

some women never get through the program; others get through but feel they've lost their voice in the process; others get sick. As students and as women, we are participating in a program that often is not what we would like it to be for our professors or for us. And as participants within the university, whether we're students, professors, or administrators, I believe we have to pay more attention to the quality of women's learning experiences and try and understand the links with ethical and meaningful research.

The university, as a learning context, generates both resistance and conformity to expectations, and we came to see the thesis group as part of our resistance: a subversive act. As feminists, we challenged what the Women's Studies program means in terms of its location and value within the university. We looked for ways to work with professors to better meet our learning needs and expand our vision of how feminist research, and research in general, could be conducted within the academy. University research is better because we are there.

The thesis group, as part of our resistance to a male paradigm of learning, helped us keep these many challenges in perspective so that we were less likely to internalize those problems as belonging solely to us. As women learners and feminists we often found ourselves discussing ways in which women negotiate the often conflicting demands of learning across institutional, disciplinary, family, and community contexts. Our meetings helped us tap into what we needed in order to feel that we were supported as we learned to be feminist researchers.

My thesis research gave me the opportunity to connect some of the issues in my own learning to similar conflicts and negotiations in the lives of women who work on fishing boats. For my thesis, I interviewed women fish harvesters who depend on their husbands to teach them the necessary skills in order to work safely on fishing boats. I found that dominant gendered notions of work considered appropriate or inappropriate for women influence what women are actually taught on fishing boats. The husband filters what he teaches her, with the result that many women are unable to perform certain tasks aboard the boat, and are dependant on their husbands for navigation,

engine maintenance, and other tasks essential to the safety of all on board.

When I think about women in the fishery, especially in light of my experience as part of this thesis group, I am reminded that much of women's learning takes place informally, in contexts outside formal education. But no matter the location, whether it be in the home and family, the university, on fishing boats, in community organizations or in a thesis support group, implicit and explicit "texts" in these settings determine the environment in which women learn. These texts are powerful in that they can determine the scope of women's learning, and their degree of engagement in learning, especially about themselves.

Today I think about my experience of graduate school as a gift, and the thesis group as an unexpected part of that gift, providing me with a kind of learning I did not encounter elsewhere in my graduate program. It brought me to a new understanding of feminist research, and taught me how to write honestly and intelligently about my own life and the lives of other women.

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#### A PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON HOW I LEARNED TO LIVE WITHOUT BISCOTTI IN ST. JOHN'S NEWFOUNDLAND

I came to Memorial's Master of Women's Studies program from Toronto, where I had lived in an Italian community most of my life. I mistakenly thought St. John's would be like the rest of Atlantic Canada, which I had visited. I could not have been more wrong. Nothing about Newfoundland felt familiar. St. John's does not have a large Italian population; it lacks the infrastructure I had taken for

granted living in Toronto's Little Italy. I was thousands of kilometers away from home, culturally and geographically separated from the rest of Canada, with no family or community to comfort me. I missed my parents, friends, and neighbors; missed hearing the Italian language in my ear; and worst of all, I could not find a decent package of biscotti anywhere in the city, so even food could not offer me any sense of emotional succor! I spent the first year of the graduate program feeling like a stranger in a strange land. I buried myself in my courses, thinking that work could be used as an antidote to counteract my feelings of loneliness and isolation. After I fulfilled the course requirements for the program, I quickly submitted my proposal and left St. John's. I had purposely designed my study so that I could conduct my research in Toronto. I planned to spend the remaining time in the program writing up my analysis at home, but my supervisors suggested I come back to Newfoundland to finish the thesis. I resisted the idea, but after rationalizing to myself that I was moving back in the hopes of completing the final draft more quickly than if I stayed in Toronto, I returned in May 2000 after a long absence.

I had not been back at Memorial University long when I heard that some students in the program were thinking of forming a thesis support group. Initially, I was indifferent to the idea. By that point I was so used to working on my own I really could not imagine how involvement in a thesis support group would reap any benefits. I felt disconnected from the Women's Studies program and the other graduate students. Underlying those first misgivings about joining the group was the fact that I was at a different stage of thesis-writing than the others in the group. I was working on the final draft while they were writing thesis proposals. This may sound terribly self-serving, but I figured if I was going to take the time to become part of a group, I wanted its members to be able to identify with what it was like to sweat out a final draft. I already felt like an outsider by virtue of the fact that I was not a Newfoundlander (all others in the group were); I didn't want those feelings reinforced by the fact that I was in a position no one else could relate to. I can shake my head now at my misgivings, but those feelings were very real to me then.

I am not entirely sure why I went to the first scheduled meeting. Perhaps on some level I felt a need to connect with other students, or maybe I just wanted to be part of something that was bigger than myself. My most prominent memory of our first meeting is that I was the only participant that showed up toting a big bottle of wine when everyone else came bearing coffee or tea. Nobody else in the group was partaking of the wine, and I remember thinking to myself, "What a conservative bunch! They're probably wondering who invited this lush to the meeting?" Needless to say, I did not feel entirely comfortable but, despite my nervousness, I decided to keep going back.

As we came to more meetings, the thesis group took on a life of its own. I found that we had things in common. Despite the fact each of us was working on a different topic, we all faced similar hurdles and could relate to each other's work. We shared the process of interviewing and writing and trying to find our own voices. We were bound by intersections of gender and class. Feminist theory had taught us, however, that those common elements cannot be the only things that sustain a group of women. All were feminists, but each of us applied different theoretical feminist perspectives to our work. What then, united and sustained us as a group for almost two years? I believe the dynamic in the group worked well because of our differences. When I first joined the group, I could not have foreseen how these differences would act as catalysts to help maintain the fabric of the group. Lively debates were fostered by varying opinions, always in a non-judgmental and supportive manner. The thesis group acted as a forum to give and receive personal and academic advice in a safe, private, and comfortable space.

Talking openly about the difficulties of being a graduate student with my colleagues gave me a lifeline at that stage of my work. There were times when I seriously doubted I was capable of finishing the final draft. It seemed an insurmountable task. I was stuck in certain parts of the thesis and unable to see my way out of these spots. Even though I felt my research topic was making a vital contribution to feminist scholarship, I was sick of making endless revisions and felt unmotivated and bored by the process of writing. On some level, I knew that the feminist values that

had been inculcated in me were supposed to empower me as a researcher and as a student. I did not feel particularly emboldened, however, all those times I sat staring at a blank computer screen and its accompanying partner in crime, the blinking cursor, as I prepared to revise yet another draft. My thesis group allowed me to expose my innermost demons, and I took full advantage of their willingness to listen. They helped me discard the idea that, as a graduate student, you have to pretend that everything in your life is perfectly fine.

My participation in the thesis group brought me back to a place I had been away from far too long as a graduate student. Working in conjunction with others in the group allowed me to rediscover what I enjoyed about being a student of Women's Studies: dialoging and brainstorming with my fellow students about the burning issues that affect us all.

I completed my thesis and we even collaborated on a session for the Canadian Women's Studies Association, which formed the basis of this article. I came full circle during the time I was living in St. John's. I no longer felt isolated because I adopted my thesis support group as my community, my home away from home. In October 2001, when I graduated with a Master of Women's Studies from Memorial, my supervisors commented that my voice in my work is very strong. I finally found the courage to take ownership of the thesis. My fellow students in the thesis support group enabled me to find my lost and silenced voice. Was I anxious about the prospect of letting go and moving on? I was, but I was also secure in the knowledge that I had formed lasting relationships with the women of my group that would extend beyond our time spent together as Women's Studies graduate students.

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## **A NEWFIE DAUGHTER WORKING THE ACADEMY**

I picked up a copy of the *Wayves* newsletter (April 2001) from my neighborhood bookstore, and eagerly looked for my article.<sup>1</sup> The

front-page headline read: "Sister Stories Wanted by Newfoundland Researcher." I stopped in my tracks. I thought to myself, "Is this who I am? A Newfoundland researcher?"

The purpose of this narrative is to consider the role my thesis group played in helping me construct my identity as a "Newfoundland researcher."<sup>2</sup> As graduate students in the academy, members of my thesis group and I experienced a hierarchy of power relations in our "workplace" typical of that experienced by working-class laborers. We organized partly as a response to relations of power in our workplace. Our organizing was collective and political. Our actions as a group further heightened my awareness that the research I am doing was work, that I was a worker, and that members of my thesis group were my co-workers. All of us had worked with community-based women's groups and we were familiar with political organizing. Although I'm not sure we recognized it at the time, the thesis support group was organized partly as an attempt to counter the individualistic, middle-class, masculinized values our workplace espouses. At the centre of our collective actions was a challenge to a common assumption that a dichotomy exists between activism and academia. My thesis group has been a feminist learning ground for me in becoming a politically-strategic academic "worker."

Before I began my research, the thought of doing interviews terrified me. To illustrate ways in which my thesis group helped me sort through my fears, I will refer to my interviews with Faith, and my feelings about these interviews as recorded in my research journal.

Faith is a single mother in her mid-thirties. She works in the service industry to "make ends meet." Faith and I met in her home. The first interview was rich but difficult. After chatting with Faith, I wrote in my research journal about the contradictions and anxiety I experienced in the interview:

I find it hard being around poverty. It reminds me of too much . . . Her house and my presence in it provided a visual for the two worlds I feel torn between and a space that I have been [left] hanging [in].  
(Fitzpatrick 2001a)