

Doing Feminist and Activist Learning Outcomes: What Should Students Be Able To Do as a Result of this Women's and Gender Studies Project/Course/Curriculum?

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Abstract

This essay reviews feminist pedagogical literature on multiple modes of feminist experiential learning, identifies the gap between the women's studies social justice mission and the courses and assignments developed to achieve it, and proposes the development of activism-specific knowledge and skills goals that are targeted and sequenced across the curriculum.

Résumé

Cet essai effectue une révision de la littérature pédagogique sur de multiples modes d'expérimentation d'apprentissage féministe. Il identifie l'écart entre la mission de justice des études sur les femmes, ainsi que les cours et travaux développés à cet effet, et propose le développement d'une connaissance militante-spécifique, ainsi que les objectifs de compétences ciblés et enchaînés à travers le curriculum.

Introduction

In *Questions for a New Century: Women's Studies and Integrative Learning*, Amy K. Levin synthesizes three decades of assessment of academic women's studies, identifying several historically consistent "Common Learning Outcomes for Women's Studies" as well as the common types of courses and requirements through which women's and gender studies programs work to meet knowledge and skills goals—an introductory class, a class on feminist theory, a class on women of colour or global women's experiences, internships or activism requirements, cross-listed elective courses, and a capstone course (Levin 2007, 18). Women's studies students are expected to demonstrate common knowledge goals, such as the differentiation between sex and gender, social constructionist theory, women's contributions to history and activism, culture and cross-cultural experiences, and intersectional analysis of interlocking oppressions. Several of the common skills goals—including critical thinking, clear communication in writing and speaking, information literacy, critical self-reflection—are not unusual goals for higher education. However, women's studies curricula often share another goal, that is "connecting knowledge and experience, theory and activism, Women's Studies and other courses" and "applying knowledge for social transformation, [and] citizenship" (Levin 2007, 16–17).

Frances Hoffman and Jayne Stake also found a common commitment to social transformation in feminist pedagogy. In "Feminist Pedagogy in Theory and Practice," they report four common themes present in feminist classrooms: "participatory learning, validation of personal experience, encouragement of social understanding and activism, and development

of critical thinking and open-mindedness” (1998, 80). The goal of social transformation, present since Catharine R. Stimpson’s first report on the field of women’s studies in 1986, is also linked to the characterization of women’s studies as feminism’s “academic arm” (Levin 2007, 4). The history of women’s studies is often told with this assumption; however, in the more than thirty years since the interdisciplinary field of women’s studies has been in place, the relationship between the feminist movement and women’s studies has become less clear. Social transformation and activism are contestable as learning outcomes for women’s studies for multiple reasons. One reason is that there is no common vision of a transformed society, and there won’t be, because, even though there are some consistently agreed upon issues (gender-based violence, for example), there are no agreed upon solutions. Given feminist pedagogy’s focus on student-centred education, it is also important to acknowledge that social transformation may not be every student’s goal; students may have other goals, including work in their chosen profession while applying feminist praxis. Moreover, even if social transformation were an agreed upon outcome of women’s studies education, how would we assess it?

Even as I recognize the difficulties raised with the three contestable assumptions briefly outlined above—that women’s studies is the academic arm of the women’s movement, that social change is the goal of our pedagogy, and that pedagogy for social change is not assessable—I would also like to propose that in the context of women’s studies education, we do have a set of both knowledge goals and skills goals; additionally, for many in women’s studies, another goal is also that our students be able to “do something” to change the world (or work towards that goal). In this article, then, I would like to analyze how women and gender studies pedagogues do and can engage in teaching students to “do something.” Rather than the more usual process of students sometimes undertaking a project in one or more courses

throughout their studies, I want to propose that we consider the skills students might later apply in their work, and how such skills can both be built into assignments within individual courses and also scaffolded across the curriculum and assessed at multiple points. Current scholarship of pedagogical practice on feminist education for activism is limited to projects within individual classrooms and elective courses on activism. However, the skills and knowledge for activism that students could gain from their university education in women’s studies can be intentionally developed across the curriculum, sequenced within and across classes and assessed through ongoing critical reflection.

Feminist Experiential Learning and the One Project, One Course Approach

Some of my practice has developed in response to specific contexts in which I have taught; I hope to use my experience to begin a dialogue about how this model for feminist activist education can be developed and assessed across the curriculum. I began teaching introductory-level writing courses focused on issues of gender as a graduate assistant in English in the early 1990s and eventually developed an introductory course on gender studies for the Women’s Studies program at the university where I earned my degree. I also taught Women’s Studies at a very small liberal arts college of approximately 2,000 students. Currently I teach at a medium-sized state university of approximately 25,000 undergraduate students in a Women’s and Gender Studies Program. This university, like many, has a general education component that students aim to complete within the first two years of their undergraduate education. Ninety-five percent of all courses at the university have fifty or fewer students; classes in the WGS program are capped at thirty-five. Our Women’s and Gender Studies Program has had a minor since 1973 but only graduated our first majors in 2008. The program’s core curriculum includes an Introduction to Gender course as well as courses in feminist theory, methodology, and global feminisms, and a capstone course.

Developing assessable curricular objectives across all these courses requires

that we ask the following questions: “What should students be able to do as a result of this project, this course, this curriculum?” After both engaging in activism projects in my classrooms for nearly ten years and teaching a course specifically geared toward activism, I have now also added the question: “To what degree does experiential learning pedagogy actually prepare students to transform the world?”—if that is one goal of our program. Based both on my experience and on the scholarship of other feminist educators, my answer is that these projects alone have very limited success in preparing students for the goal of changing the world. But if women’s studies programs do aim to teach students to apply knowledge and skills toward social transformation, then what should we teach, how should we teach it, and how can we assess this broad goal?

Feminist experiential learning has been a common pedagogical approach in response to feminist activist learning outcomes, because experiential learning involves applied, active, student-centered learning, all of which have become crucial in feminist pedagogy. Across the literature of feminist pedagogy, there are several terms used to describe the type of activity that falls under experiential learning, including “the Outrageous Act” assignment (Shattuck et al. 1999; Mussey et al. 1999), action projects, activism projects, advocacy projects, community action projects, volunteer opportunities, internships, and service learning. In the literature on feminist pedagogy, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably and experiential learning is sometimes conflated with service learning (see Balliet and Heffernan 2000). In this essay, I am using the phrase experiential learning as an umbrella term for this broad range of activities; rather than taking up the debates about the problems or value of service learning, I am interested in the variety of ways in which women’s studies programs are already engaged in forms of learning from experience, particularly when that experience is based in activism/action.

Experiential learning projects in women’s studies take different forms, but typically require that students design and sometimes implement an action or activist

strategy to address a topic of their own choosing. Sometimes these projects focus on collaboration and collective action by asking students to organize into groups based on similar choices, to work together to outline the significance of an issue, to build consensus around goals and define their action/activism designed to accomplish those goals, and to take those actions and write up and present results to the class. Asked to develop an activist/action strategy for addressing the issues raised by the topic of their choice, students often develop projects that mirror the outcome of their experience in the classroom. Since the outcome of their classroom education for them has been raised awareness, the clearest action they often imagine mirrors this experience; thus, they design strategies aimed at raising the awareness of others. As such, common projects students often develop include feminist newsletters, posters, websites, or Facebook groups as educational campaigns on racism, sex education, sexual assault, and body image issues. Though activism projects like these are successful in that they provide an introduction to the concept of activism and create a sense that students are able to take meaningful action as individuals, these assignments are often also limited in scope, with the result that the outcome can actually be a greater sense of complacency for students. These small acts also rarely evolve into something bigger, partly because of the limit of the ten- or fifteen-week semester. The limited scope and impact of students’ work in activism projects is just one of the frustrations with these kinds of projects in isolated courses. In their essay “Punishing Pedagogy: The Failings of Forced Volunteerism,” Kathryn Forbes et al. (1999) address another frustration with the limits of these activism projects. Despite the goal of connecting theory and practice, they have found such assignments often miss “the boundaries of the concepts of ‘feminism,’ ‘activism,’ and ‘feminist activism’; a critical introduction to the tools of activism (the heart of the course as we see it); analysis of actual applications of the tools; coalition and alliance with other organizations; and diverse motivations for activism” (167). Their answer to the dilemma

“led us to the idea of offering a senior seminar that teaches students how to create their own feminist responses—to events, injustices, and institutional oppression—while providing experience in coalition building among our very diverse student body” (166).

Although these projects, then, whether in the introductory class or as a culminating activity for majors, may help students see themselves as agents for change, they do little in the way of either preparing students to carry out this activism or for addressing the consequences associated with activist activity that takes place outside of the classroom or campus. Perhaps the greatest factor limiting outcomes for feminist experiential learning, though, is the “one project, one course” approach. Most approaches to experiential learning are based on pedagogical praxis in individual classrooms rather than programmatic praxis across the curriculum. Nancy Naples and Karen Bojar’s collection *Teaching Feminist Activism: Strategies from the Field* (2002) exemplifies this limitation: 12 of the 17 essays focus on work in one course, most often in introductory-level or capstone courses; only 3 essays address the ways in which their authors use experiential learning in multiple classes as individual practitioners; and none of the authors address collaborative teaching or discuss goals and outcomes for experiential learning across the curriculum.

My initial response to the limitations of the project-based approach to activism was to develop an entire course aimed at developing knowledge and skills related to activism. My Feminism and Rhetoric course included the goals of familiarizing students with fundamentals of rhetorical analysis and composition, analyzing feminist rhetoric for social change, and preparing students to use rhetorical principles in social activism to persuade policy makers, administrators, and funding providers, in addition to analyzing historically significant rhetoric on policies affecting women. June Rinehart (2002) describes her successful use of activism in her capstone course in women’s studies: “Many of my women’s studies students hope for changes in the world; many also admit to skepticism about the efficacy of any form of

social activism. Thus, while they do not believe in ‘the system’ in the sense of agreeing with its principles, they affirm its power. The capstone seminar was an opportunity to challenge their resignation and encourage them to envision possibilities for making social change” (23). The “one course” approach in developing specific elective courses in activism and rhetoric, and other courses like them, would be well-suited as intermediate courses in feminist activism; however, if activism cannot be taught in one course through one project and then again in another course with another similar project, it also cannot only be taught in the capstone course at the end of the major.

The limitations of this “one course” approach are also reflected in educational literature more broadly. Several scholars have responded to them by suggesting addressing the gap by adding another course to the curriculum. For example, to address her concern that despite the fact that women have a long history of organizing actively in resistance to oppression “women’s studies programs have not highlighted this organizing” (78), Linda Briskin (2002) created both an undergraduate and graduate level course on Women Organizing at York University. However, revising projects or developing new courses cannot relieve the larger frustrations with the limited scope and impact of experiential learning projects. Rather, these projects must be rethought as part of a larger curricular strategy in which these objectives are met across multiple courses in conversation with each other.

An Education in Activism Across the Curriculum: From Critical Consciousness to Solidarity

Given that women’s studies curricula tend to have the consistent desired learning outcomes of critical thinking, clear communication in writing and speaking, information literacy, critical self-reflection and “applying knowledge for social transformation, citizenship,” (Levin 2007, 16–17) and a consistent structure, including an introductory-level course, a course in feminist theory, a course on global and/or women of colour feminisms, and a capstone, it is possible to re-evaluate and

make use of common learning goals in service of the larger goal of social transformation. If skills and knowledge for activism were identified and intentionally developed across the curriculum, individual assignments or courses in the curriculum would not bear the entire burden of teaching students how to change the world; rather, courses across the curriculum could build the necessary skills in preparation for other classes that focus on those skills needed for social transformation work. But what do students need to know and be able to do as a result of their women's studies education in order to do this? Once they begin to see themselves as potential actors in social change, what knowledge and skills do they need in order to work toward their vision of social change?

As one response, I propose a scaffolded/sequential approach across the curriculum to teaching and articulating skills associated with social justice work. Across the curriculum, students must come to consciousness about the role of gender as it intersects with other aspects of their identity, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and national citizenship, in their lives and the institutions structuring their lives (critical consciousness); see themselves as potential actors for social transformation (agency); learn to research their chosen issues, but also ground themselves in theory and the history of activism (research and theory); develop the tools of feminist curiosity; and, finally, learn how to critically reflect on and revise their activist strategies (critical reflection). Critical consciousness, agency, research and theory, feminist curiosity, and critical reflection can be assigned and assessed with rising expectations across the common components of a women's studies core curriculum—the introductory-level course, a course in feminist theory, a course on global and/or women of colour feminisms, and a capstone course.

Initially, students come to consciousness about the role of gender in the structure of their lives and the institutions structuring them (critical consciousness)—ideas which introductory courses in women's studies already present very well (Stake et al. 2008). But in order for students to begin to see

themselves as potential actors for social transformation, they also need to develop a sense of agency and see a connection between what they are learning and their lives, both personal and professional. I accomplish this by assigning Adrienne Rich's essay "Claiming an Education" for introductory classes to read for the second day of class and reviewing the essay in the first week of every other course I teach. Rich's concept asks students to claim their education rather than passively receive it; in other words, that they claim what is rightfully theirs rather than acting as a receptacle for information. Claiming an education requires that students take themselves seriously: "Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work" (Rich 1979, 233). Students must see themselves as potential actors for social transformation, a process that activism projects in introductory courses can begin and subsequent courses can continue to emphasize and develop (agency). I use Adrienne Rich's essay to also help develop a sense of agency for students in the introductory course. I begin the discussion of the essay by working through student reactions to Rich's definition of claiming an education. Students usually remark that the essay, a convocation speech that Rich gave at Douglass College in 1977, is outdated and therefore problematic. Rich's essay helps me to tell the history of women's studies and allows me to define feminist pedagogy in terms of active and passive learning. Additionally, I and the students begin to forge an informal contract of what they must do to *claim* rather than receive an education in our classroom, as well as what they are entitled to expect from their classmates, their university, and me. Students easily identify the ways that they can work to claim their education—coming to class prepared, visiting my office hours, asking for reading suggestions, participating in class, among others. They also easily identify the ways they would like to be treated by each other—listening, criticizing constructively, and disagreeing respectfully.

In Charlotte Bunch's often anthologized essay "Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education" (1987), she outlines a four-part model for developing feminist theory, which I use as the basis for assignment building across the curriculum. In this classic and often cited essay, Bunch breaks down the theory/practice divide in a way that is useful not only to get students to see that what they are learning in the classroom is connected to the "real world," but also for guided learning of feminist discovery and activism. Envisioning Bunch's essay not just as a model for theory, but also as integral to a curricular model for social transformation has helped me to scaffold assignments across the courses I teach; thus, I emphasize the four aspects of the model for theory differently across the curriculum in order to develop the associated skills. Students in the introductory course "describe what exists" with regard to the most common topics in the field, highlighting "four important aspects of the field of Gender Studies: the study of gender as a pervasive social construct; 'nature vs. nurture' debates on gendered traits and differences; the intersection of gender with other social and cultural identities (such as class, race, age, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality); and an emphasis on activism meant to show what you can do with this emergent research and information" (DeMuth 2009, vii). This material is the foundation for the questions they will later ask and introduces them to some of the topics and questions they might explore.

In order to help build both this critical consciousness and agency in the introductory-level course, students must also engage in six hours of co-curricular activity as part of a structured setting—volunteering on campus through the Women's Centre, placement with a community agency, or attending relevant lectures, films, or workshops on campus. Though six hours is less than half of what I consider to be an ideal goal, it is a good start, and it does become a springboard for many students who continue these practices throughout their education. Students turn in a paper describing what they did, reflecting on their experience, and making explicit connections to course material, an assignment that also engages the learning goals of writing and

critical self-reflection. Completing and reflecting on co-curricular activity are only the first two steps in the assignment, which ultimately also engages them in building theory and envisioning activism. Using a class project to help students make connections between their education and their experience as well as developing a sense that they can work actively for change is the first step in the curricular process I am proposing.

After completing and reflecting on co-curricular activity in the introductory-level course, I require students to research one of the topics that came up for them in their experience. The topics range from gendered body image, sex education, domestic violence, dating violence, gender and race in the media, marriage equality, and homophobic bullying in schools, among others. Their research must include not only factual information about the topic—statistics, relevant laws, terms defined—but they must also find relevant activists and organizations that have worked on the issue. In conducting research for the project, students not only develop the learning goal of information literacy, but they also engage in one of the primary activities in Bunch's model for theory, "describing what exists," as well as fulfill the university-level expectation for information literacy by gathering information, reading scholarship, and developing an annotated bibliography on a topic of their choosing. Once students have turned in their annotated bibliography, I put them in groups of students interested in similar topics. To their groups they bring the information they have gathered; the groups are required to synthesize the information into a two-page "information sheet" to be distributed to their classmates. As a group they then begin the process of strategizing a way to address the gendered issue they have researched. During the final exam period for the class, groups present a synthesis of the relevant information about the topic as their collaborative activist strategy.

Students must learn to research their chosen issues but also ground themselves in theory and the history of activism (research and theory), a process which can begin in the introductory course but is carried out by rising expectations across the women's studies

curriculum, particularly in feminist theory courses. Though this project is similar to the activist projects outlined earlier in this essay in that it has limited outcomes, given that this is the first assignment in a cross-curricular model for activist education, it does not need to have the outcome of training students to be fully prepared as activists. Rather it is the first step in an activist education that is developed across a curriculum. It accomplishes the first of my goals in activist education (critical consciousness), it introduces the second goal (agency), and it gives students practice in the third (research and theory).

Bunch's model is then the foundation for a more challenging assignment in feminist theory courses as the basis for a sequenced assignment in writing feminist theory in order to more fully develop the third of my goals in education for activism (research and theory). Sara Crawley (2008) describes a similar project:

I ask students to follow Charlotte Bunch's theory construction model which out-lines four components of a theory: description, analysis, vision, and strategy. This format allows students to describe their issue in detail from the research they conducted outside the classroom (which required research in the library); to analyze the issue using classical feminist theory (wherein they were required to cite a certain number of the course readings); to create their own vision for the future; and to outline a specific practical strategy to accomplish their call for change. (27)

Though in the course of one semester of feminist theory students cannot meaningfully design and carry out a project of the scope they imagine given the size of the problems they identify, they often carry out their activist project after the course has ended, sometimes as a project for one of their other courses.

Using Charlotte Bunch's model for theory as the foundation in an education for social transformation helps develop both necessary knowledge and skills—knowledge of history, development of theory, synthesis and articulation, and planning/strategizing. It also matches well with more common university learning outcomes that programs are often

required to assess—information literacy, critical thinking, synthesis, and effective writing. However, as a model, it does not approach implementation of strategy or critical reflection that includes evaluation and revision of strategy. More importantly, it only begins to engage feminist curiosity, solidarity and coalition, and critical reflection. But building on this model brings the foundation for skills needed to develop and maintain feminist curiosity as well as solidarity and coalition.

In addition to critical consciousness, agency, and research and theory, then, students must also develop feminist curiosity, which involves the development of both empathy and solidarity. In both *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (2007) and *The Curious Feminist* (2004) Cynthia Enloe explains and models feminist curiosity:

Using a feminist curiosity is asking questions about the condition of women—and about the relationships of women to each other and about relationships of women to men. It is also about not taking for granted—thus it is insisting upon exploring—the relationships of women to families, to men, to companies, to movements, to institutions, to ideologies, to cultural expressions, to the state, and to globalizing trends. (2007, 10).

I open my upper-division course in global feminism by asking students to introduce themselves and to include the one or two feminist issues that are most important to them. It is not surprising to me that the most often mentioned issues are sexual assault, domestic violence, sexuality, and body image. They are also very forthcoming with their lack of interest in global issues. Although they frame their issues mostly in a localized framework, I then push them to imagine how their issues are connected globally. Though that is too much to ask for the first day of class, the question and the discussion frame the mode of inquiry for the rest of the course.

Enloe's work, particularly on the globalized, militarized sneaker, helps students to see the ways in which all feminist issues are globally connected, particularly in impact. The concept of feminist curiosity helps them build new questions and connections for their work, theory, and activism. They use the

skills of information literacy and theory development to build connections between local and global conditions of labour and violence against women, neoliberal economics and marriage equality, education and militarization, among others. The research they conduct on the issues they identify as most significant to them takes on a new context. Upper-division courses in the women's studies core curriculum, particularly those in global and women of colour feminisms, are crucial in developing feminist curiosity as well as empathy and solidarity. "A transnational feminist practice depends on building feminist solidarities across the divisions of place, identity, class, work, belief, and so on. In these very fragmented times it is both very difficult to build these alliances and also never more important to do so....The differences and borders of our identities connect us to each other more than they sever" (Mohanty 2003, 250).

Perhaps the greatest barrier to students' ability to build solidarity across differences is ethnocentrism. They often do not understand the way their vision of themselves as gendered, raced, and classed citizens has been shaped by rhetoric, including feminist rhetoric, particularly in the service of globalization and militarization. They also do not understand that using their feminist curiosity means starting with applying that feminist curiosity to their own lives and relationship to the lives of women throughout the world. They generally come to my classroom in global feminism viewing third-world women with sympathy rather than empathy—a building block of solidarity in which they would see themselves not as the more-developed sisters who can save third-world women, but rather as global actors whose very existence and vision is tied up with that of third-world women. For example, despite the fact that students can readily explain their local issues related to sexual assault, domestic violence, sexuality, and body image, they still see their position as more developed than, and aspired to by, global women. Before students can move toward solidarity, which requires a mutual understanding, as well as the taking on of each other's struggles and learning from each

other's strategies, they must first see their own positionality. In order to accomplish this, I ask them to write an autoethnography in which they trace their social location and the roots of their own feminism. This assignment comes before a written research project on feminist activists and transnational feminist networks in a local and global feminist case study project, a project which continues to build on my goals for activist education—critical consciousness, agency, and research and theory—as it also develops feminist curiosity.

Finally, critical reflection is an ongoing and crucial learning goal related to the larger goal of "applying knowledge for social transformation, [and] citizenship" (Levin 2007, 16–17). Students must learn how to critically reflect on and revise their activist strategies. Throughout the women's studies curriculum, in their co-curricular projects in the introductory class to their more developed projects in the feminist theory class, students envision and carry out their strategies, get feedback on their strategies in action, and revise them. In the capstone course, the culminating experience for the major, students should be able to articulate the skills they have acquired with evidence from their experience—that is, if we hope that they are ever to find meaningful work as a result of their education, which we have promised them from the beginning. Asking them to articulate in writing and discussion how they have applied their knowledge of core material through experiences throughout their college career—service learning, leadership positions, research projects, and activism—and asking them how they have both succeeded and failed in their efforts is part of the critical reflection that will successfully prepare them for lifelong work of social transformation.

Conclusion

In "The Past in Our Present: Theorizing the Activist Project of Women's Studies," Bonnie Zimmerman reflects on women's studies, which she calls "the academic arm of the women's movement," and her growing skepticism of the meaning of women's studies as a radical education given that many of the tools of women's studies education are increasingly becoming

graduation requirements at universities; in particular, she has found herself “wondering whether what we mean by activism has become synonymous with community service, or, in current academic jargon ‘service-learning’” (2002, 188). I do not share her skepticism. Social transformation has remained consistent as part of the mission of women’s studies. Whether women’s studies is the academic arm of the women’s movement or a strictly academic interdisciplinary, we are charged as educators with training students in terms of both knowledge and skills to do something with their education. Experiential learning with assessable objectives can help bring feminist learning outcomes into sharper focus both within individual courses as well as in overall curricular design. What is missing from pedagogical discussions about activism and feminist pedagogy is the specific development of feminist knowledge and skills goals targeted and sequenced with rising expectations across the curriculum.

Introductory-level courses, through content and assignments, begin the process of critical consciousness that can lead to students’ agency as they develop visions of themselves as actors in social change movements; these courses can also introduce students to research and the theory of activism with regard to the core topics in the field. Courses in feminist theory can build upon introductory courses with deeper knowledge of history and the connection between theory and activism. Courses in global feminism, in particular, are important in helping to develop students’ feminist curiosity that leads to building and developing an understanding of the interconnectedness of the core issues in women’s studies. These courses in global and women of colour feminisms are crucial in developing theory and historical knowledge of solidarity and coalition. As the culminating experience of the curriculum, the capstone course in women’s studies can require and model critical reflection as applied to their education, their own history of activist work, and their vision for the future. Including objectives of critical consciousness, agency, research and theory, feminist curiosity, and

critical reflection throughout core courses in women’s studies and building on them with rising expectations will better achieve the overall objectives of both knowledge acquisition and application of that knowledge for social transformation.

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