

countering some of the barriers to good health that women face, economically, socially, and culturally.

In this spirit, our collective is presently working on a magazine on women's health issues thanks to a small grant from NSPIRG. We are soliciting articles from a wide variety of perspectives and sources with the goal of bridging theory and practice and connecting the academy and the community. We have put out a call for submissions, targeting a variety of groups and organizations such as the Multicultural Association of Nova Scotia, the Black Women's Health Program, the Maritime Center for Excellence in Women's Health, and the Sexual Health Coalition of Nova Scotia. We hope to gather poems, narratives and essays not just from professors and experts in the health professions but from a wide diversity of women, so that the contributions of those interested in sharing their experiences and knowledge about women's health can be heard and valued.

Field-based learning raises important questions about definitions of epistemology, about where, how, and by whom knowledge is generated. Scholarship is not just created within academia; it also emerges out of communities of individuals and groups who seek to understand the conditions and forces that affect their lives and their health. Activism and learning go hand in hand both in and out of the university so, if implemented appropriately, a field-based learning component can legitimize and recognize these links. As soon as my feminist theory starts to drift away from my feminist practice, I remind myself that I am a researcher and a student because I believe in working for social justice. How can we begin to challenge the notion that somehow the academy presents a more expert or superior brand of knowledge than other forums? One way this can be done is by privileging poetical, political and experiential discourses alongside theoretical and philosophical discourses so that all are seen as valid means of discussing ideas and strategies of resistance. Stories can help us identify with the experiences of others, articulate experiences we share in common, and provide strategies for resistance and survival.

It is my hope that field-based learning can lead to questioning false oppositions and may encourage a more sophisticated understanding of human experience. It should, therefore, be an integral component of a Women's Studies program because of the important insights that can be learned from it. I continue to look for ways to connect my "formal" education with community activism, and believe that Women's Studies should allow for and facilitate this connection. This encourages what I might call "responsible" or "accountable" scholarship, by which I mean feminist scholarship that questions its relevance to the world in general, and to women's lives in particular. I would argue that a field-based learning component facilitates the grounding of theory and keeps us more honest, whether our work is literary analysis or action research. It has been said before but we too often forget that theory and practice must be connected. Praxis is where we play.

REFERENCE

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Tania Trepanier

GIVING FEMINIST THEORY A HEARTBEAT: FIELD-BASED LEARNING AND THE ACADEMY

As a graduate student in the Interuniversity Masters in Women's Studies program, I chose to fulfill the Field-Based Learning requirement for my degree with the Women's Action Coalition of Nova Scotia (WAC). WAC functions as an umbrella organization of grassroots women's groups across the province. Its main mission is to lobby the federal and provincial governments as a collective entity on behalf of the various member groups. My most significant work with WAC to date (I continue to work with WAC despite having fulfilled my field-based learning requirement) has been in planning and attending a provincial conference, attended by almost 60 women as

individuals and as representatives of their women's groups from across the province. The conference, entitled "Standing Up and Speaking Out: Women Reshaping the Public Policy Agenda," stemmed from concerns voiced by women's groups regarding the significant public policy changes to education and training, social services and funding to women's centres in Nova Scotia, as well as the devolution of funds and services from the federal to provincial government. This conference represented the culmination of the learning experience in which I had participated all year. It was there I faced significant challenges to my initial assumptions regarding the values of field-based learning. After some careful reflection following the conference I realized a significant shift had occurred in how I approached what I was doing in the academy. This shift marked a change in my personal politics, my methodological approach to feminist theory and a recognition that this shift and its impact on the work that I produce would implicitly challenge the institution of which I was a part. I had gained a new-found politicism that permeated my thinking about academic feminist theorizing grounded in the reality of lived experience. The link between theory and practice has never been so real or so strong for me. Admittedly, this recognition of the change in my personal politics and methodological approach to theory was terribly uncomfortable for me. For most of the year in my graduate classes, I had been one of postmodernism's loudest defenders against the claim that it was not politically viable and even that it was anti-feminist. To my postmodern-tending mind, my reluctance to give up on a group like WAC, a group that essentially operated by purporting to speak for all of its member women, was terribly disconcerting. In theory, it did not seem possible that a group like WAC could ever hope to represent adequately all its members' concerns, nor, in my opinion, that it should strive to. But, after attending the conference and immersing myself in the concerns and experiences of the women present, the need for a strong politically viable entity such as WAC was impressed upon me. At a time when such profound political and economic changes are taking place in Canada and in Nova Scotia, the need for a group

like WAC seemed all the more pressing. What was a postmodernist to do with such a methodological and theoretical dilemma? I could no longer easily dismiss the viability and merit of a materialist feminism that is grounded in lived experiences. I was not, however, ready to let go of all of my postmodern thinking either. When I considered how WAC actually operated it became apparent to me that a marriage between the two theoretical camps was not as improbable as I had originally thought.

What I soon realized was that WAC was not as homogenized as I had assumed. Just when I was beginning to understand the need and usefulness of large groups such as WAC despite the potential problems of obscuring differences and multiplicity, I realized that the ways in which WAC tended to operate could be understood in postmodern terms. On a day to day basis, WAC operated by forming smaller coalitions between and among some of its members and other women's organizations outside of WAC in order to build alliances and work to effect change, while simultaneously operating as a unified "we" to demonstrate its political potency.

In the tradition of Donna Haraway in her 1991 "Cyborg Manifesto," I now advocate a cyborg feminism that combines both materialist feminist approaches with a postmodern irreverence for categories, as well as a recognition of fluidity and shifting alliances. Haraway's concept of the cyborg, which insists on never losing sight of the need for explicit politicism, is capable of absorbing the many inconsistencies and contradictions in the work that I do as an academic feminist working in the "field." The political "we" which acts as the grounding for our politics must engage in situational definitions that will serve the groups' political ends by enabling useful political alliances. Linda Alcoff refers to this as operating according to "positionality" -- a strategy that allowed me to form shifting political alliances with other women from across the province that, under different circumstances, I would not have made.

My involvement with WAC has helped me to recognize that political alliances can be formed across bodily, geographic, racial and sexual orientations according to common political

agendas. These alliances are always partial, always temporary, but always politically potent. By allowing for such fluidity we create space for local alliances and coalition building in political activism. I am asserting what Chandra Mohanty maps out as "cartographies of struggle" as a viable means of organizing politically in a postmodern fashion. She writes of this approach, "it is the common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems that determines our potential political alliances" (Mohanty 1991, 7). With this approach in mind, one does not revere boundaries between various theoretical paradigms.

However, working with WAC as a student completing a requirement for my degree required some careful negotiations. I was constantly reminded of the differences between myself and the women with whom I worked. Most of the women I worked with at WAC came from different socio-economic classes, time-lines and experiences. I was constantly aware that I was a privileged woman with advanced formal education. Academic discourses that served me so well in academia proved useless and even damning in my work with WAC. Removing the barrier of language and other assumptions about the value of, and place for, academic theorizing helped me to recognize the different kind of theorizing that was taking place around me. I realized that the ways WAC worked as a group, struggling and negotiating among the various differences, was a cogent example of everything I had been reading about in my feminist theory texts. As a result, I could understand the potential of feminist praxis.

My most difficult and valuable lesson in field-based learning has been to get grounded in the realities of women's lives in Nova Scotia while also performing in a graduate program that stresses, like other graduate programs, academic performance. Throughout my time with WAC, I have been acutely aware that the two aspects of my Women's Studies degree -- that is, engaging in field-based learning and maintaining academic performance -- are often at odds with one another. I am suggesting the commitment to both aspects of this degree often clash because of the alienating and individualizing nature of graduate work,

especially when that work is being done in an *interdisciplinary and interuniversity* program. As a Women's Studies student in this particular program, I have existed as a diasporic woman, without a home, without boundaries, without a clear, stable sense of community. Field-based learning has allowed me to root myself in the community of women that surrounds me. A Women's Studies program may speak of the need to remain grounded in the realities of women's lives, but the requirements of academic performance can obscure this goal. The academic requirements force me to spend great amounts of time alone. I have, therefore, had to learn again how to work with people, how to work around other people's schedules, how to engage in a subject where there is mutual interaction, and, most importantly, how to deal with varying theoretical approaches that may differ from my own.

Negotiating differences has become real for me, more than just common rhetoric. It adds an entirely different dimension to hear, witness, be part of the process of creating theories in more than just an abstract way. These theories have real and immediate consequences for creating change in the community in which I live. This kind of engagement is not the usual experience of the classroom. Most of what I do in academia does not concern itself with how I feel about another person, but about debating on an intellectual level. And yet, if I as a feminist student lose sight of the commitment to creating political change in the lives of the women who are most affected by the particular issues at hand, my work runs the risk of spiraling into intellectual arrogance.

I believe that this point has particular salience for a discipline that is in large part about creating social change. This can be lost if the theorist fails to argue explicitly for a theory that can hold political currency and efficacy. I have learned that if a theory is not politically viable, if it does not elucidate the problems of the women living the realities of the issues, offering solutions that make sense in useful ways, then it is neither good feminist theory nor good Women's Studies scholarship. This is the most important legacy field-based learning has taught me. I have come to

think of this lesson as giving feminist theory a heartbeat. By keeping in mind the women that I have been working with all year, I have been able to articulate a politic that never loses sight of the material realities of women's lives in my academic work and that challenges the impulse, so common in academia, to de-radicalize and de-politicize the work that we do in it. Field-based learning insists on adding a radicalism to my work as an academic by challenging conventional pedagogical notions of how and where knowledge is formed.

My hope is that my field-based learning with its explicitly political agenda has ultimately proved to be blasphemous. I am using this term in the same way that Haraway defines it, that is to say, that field-based learning has led to a healthy skepticism and irreverence for disciplinary boundaries and conventional pedagogy, a process that requires me to stop and evaluate the prevalent assumptions that exist in academia about what counts as education. This kind of blasphemy allows me to value this non-conventional approach to learning; field-based learning, particularly in a discipline such as Women's Studies, adds a new level of politicism to my studies that I could not have attained through any other means. This politicism has challenged me to make my work as an academic be relevant to the greater community outside of academe and it has reminded me of why I chose to do a women's studies degree in the first place: to contribute to a discipline that cared about the women to which, and about which, it purported to speak.

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Sandra Gabriele

THE PAIN AND PLEASURE OF PRAXIS OUT IN THE FIELD

Reflecting on the metaphor of "playing" out in the field took me back to my childhood as a "baby-boomer" in a rural community where baseball was one of the most popular games and everyone was urged to play so there would be enough children to make up teams. My knee-jerk reaction to flying objects is to duck and cringe, not reach and catch, and as a child I often simply refused to play. I also suffer from a degree of shyness which causes me to react similarly to my fear of flying objects. When faced with new and challenging situations, I have always had to make a huge effort to stand up and "catch the ball." I have had to work hard to overcome that shyness in order to work with groups, and to function in a public forum when I felt it was politically or morally necessary. As a result, most of my rebellion has been on a very personal basis, my community activism has been largely with small cooperatively organized groups such as community-based daycare and co-op housing, and my feminist activism has been on a one-to-one individual basis. Playing ball and political commitment have thus been parallel forms of pain and pleasure in my life.

In the years just prior to returning to university as a mature student, I took a firm grip on the bat and acted on my political beliefs by becoming an active member of the Riding Association of the New Democratic Party. Yet when I returned to university as a mature student, single parent, and welfare recipient dependent on scholarship funds, I had to move out of the co-op and cease my volunteer work in order to achieve academic excellence and move through the program as quickly as possible. During those years, however, the feminist professors and Women's Studies courses provided a good deal of the consciousness raising I had missed out on earlier in my life, and I looked forward to the time when I could take up my community work again, and, in particular, I hoped to return to the NDP to work with its Women's Rights Committee. The field-based learning component of the Master's