in our culture, the university was historically constructed upon male traditions, and gender identities and related social roles are constructed and reproduced within its walls (Lerner 1993, 23). It upholds many dominant gendered beliefs that play out in under-representation of issues affecting women in general and, in the Women's Studies program, in under-funding, under-staffing, and a lack of recognition for the work that gets done there.

Gendered ways of learning inside the academy have implications for women's well-being: