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Conversation and Commentary

Feminist scholars long have evinced an interest not only in explaining the world, but also in changing it for the better. In feminist scholarship these goals are not always separable, but sometimes advocacy needs its own place. This section of the journal is devoted to essays that do not take the form of traditional academic research articles. Short advocacy pieces or conversations about women’s scholarship and advocacy will be published here.

Service-learning Is a Feminist Issue: Transforming Communication Pedagogy

Eleanor M. Novek

How do we “do” emancipatory feminist teaching when we have not observed it or experienced it ourselves? The author argues here that service-learning is a useful strategy for feminist communication educators to begin challenging the power relationships of traditional pedagogy. Pioneered in the 1960s and ‘70s, this pairing of traditional course work with community service is now used as a learning model in schools around the nation. Because service-learning allows educators to forge relational links between ourselves, our students, our neighbors, and the communities in which we live, it deserves careful consideration from feminist educators.

In recent years, communication scholars have become more aware of the transformative, affiliative potential of their research. Groundbreaking work by feminist and activist scholars has led us to acknowledge and value the interdependence of researchers and subjects. Increasingly, we can envision a world comprised of relationships rather than rules, a world built on human connection, as discussed in the work of Carol Gilligan, bell hooks, Patti Lather, Miriam Belenky, and many others. We find growing merit in the idea of research as a participatory exchange or collaborative dialogue with other people in which domination is replaced by cooperation, and we strive to incorporate such dialogic practices into our own scholarship.

It may be harder to incorporate these approaches into our teaching, especially in hierarchical environments. We may see ourselves as scholars struggling to understand and transform social relations, particularly those which play out inequalities constructed around gender, race and class, but feel caught up in authoritarian practices in our classrooms. We may

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conduct research to illuminate and challenge the hidden social processes of daily life, but be hesitant to dismantle our existing power relationships with our students. We may also suffer from the lack of practical examples: how do we model emancipatory feminist teaching if we have not observed or experienced it ourselves?

Though not usually identified as a feminist approach per se, service-learning is a useful strategy for challenging the power relationships of traditional pedagogy. Service-learning is defined by T.K. Stanton (1990) of Stanford University’s Public Service Center as a teaching method which combines “structured, intentional learning with public and community service” (p. 344). Derived from the experiential education theories of John Dewey and pioneered in the 1960s and ‘70s as a learning model, the method is now used in elementary and secondary schools as well as institutions of higher learning around the nation. Educators who apply this experiential model bring their students into direct contact with various types of contemporary social problems and efforts to solve them. In typical forms of service-learning, students may work with people in charitable organizations, health care facilities, youth groups, nursing homes, public interest groups and so on, performing environmental research, tutoring, nutritional analysis, oral history, voter education, community journalism, and many other forms of outreach.

Such direct experiences, grounded in the curriculum of particular courses and disciplines, give students opportunities to field-test theories and insights they have been exposed to in class while at the same time working cooperatively for the greater good. C. K. Della-Piana (1996) described her students’ experience of “learning to work with others who did not have the same values, beliefs, and concerns, yet had a commitment to community service and the passion to make a difference...It was providing enlightened and humane service and committing oneself to the common good” (pp. 9-10). Proponents say that service-learning may be the first time their students have ever recognized the need for their skills and engagement in the world around them.

In bringing service-learning to the classroom, educators also reach out, and learn by doing so. To create successful service-learning projects or programs, teachers must engage in ongoing dialogue with public groups and agencies, their students, and each other. Becoming part of a community which consensually constructs and shares knowledge, we are guided and informed by our fellow residents, by the parents of our students, our leaders, organizers, activists, and critics. As we develop this consciousness
and share it with our students, Parker Palmer (1990) asserts, we talk more about those ways of knowing that form an inward capacity for relatedness (p. 111). For these reasons and others, I argue in this essay, service-learning is a promising approach for feminist educators.

Service-Learning as Feminist Strategy

Feminist and activist scholars have increasingly come to value research which unpacks the various meanings of community. Early definitions generally included the concepts of social connectedness, territorial organization and physical location (R. Park, 1983). When most social relationships occurred in geographic proximity, M. Janowitz (1967) notes, communities were characterized by a local elite with local institutionalized patterns for controlling social change. Scholars of social change continue to see the geographic community as a critical site for political mobilization because it is where problems of daily living conditions can be discussed, and where groups with common interests may form and act together (J. Servaes, 1990).

Today, scholars of the late 20th century lament the erosion of community participation in civic, professional and volunteer associations (R. Putnam, 1996) and note the rise of affinity groups based on shared electronic “experiences” (J. Meyrowitz, 1985; C. Stoll, 1995; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Popular new technologies have been credited with establishing “virtual communities,” far-flung groups of people linked by common interests. These understandings of community refer to collections of values shared by diverse individuals and disseminated via electronic media such as talk radio, global satellite television, and the Internet. Members of these communities are “bound by a sense of identity, shared values and interaction” (G. Payne, 1993, p. 7) or linked by “a common interest or shared circumstance” (M. Smith, 1995, p. 11), not by physical space.

There is a real danger in thinking that virtual community supercedes or addresses the needs of physical, geographical community. Out on the streets, in our physical communities, on our campuses and in our neighborhoods, people still suffer the shared predicaments of oppression, isolation, and need. The widespread electronic sharing of values has not resulted in a blossoming of relationships of care in the physical world. Feminist researchers and teachers still need to pay attention to the community of the body—creating and sustaining embodied relationships in the contexts of gender, ethnicity, age, and geographic location.
Since the 1970s, communication scholars have sought to understand how some groups of people evolve into functioning communities possessing a sense of collective identity and interdependence. Jürgen Habermas (1984) uses the term “communicative action” to denote the collective efforts of people who share consensual interpretations of situations and events. By sharing meanings, people “harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions” (p. 286) and may form an interdependent “community of interest” (O. Gandy, 1989) in which members act for the common good.

Feminist scholars are also interested in the transformative potential of relationships of community and connectedness. Feminist theories of care have helped us to envision a world “comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules” (C. Gilligan, 1982, p. 29). In this view, individuals link to one another in a fundamental attitude of protectiveness or caring, acting not out of competitive self-interest, but toward the good of a more equitable society (see b. hooks, 1989; S. Ruddick, 1989; J. Tronto, 1989; J. Wood, 1994, and others). Individual identity develops in the context of relationships and is shaped by our responsibility to and connection with others (A. Bookman & S. Morgen, 1988; P. Lather, 1991; and M. Fonow & J. Cook, 1994).

If we agree with P. Palmer (1990) that community is “a capacity for relatedness within individuals” (p. 110), how do we model it with our students? Too often we disregard the physical community and its relationships in the classroom. Traditional hierarchical educational strategies do not encourage children, adolescents or young adults to take part in problem-solving dialogues or action within their own communities. Indeed, Ernest Boyer (1990) observes, “it is possible for American teenagers to finish high school without ever being asked to participate in life in or out of the school—never encouraged to spend time with lonely older people, help a child who has not learned to read, clean up litter on the street, or even do something meaningful at the school itself” (p. 100). Many students leave school behind without learning how to affiliate with others or how to take collective action for systemic change (H. Levin, 1972).

This is a relational gap which service-learning proposes to fill. According to R. L. Sigmon (1990), the learning objectives of this approach “are formed in the context of what needs to be done to serve others” (p. 57). Ideally, the approach is structured on the premises that those being
served control the service(s) provided; that those being served become better able to serve others and themselves by their own actions; and that those who serve are also learners and have significant control over what is to be learned. At its best, C. Bachen (1994) observes, “community service may foster in students and the people in their communities a deeper understanding of the human condition, including the structural factors that reinforce poverty and prejudice. . .(and) a lifelong commitment to working for equality and justice” (p. 4).

Service-learning also acknowledges students' agency in their own lives. Behind classroom walls, the teacher might be tempted or pressured to cast herself as the holder of wisdom, but out in the community, students often have more “street knowledge” or local survival skills than their teachers. The service-learning educator abandons the sage on the stage position to act as a guide from the side, helping students make connections between the theoretical concepts they learn in school and their own experienced realities. Service-learning instructors and students forsake their traditional roles, K. Krupar (1994) notes, to develop a collegial sharing of power, accountability and tasks: “This pedagogy requires that students become profoundly and actively involved in their own learning, that they discover for themselves rather than accept verbal and written pronouncements, that they learn to map uncharted territories and that they find themselves through the processes of trial and error” (p. 3). Rather than telling students what to think and do, service-learning educators generate discussion about how to think and do, encouraging students to reflect upon the complexities of their social worlds.

The most widely made claim, and the one most promising to feminist educators, is also perhaps the most controversial: that service-learning creates a foundation for a personal commitment to social responsibility. Harkavy & Puckett (1994) say that academically based community service supports “the promotion of civic consciousness, value-oriented thinking and a moral approach to issues of public concern among undergraduates” (p. 300). Stanton (1990) argues that community service deepens the experience of students, “potentially stimulating in them passionate reactions to social injustice and a commitment to work for change” (p. 344). And Ernest Boyer (1990) posits that service can lead students to see that they are “not only autonomous individuals but also members of a larger community to which they are accountable” (p. 100).

Obviously, this possibility harmonizes well with feminist goals of liberatory research and praxis, which envision new forms of socio-political
relationships linking individuals to one another in bonds of caring and commitment. The experience of service-learning might help our students comprehend feminist perspectives such as Carol Gilligan’s “ethic of care” (1988) or Sara Ruddick’s vision of “holding” (1989), which she describes as social relationships based on a fundamental attitude of protectiveness. Involved community contact might help students understand why Julia Wood (1994) calls for the full integration of models of caring into public life: “Appreciating the profound interconnections among humans enables all individuals, regardless of age, sex, race, or class, to understand and participate in life in ways forever closed to those whose rigid autonomy diminishes their capacity to form intimate relationships and to appreciate differences” (pp. 158-9). For its emphasis on leading students to committed social relationships with their communities, service-learning seems a perfect pedagogy for feminist educators.

Limitations of Learning through Service

Service-learning also has its constraints, and feminist practitioners can strengthen it where it is most vulnerable—in the area of critical consciousness. Although the goals of service-learning are worthy and designed with liberatory intent, critics question whether merely “exposing” students to social problems is a useful or ethical way to stimulate dedication to social justice and commitment to action. They raise the possibility that such learning programs have little to do with genuine community service and instead involve a form of paternalistic, “feel-good” benevolence. Edward Zlotkowski (1995) asserts that service-learning may lead some students and educators to disregard the traditions and objectives of specific learning disciplines in favor of the pre-determined “discovery” of a sentimental, ideologically fixed view of the service experience.

In a critique of outreach efforts by U.S. students in Mexico, Ivan Illich (1990), attacks “the belief that every American has something to give, and at all times may, can and should give it” (p. 316). He argues that well-meaning middle-class American students are ill-equipped to help poor people in developing nations, or their own. Instead, he asserts, they are often filled with a self-involved missionary zeal which is insulting at best, and might also be dangerous to the people they are allegedly trying to “help.” He cautions students, “It is profoundly damaging to yourselves when you define something that you want to do as 'good,' a 'sacrifice,' and 'help' ” (p. 320).
Similarly, R. L. Sigmon (1990) points to the “self-deception” of those who claim to be aiding others when they are actually serving their own interests. He notes that learning goals may be superimposed by educators rather than derived from the service task: “We spread around our talents and knowledge because we have it to use and enjoy sharing. We do research in communities to justify our positions or test a promising methodology. We do group-oriented work because we are trained in group process. . .We advocate for the poor, young, elderly, and minorities because we want to serve without realizing that they may not be impressed” (p. 62). Instead, he argues, educators should be asking if the proffered service makes sense to those expected to benefit from it.

Even at its most self-reflexive, the service-learning approach cannot resolve all of the ethical or practical dilemmas faced by educators who are interested in adopting more egalitarian or liberatory pedagogies. The social intervention inherent in service-learning is criticized both for activism and for paternalism. S. Shapiro (1990) notes that approaches to education for citizenship historically have been associated with the collective effacement of minority and immigrant cultures. In some contexts, Wood (1994) notes, caring may be seen as the responsibility of those deemed culturally subordinate (p. 99). Thus, the service aspects of service-learning may seem problematically linked to the “traditionally female” characteristics of nurturing and care, an association critiqued by some feminists as disempowering.

Ethical dilemmas in research and pedagogy cannot be avoided, Della-Piana (1996) asserts, but are “continuously confronted, tenuously resolved, and inherently wrought with self-interest and power” (p. 14). This is an area where feminist research perspectives may interact with service-learning pedagogy to good effect. Feminist scholars have often visited the politics of class and privilege in the study of the “other,” questioning the hidden social processes of daily life and pointing out contradictions in the relationships between researchers and the groups of people with whom they study (J. Acker, K. Barry & J. Esseveld, 1991; P. Lather, 1991). Feminist inquiry often seeks to illuminate disparities between liberatory theory and the physical conditions of its praxis (M.M. Fonow & J.A. Cook, 1991; M. Mies, 1991). Because feminist scholars are dedicated to the exploration of liberatory theories and methods in research and teaching, and because we are willing to open our efforts to examination by other participants in a knowledge-constructing dialogue, we may be
able to introduce our students to community service from a more egalitarian perspective.

Feminists who teach human communication or media skills at the high school or university level are especially well-positioned to integrate service-learning into the curriculum. For example, high school students in Philadelphia have conducted an oral history project of their neighborhoods, while college students have compared and applied different approaches to relieving intergroup ethnic and cultural tensions (Harkavy & Puckett, 1994). Students in writing classes at a Maryland university have performed community service and reflected on the personal implications of these experiences in journals, while a women’s studies class in Washington, DC, has involved college students in semester-long internships with groups like the Children’s Defense Fund, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, and the D.C. Rape Crisis Center (Campus Compact, 1994). A California university has asked journalism students to write stories about the underprivileged people served by a community center, with students later sharing the stories with their subjects (C. Bachen, 1994). As a professor of journalism and mass communication, I have also used modest amounts of the service-learning approach in my courses on newswriting, editing, and civic journalism. These efforts have brought undergraduate writers into public school classrooms and human service agencies as youth mentors or volunteers. Each of these endeavors moves us farther away from the realm of hierarchical pedagogy, and more into contact with our communities, our students, and ourselves.

**Conclusion**

Though it is not usually described as a feminist approach, service-learning offers a model for a more egalitarian and socially proactive pedagogy. The pairing of traditional course work with community service brings our students into direct contact with contemporary social concerns and allows them to take part in efforts to respond, opening the classroom to the feminist ideal of social relations based on caring or interdependence. Service-learning also gives us a framework for placing more emphasis on students’ agency. Community experiences allow students to test theories they have considered in class against insights gained in the field. They foreground the value of community building and the importance of each individual’s contribution to the common good. And they encourage
us—students and teachers alike—to open our own efforts and results to examination by others.

Of course, we must guard against sentimentalizing the service experience, and we must be critical and careful in its use. Some of the significant drawbacks to service-learning, pointed out by supporters and detractors alike, are easily recognizable in its practice. And I am not sure, frankly, whether any form of pedagogy which is imposed on learners can serve as the catalyst which generates an enduring passion for social justice.

On the other hand, service-learning encourages educators to broaden the relevance of their material and pedagogy. It allows us to build "real-world" concerns and connections into a wide variety of academic subjects and encourages us to develop ongoing working partnerships with community organizations and groups. In this way it brings new immediacy to communication education and forges relational links between ourselves, our students, our neighbors, and the communities in which we live. Therefore, it is an approach that deserves careful consideration from feminist educators. In our search to find promising models of social interaction for ourselves and our students, we may do worse than to consider the potential of service-learning.

References


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