

## FEMINIST FIELD-BASED LEARNING: THEORY AND PRAXIS IN THE COURSE OF KNOWLEDGE CREATION

### Introduction

My syllabus for the 1996-97 Graduate Seminar describes its Field-Based Learning component as follows:

Field-Based Learning is an opportunity for students to become acquainted with a set of the concerns of women and of the women's community and to experience a different approach to learning. Rather than basing ideas only on books and articles, students will theorize about women's experiences from actual sets of relationships, activities and community practices. This experiential base in feminist praxis is important in the developing field of women's studies. Its approach and the insights it generates are likely to prove useful in other courses, research and work experiences.

This paper will theorize key components of feminist field-based learning, an idea and a concept which I see as arising from the "developings" of feminist knowledge. It will also briefly discuss how these theoretical insights were important in shaping this year's course in the new inter-university M.A. in Women's Studies at Mount Saint Vincent, Dalhousie and Saint Mary's Universities.

### Intellectual Importance of the "Field" for Feminism

In the current blossoming of women's studies/recherche féministe<sup>1</sup> in Canada, the "field" has been a crucial site for feminist knowledge creation. The 20 year existence of the Canadian Research Institute for the *Advancement* of Women, and CRIAW's commitment to bridging the university and community, attests to the perceived significance of the field (see Clippingdale, 1996). So do the books on the women's movement (e.g.,

Adamson, Briskin and McPhail, 1988; Wine and Ristock, 1991) and especially books and articles that link theoretical developments and issues of knowledge with the women's movements for social change (e.g., Miles and Finn, 1982; 1989; Finn, 1993; Hamilton, 1996; Vickers, 1996; Miles, 1996).

The "field" has been central to feminist scholars, even in the sciences (see, e.g., *Canadian Women's Studies*, 1993 commemorating Margaret Benston), to our reflections of our own intellectual development (e.g., Christiansen-Ruffman, 1992; Smith, 1992) and to our major concepts and approaches to creating feminist knowledge. Theorist Dorothy Smith, for example, focuses our attention on the everyday world as problematic and on the "standpoint" of women, (or on the field and women's location in it) (Smith, 1987); methodologists Kirby and McKenna (1989) suggest "researching from the margins" [of the field]. In fact, I would argue that most fundamental feminist assumptions have arisen from the women's movement in the field and that the field, especially at its margins, holds the most promise as a site for autonomous feminist theorizing and for ridding social knowledge of its patricentric assumptions (Christiansen-Ruffman, 1989; 1993).

It is not a coincidence that women's studies/recherche féministe itself is often considered to be a "field" of study, rather than a "discipline." Currently, a discipline implies knowledge created in the academy by expert scholars mainly in discussions with other expert scholars. In conscious contrast, Women's Studies has been developed by recognizing different sources and forms of knowledge creation in the field, and our responsibility to ensure that our research is relevant there.

Feminist knowledge seeks to understand:

- the diverse realities and complexities of women's lives;
- women's oppression by patriarchal and misogynist cultures, structures and practices;
- women's struggles for transformation, requiring further elaboration of our vision and refining of our praxis; and
- the women's movement, whose organizations

form the foundational base for feminist changes in the world and in the university.<sup>2</sup>

These feminist knowledge goals aim to develop our understanding at the same time as they better women's lives and the social conditions for all peoples. They provide a material, real basis for theorizing, actual sites and a set of theoretical questions for feminist knowledge and praxis. Moreover, in each of these four sub-fields, women's experiences and their praxis provide real and continuing sources for identifying important new questions and for developing feminist knowledge with the academy.

### **Implications for Field-Based Learning**

Feminist field-based learning is not an easy activity for students, faculty or even activists. Considerable skill is required in this process of actively engaged learning and "making feminist sense" with others, from a particular site. The mandatory field-based learning component in our new M.A. programme<sup>3</sup> created a teaching challenge: how to shape a useful learning experience for graduate students with different backgrounds in feminism and women's movement activities that would be a contribution rather than a resource drain for women's groups in the field. In designing this course, I reflected on its similarities and differences with experiential components of co-op programmes and practicums for professionals and with past courses and seminars I have taught over the years.

Practicums, pre-professional field placements (e.g., social work), and co-op education programs were not as relevant as expected. They focused on job-related skills rather than on the graduate level goals of learning, reflecting, theorizing and praxis. The time commitments demanded from students were longer. Placements were assumed to be in an institutionally structured and hierarchic setting, enabling supervision in established professional conduct. These structured settings are appropriate for certain types of learning, but the setting contrasts with many feminist field placements where hierarchical relationships are less valued than collaborative ones and where students will

learn from a variety of different relationships in their group setting. The assumptions of field-based learning should not exclude the small women's movement groups and caucuses without paid staff and with only occasional meetings.

In planning the field-based learning experience, I found more useful lessons in the courses and scholarly literature on qualitative research. For example, descriptions of the process by which the qualitative researcher enters, participates in and then leaves the field were modified to describe stages for field-based participation. While qualitative research models were useful to me, I did not use this literature in the seminar, because I was afraid that students might simply replicate qualitative sociological research, which was not my objective.

I also relied on years of teaching substantively related courses. For example, the content of my course, *Women's Organizations and Social Change*, was useful as background, but there was no time to replicate its course content. Instead, students defined what was relevant to them as their learning objectives. Even in the same setting, learning comes in many forms and from many sources. For example, one student interested in group dynamics might learn from watching meetings, while another student with the same interest might learn mainly from a particularly wise woman. A third student might learn from this same wise woman, but about ways feminists organize for change. A fourth student might engage mainly in self-reflection and a fifth might develop new strategies for change.

During 1996-97, students decided against working in the same setting for this experience of education and action. Thus, the seminar emphasized students' exploration and selection of different locations for themselves within the field. The syllabus described the requirement and several possible types of field arrangements:

Each week, on average, students will be expected to spend three to four hours "in the field" (around 75 hours over the year) plus preparation time and reflection time (record-keeping and field notes) on field-based learning. In most cases, students will act as

volunteers and/or group participants. In a few cases, students will be expected to take volunteer training courses and then to act as volunteers. In other cases, students will undertake a particular project for a group, using a particular skill that they have (e.g., a history or library student might help a group gather together their records for the archives). The specific placement will be negotiated among the student, instructor and women's group, and a written agreement will be kept of mutual expectations, including goals and work plan. A mid-year meeting will be held among the three parties to evaluate progress and to change goals and work plan, if necessary.

I facilitated the placement process by describing a number of possible settings, based on fairly extensive knowledge of, and contact with, the women's movement in Halifax. Half of the students chose one of these sites, and one student had to decide which among her many activities she would consider her official site for field-based learning. The information-gathering and selection process required students to learn about the women's movement in Halifax, if they were not already involved, to think about themselves in relationship to the women's movement and to prioritize their commitments. In making their selection, students reflected on their strengths, on their learning needs and on the idea of field-based learning. This reflective planning process involved learning, imagining and evaluating the placing of oneself in particular field settings.

Especially at the graduate level, students come with very different levels of prior involvement with the women's movement, and with very different learning objectives and skills. The less knowledge and involvement the student has with the women's organizations and feminist praxis, the more structured the placement should be.

Students at the graduate level have also become enthralled with their individual knowledge pursuits, sometimes framed in highly abstract terms, and some of the students, even with

extensive experience in the women's movement, find it difficult to take seriously the language and knowledge created in the field. The reasons for this will become clearer if we return to our more general theorizing, this time about the nature of disciplinary knowledge found in universities and their relationships with the field.

### **Universities, Disciplinary Canons and Problematic Treatment of the "Field"**

Universities are elite institutions, which often distinguish themselves and their tradition of gowns from "the town." They erect barriers to field-based learning by claiming jurisdiction over knowledge. In the minds of many non-feminists and now, even some feminists, universities are the sole site for knowledge production and the repositories of expert knowledge. They are structured in ways which actively delegitimize grounded, contextualized knowledge. The competitive, hierarchical, credentialized, objectified and individualistic environment of the university mirrors the society. These characteristics of university and society are patriarchal features which feminist scholars of my generation, and feminist activists in all fields, have sought to challenge and to transform.

Universities tend to teach disciplinary canons of knowledge. These sets of concepts, assumptions and principles are the authorized and accepted rules of disciplines. They frame the questions and the answers that identify the information and knowledge still required to be placed within disciplinary parameters. Their paradigms oppose innovation. The field as an alternative source of perspectives, questions, knowledge and authority is considered "out of bounds." When left unchallenged, disciplinary canons fossilize "the" important questions. Feminists found disciplinary knowledge tremendously powerful, and important, while flawed by sexism, homophobia, racism, colonialism, classism...

As women's studies blossomed, its leaders and recruits along the way came trained in traditional disciplines which had to be challenged and to be unlearned, in part because of the way in

which the field is mistreated. It is no accident that the field and interdisciplinarity became the site for feminist knowledge creation. While disciplinary scholars often gain insights from the field, their disciplines want them to deny it, and to claim the field's insights as their own intellectual property. In fact, scientific disciplines developed historically by claiming to separate the world of knowledge and science from the world of experience in the field (see Ursula Franklin, cited in Vickers, 1996:226).

Traditional disciplines value highly abstract concepts in an apolitical, unworldly realm of "pure knowledge." Pure ideas are said to be uncontaminated by the field and are often given unqualified authority and prestige. The hierarchy of knowledge, fostered by the academy, undermines the field and "outside" authorities. Feminist scholars, especially graduate students and junior faculty, often feel caught between the need to "show authority" and "to be feminist" in their academic work.

When traditional social science disciplines venture into the field, it is usually under conditions they control and for their purposes: to collect "data." When the community only functions as data to feed the academy, the relationship may be considered cannibalistic (see Christiansen-Ruffman, 1997). A colonial, cannibalistic relational heritage marks and potentially still mars relations between the academy and the community.

### **Relevance for Field-Based Learning**

The power of the university and disciplinary norms continue to undermine even the idea of "real" learning in the field. The normal university business of conveying unquestioned expert knowledge to students contrasts with feminist pedagogy, a more active learning process of creating knowledge from our understanding of the past, present and future. But even feminist pedagogy has tended to be university-centered.

Lingering colonialist and cannibalistic relationships between the university and community create problems for field-based learning courses and experiences, partly because

of the litany of bad experiences with university researchers which form part of the memory of community groups, and partly because of the on-going structured elitism of the academy. Field-based learning courses must address many structural/personal/ political issues without becoming paralysed by them.

In the syllabus, I described some of the key ethical and political considerations as follows:

Field-Based Learning is an opportunity for students to contribute to the local women's community in exchange for this opportunity for field-based learning. This relationship must be based on principles of mutual benefit, non-exploitation and mutual respect. In fact, part of the learning is how to develop a respectful and mutually beneficial relationship across differences. In this case differences will likely stem from such features as differing time lines, needs for confidentiality and resulting senses of urgency/priority between the community and university worlds which must be negotiated.

In future, my syllabus would also name language differences. The abstracted self-important language of the academy "does power" over those who are not its "members." The early discussions among feminists that our new field of studies should develop and use language that speaks to the women's movement has become subverted by the power of the academy, the current fashion of post-modernism, and the fact that students, especially graduate students, are in the process of becoming socialized into the academy and want to try out their new insights. They can unknowingly, therefore, reproduce the ideological elitism of university/community relationships. This process becomes even more complicated because they do not hold the taken-for-granted authority, social stature and respect that usually lies at the basis of taken-for-granted hierarchy. Of course, neither do women faculty. Current discussions within women's studies of the elitism and privilege of members within the university, therefore, need to be tempered.

## Conclusion

What will be the legacy of the recent feminist knowledge explosion which has been created by feminist academics who have seen themselves as part of the feminist movement? The university has been included as a site for struggle and change, but along with other locations. Field-based learning in women's studies/recherche féministe is an important counter-weight to constricting academic definitions governing the course of feminist knowledge. It reminds us of the dimensions of our field and of the relevance of our work. It makes us aware of the diversity of overlapping fields and of the significance of collaborative, comparative field-based learning.

Time will tell whether we are to be successful in this new course of knowledge creation. In retrospect, this particular course in field-based learning taught me the need to theorize more explicitly the intellectual importance of the field as a source of knowledge, and reminded me of the uniqueness of the specific Canadian field of women's studies/recherche féministe.

## ENDNOTES

1. This name, Women's Studies/recherche féministe was developed to describe our work at a Canada-wide symposium in 1991, organized in association with a review of strategic research on women. Its advantages are that it names both women and feminism, and it is bilingual. Moreover, it signifies a uniquely Canadian field, thereby drawing attention to the different assumptions that characterize Canadian and American scholarship and feminist practice. For example, Canadian feminism is considerably less individualistic than that in the United States, from its academic theorizing to the structure of its women's movement - the group-based National Action Committee (NAC) in Canada compared to the individual-based National Organization of Women (NOW) in the United States. In such respects, Canadian feminism is also closer to Indian feminism and the feminisms of some other countries in the economic south (see Sen and Grown, 1987 for an excellent introduction to the third world women's perspective of DAWN.)

2. The four overlapping sub-fields, objectives and/or bases of feminist thought and action defined here were developed in Halifax by Peggy Antrobus (Barbados), Linda Christiansen-Ruffman (Canada) and Saparinah Sadli (Indonesia) in 1996. Previously, I had considered only the first three components. The 1996 conversations, as part of a workshop of the Community Partnerships and Women's Studies Project, sponsored by AUCC and CIDA, helped to expand the theoretical and practical implications of this conceptualization,

as has recent writing.

3. Field-based learning is structured into the graduate program as a required component of the graduate seminar. The graduate seminar is mandated by the M.A. Programme proposal "to organize and facilitate the requirement of the graduate programme for field-based learning and to discuss and analyze, along with other classes, both individual and collective results of that learning."

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*Linda Christiansen-Ruffman*

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## HOSTING THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

At the recent Learned's in St. John's, Newfoundland, I was asked to participate in a Women's Studies session entitled "Doing Activism in Women's Studies Credit Courses: models, successes and problems." More specifically, I was asked to comment on the value of Women's Studies practicum from the perspective of the agency hosting the students being sent "out" into the larger community. As the executive director of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women / Institut canadien de recherches sur les femmes (CRIAOW / ICREF) I have been directly involved in the placement of students here for the past six years.

CRIAOW is a national, non-profit, membership-based organization with a small office located in Ottawa. Its principal mandate is to promote, encourage, communicate and initiate research on women and women's experience with the goal of advancing women's equality and promoting social justice for all women. When it was founded in 1976 it was also seen as a vehicle

for bridging the gap between academe and the wider community--for making research accessible to the world outside the academy. The Board of Directors, for example, is made up of both academics and women based in the community.

The hosting of practicum students fits in very well with CRIAOW's mandate and almost without exception it has been a positive experience for both the organization and the students. The students placed here have come from the two universities in Ottawa (Carleton and the University of Ottawa), from a local CEGEP in Hull, and even from the senior class in a local high school.

I am often asked how onerous it is to take on a student in the workplace. It is not onerous at all if there is a definite project for the student to work on. If you have to be thinking every time the student comes into the office -- oh dear, what will we have her do today? -- it will definitely be a burden. Moreover, from the student's perspective, a specific project gives her something concrete to demonstrate the worth of her experience with CRIAOW. In fact, some practicum programs require that there be a written report or paper of some kind which is evaluated by both the host supervisor and the academic advisor.

In addition to having a particular project for the student it is absolutely essential that there be communication in advance with the academic advisor and an interview with the prospective student. It is important to ensure that the student will be a good fit, not only in terms of the work to be done but also in respect to the office personality. This consideration is especially important in a small office where people work in very close quarters and share in many of the day to day tasks. Students who are placed with CRIAOW are expected to share in the general work of the office, including: answering the phone, helping with mailouts, sending faxes, photocopying, inputting data in our two databases, organizing the resource centre and answering requests for information which come in by regular mail or the internet. Students have also helped with the organization of meetings and special events such as our gala dinner and auction in the fall of 1996 and staffed information booths at conferences and book displays.