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Linda Christiansen-Ruffman

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.

In determining the specific project for each practicum we try to come up with something which will benefit both the organization and the student. We look at our agenda for the coming year to see where we could use some help, perhaps with a particular piece of research or information-gathering. At the same time, we try to ascertain what would be interesting to the student and what skills she will learn in the carrying out of this task. The following is a sampling of some of the projects undertaken by these students:

1. Daphne Uras, a third year student in Women's Studies at Carleton University, did a history of the CRIAW Bank of Researchers: how it was operationalized, the criteria for inclusion of researchers, and the changes in the Bank's policy over the years to reflect greater acceptance of community-based research. At the same time she did an evaluation of both CRIAW's databases: the Bank of Researchers (feminists across the country engaged in research and categorized according to the themes of their research); and the Directory of Women Specializing in Global Issues (e.g.. Environment, Peace, and Development). This massive piece of work is now a part of CRIAW's resource centre and archives.

2. Laura Bonnett, a graduate student in Women's Studies at Carleton, did a "volunteer" practicum with CRIAW during our 20th anniversary year. She was later hired for the summer on a student employment grant. She updated the CRIAW history, originally done by Patricia Saidak in 1986. She read through every Newsletter, went through various archival material and interviewed some of the key players in CRIAW's history. Her work was eventually published in the special anniversary volume: *Memories and Visions: Celebrating 20 Years of Feminist Research with CRIAW/ICREF 1976-1996*.

3. Tess Powter, also a graduate student in Women's Studies, more recently did a literature review and annotated bibliography on *Body Image and Self Esteem*, focusing on adolescent girls. She looked not only at books and magazines, but also

at videos and web sites. The reason for this particular topic being chosen was its relation both to the theme of CRIAW's biennial conference being held in Fredericton in November 1997 and to an essay contest CRIAW is sponsoring for girls aged 13-19. Tess helped with the initial conception and publicity for this essay contest.

In the fall, we hope to have a practicum student from the University of Ottawa to do a similar piece of work in French. Eventually this work will be published along with the 10 or 12 best essays submitted for the contest.

4. Masha Petrovic was a senior high school student (Grade 13) when she did her placement here. Unlike the previous three students, Masha didn't have a written paper to prepare, but she did work on a specific project: she was assistant to the coordinator of the Beijing Secretariat which CRIAW housed during the year and a half leading up to the Fourth World Conference and NGO Forum on Women. Her experience was more akin to someone working in a front-line or service organization and she described it as a transforming experience. During her time with us she also had an article on feminism published in the Ottawa Citizen and she founded a feminist issues club at her high school. Not surprisingly, she went on to take Women's Studies when she entered university.

I think these examples illustrate how the practicum experience is beneficial both to the host institution and the student. The student gains important work experience as well as an understanding of the working of the women's movement; the hope is that she also sees the importance of the link between activism and women's studies. The host institution has the opportunity to have work done on a volunteer basis -- work that would not be done otherwise, since most non-profit organizations are coping with smaller and smaller budgets. Moreover, it is provided with the chance to establish contact with the young feminists who will guide women's studies and feminist research in the future. These young women bring a breath of fresh air into our office every time they enter. From CRIAW's point

of view, the practicum experience is one we will continue to participate in for as long as we are given the opportunity.

Linda Clippingdale

OUT IN THE FIELD: PRAXIS IS WHERE WE PLAY

Control over our bodies and health is a key component to having control over our lives, as women's bodies continue to be sites of abuse, oppression and exploitation. The barriers to women's health and well-being are manifold, from economic obstacles which affect women's access to proper health care, to such practices as the universalizing of male symptoms and diseases.

My desire to develop an awareness of the health issues that affect women and to explore the theoretical frameworks which help to analyze these issues led to my choosing as my field placement the Women's Health Collective, one of the working groups of the Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group (NSPIRG). This group has been in existence for close to two years, and consists of a core group of about six students and community members.

I chose this site because addressing women's health issues seemed an important way to ground my feminist theory. The collective offers workshops and facilitates discussion groups as a way of promoting awareness of women's health issues and of providing alternative perspectives to mainstream notions of women's health. I was a member of the collective before I started the MA program in Women's Studies and I participated in these activities over the academic year. I continue to work with the collective even though my course is finished as I find the work that we do valuable and rewarding.

An important issue that field-based learning has raised for me is how we go about focusing our activism without privileging one form of oppression over others. The Women's Health Collective tries to make connections

between different forms of oppression, and have this awareness reflected in the health issues addressed. For instance, what are the effects of culture, race and sexuality on women's health? How can the examination of the multiple axes of oppression within the practice of social activism form part of our social activist work? Addressing questions like these offers one of the ways that feminist postmodern and postcolonial theorizing can play out in practice.

My subjectivities and life experiences have informed my scholarship and have influenced the ways in which I am a social activist. I grew up in the Comoro Islands, Malawi and Trinidad, and my experiences growing up in different cultures has meant that issues around hybridity, racism, and global inequities have remained important and integral both to my activism and to my scholarship. Similarly, coming out as a bisexual woman while doing my undergraduate degree led me to address issues around homophobia, biphobia, heterosexism, and monosexism (the assumption that everyone must either be attracted to people of the same sex or the opposite sex, but not both). My concerns here had already led both to my involvement in the queer movement and to my theorizing about bisexuality. Such personal experiences and idiosyncrasies will ultimately influence our scholarship and activist choices, so it is important to examine how these shape our understanding, as well as how they are embedded within our socio-cultural and political milieus.

Field-based learning has reinforced my belief that knowledge is not always generated within the academy. Much of our work as a health collective involves discussions of our experiences of health and also the sharing of knowledge and information not supplied by the medical system. When we tell our stories of healing and health we can make the opportunity to connect the experiential and the theoretical. A good example of what I mean by this can be found in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980), where she relates her experience of having a mastectomy and explores the issues around wearing a prosthesis. Lorde's writing demonstrates the power of combining the lived experiences of women about their health with feminist theories, as a way of