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The Development of Political Consciousness and Agency: The Role of Activism and Race/Ethnicity in an Introductory Women's Studies Course

by Melissa R. Peet and Beth Glover Reed

Introduction

In this essay, we explore how activism-related teaching strategies—a semester-long action project supplemented with a panel discussion among activists—can be used in conjunction with feminist knowledge about activism to link personal learning with political consciousness for social change in a women's studies course. We address the question, "What types of knowledge and classroom processes facilitate students' intellectual, emotional, social, and interpersonal development towards seeing themselves as political actors?" We use students' own words to describe how they perceive activism, the specific processes and elements in the course that empowered them to develop towards political action, and some of the barriers they experienced. Within this, we explore how students' racial identities play a role in their development and change towards activism, and argue that engaging in an action may be especially important for white women. In doing this, we compare the experiences of two groups of white women: those who did, and those who did not, do an action project. Finally, we contrast white women's experiences to the experiences of women of color.

The Importance of Activism

Courses in women's studies have historically emphasized activism for many reasons. As the "academic arm of the women's movement," women's studies has been concerned with creating knowledge to inform feminist activism, and also with infusing feminist perspectives into curricula, structures, and practices within higher education, thus transforming academe (Stanton and Stewart).

The early programs, especially, were strongly linked to community-based feminist activities designed to raise consciousness, redress inequities, promote social justice, and provide alternative services (Maher and Tetreault). Study of past activism places course topics within their historical context, promotes an understanding of past and present feminist activist activity, and can help to prepare students to engage in active and well-informed participation in the world, including political and social actions that challenge oppression and promote justice.

Engaging in action/activism is also a crucial element within praxis, a process often emphasized in writings about feminist teaching. Borrowed from Marx, by way of Paulo Freire, feminists usually define praxis as a dynamic interplay between theory and practice, reflection and action (Ferguson; Maguire). A recent study of 115 women's studies instructors found that promoting social understanding/activism remains an important element within women's studies courses (Hoffman and Stake). Despite these emphases, little is available about how to teach "praxis," what it looks like in the classroom and in course material, and, the impact it has on student development and learning. Moreover, the 1998 study conducted by Hoffman and Stake does not distinguish among programs that include activism and those that focus on social

understanding. Their definition of “social understanding” appears to emphasize knowledge of social complexities rather than activism in the larger world or direct activist experience. We believe that this distinction is an important one and that social understanding is necessary, but it is not sufficient for optimal learning about activism.

In an earlier essay, we have described how carrying out a formalized “action” in the context of praxis is an example of connected learning, a central principle in feminist and multicultural teaching (Peet and Reed). We argued that engaging in an activity designed to create change, applying theory to and reflecting on that activity, links the abstract processes of thinking and learning with the larger context of people’s lives in their communities. Through an analysis of students’ self-reflection papers, we suggested that engaging in an action project assisted students in developing a more complete understanding of the connection between public and private spheres, and affected their understanding of their social position. Students’ conceptions of empowerment became more concrete and less theoretical as they perceived much more expanded options for exerting agency and taking action within their environments. We proposed that the action project 1) presented an opportunity to connect theory that conceptualizes interlocking systems of privilege and oppression to specific actions and roles intended to empower and create social change; and 2) gave students the opportunity to experience themselves and others as conscious social actors who are able to influence social and political structures.

We also speculated that engaging in action reduced barriers to the learning acquired in feminist classrooms. For instance, the course content in many women’s studies courses can generate many reactions in students: anger/rage, frustration, excitement, disillusionment, and so forth. These feelings can be so strong that students resist learning in order to avoid them. Students often feel that they have nowhere to go with these feelings, and they can take a long time to work through if they don’t have opportunities to use them to inform action planning.

Goals and methods

In this essay, we explore all these assumptions more fully, focusing on specific course and classroom processes that both helped and hindered students to develop political consciousness and agency. Since the action project and other course elements are one way to implement praxis within women’s studies, the analyses presented here will contribute to knowledge about how praxis can be “taught,” and they will illuminate why the action component of praxis remains an important element for feminist learning and future activism.

Women’s Studies 240: the context of the action project

Women’s Studies 240, “Introduction to Women’s Studies,” enrolls about 250 students per semester. The class is a prerequisite for more advanced women’s studies courses as well as a course that fulfills the university’s race and ethnicity requirement. It emphasizes the intersections of race, class, and gender consciousness. The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (UM-AA) is the largest campus of the flagship public university in Michigan with nineteen schools and colleges within it and approximately 35,000 undergraduate and graduate students a year. About 60% of the undergraduate students come from the state of Michigan, and about 75% identify as white. Although Michigan has Native American, Asian American and Latino/a populations, African Americans are the racial group most often discussed in terms of racial issues. Although some students from Michigan are the first generation to attend college and/or come from blue

collar or poor families, other students, especially those from outside the state, come from upper middle class and wealthy families. Economic class, however, is often a hidden and unidentified dimension among students.

On average, about 75% of the students who take *WS 240* are women; approximately the same percentage in any given semester are white. Students include first through fourth year undergraduates, in approximately equal proportions. Students vary greatly from those who are strongly committed to women's studies to others who are grudgingly present because the course fulfills the race/ethnicity requirement for graduation. The course is team-taught by 4-5 advanced graduate teaching assistants from different disciplines and supervised by a PhD faculty member. The overall course goals are to 1) provide an overview of institutional structures impacting women's lives; 2) challenge students' "assumptive worlds" through women-centered knowledge, feminist theory, core concepts, and cognitive frameworks; 3) offer tools for critical analysis of power and inequality at a structural level; 4) engage students in critical self-reflection about their own positions within systems of inequality; and 5) realize empowerment through seeing themselves as agents of change.

In the course, "praxis" is enacted in a number of ways. Lectures usually focus on the exploration of various feminist theories and core concepts and their application to specific topics. Discussion sections (25 students) are intended to deepen students' understanding of the course materials through interacting with their peers and participating in structured exercises. Additionally, students are often asked to respond in journals to questions that are designed to stimulate their thinking and learning in regards to these concepts and how they apply to the topic at hand (e.g., work, welfare, violence, cultural representations, etc.).

Approaches to activism in the course: During the time that students' self-reflection essays were collected, the course had a strong "activism" theme that was intellectually guided by explorations of feminist theories of activism and in-class discussions that "unpacked" students' stereotypical assumptions of what activism was and who did it. These theories were reinforced, demonstrated, and linked to action in two important ways: by having a guest panel of activists who visited the course, and, for many students, by participating in a semester-long "action project." In the action project, about half the students planned, carried-out, and evaluated specific actions and interventions that were based in feminist theory. The other half of the students chose other assignments, usually a research paper on some topic of interest.

The activist panel: Toward the end of the semester, a two-hour lecture session was dedicated to exposing students to a variety of activist endeavors through a panel of activists. Panelists included people from a wide variety of organizations and professions (lawyers, social workers, professors, journalists, community organizers, student activists, etc.). Often, these guests would be people whom students would not normally consider to be "activists." Panelists described their activities, their backgrounds, and how their work contributes to feminist changes.

The action project: The following statement is an excerpt from a handout that is given to students at the beginning of the action project:

The action project is intended to enhance your learning by making connections between *theory* (what we think), *practice* (what we do), and *reflection* (how our experiences impact what we "know"). For this project, you are expected to participate in an "action" that is grounded in feminist theory. For example, the ways in which we now conceptualize domestic violence and consider responses to it (victimless prosecution and mandatory arrest policies) are a direct result of feminist theory informing practice. For the action project, you are similarly expected

to participate in an “action” that is informed by feminist theory and consequently aims to improve the lives of those affected by oppression. The planning, monitoring, and evaluation of your project will be a learning process that will unfold over the course of the semester. [for detailed information on how to facilitate the action project throughout a semester, see Peet and Reed]

Types and steps of action projects: When we examined the types of action projects that students enacted over a number of terms, we found that they fell in one of four domains. *Service Development* projects included support and consciousness-raising groups, and education workshops: for instance, organizing sexual-harassment and date-rape workshops for their fraternity and sorority houses or creating anti-racism/white awareness workshops for their dorms. *Volunteering in Community Agencies* (which have goals of reducing the direct effects of oppression) usually involved going through volunteer training and participating in local organizations in an on-going way. *Political Participation* clustered projects focused on active work towards social change and increasing the political participation of members of oppressed groups. Students, for instance, worked with a campus student group that was addressing the child-care needs of single parents. Others worked with a statewide organization that was aiding in the relocation of Bosnian refugees, and some started a student organization that actively fought against federal cuts in student financial aid. In the *Broadening Representations of Women* category, projects usually involved the media. A notable example was starting a local magazine, *HUES (Hear Us Emerging Sisters)*, that was geared towards positive representations of women of all colors, shapes, and sizes.

Student requirements included the following components:

Write a plan and present it to the instructor.

Keep track of what they are learning and how it is related to the course *every week*.

Hand-in a progress report mid-semester.

Make a presentation to the class as a whole.

Write up an analysis of the strategy or approach used to address the issue or the problem, the expected outcomes for action, and the insights gained on activism work or activism in general for a final paper.

Students were first grouped together according to their interests. For the most part, students were allowed to select any project they proposed, as long as it included a feminist analysis and engaged the student in meaningful action. For instance, one student wished to volunteer at a nursing home, which the other students initially felt did not meet the criteria for an action project. The student argued that women lived longer and that many more women than men were in nursing homes. She stressed that much of what they were learning in class about the gendering of poverty, unequal health care, equity in pension plans, problematic social representations, and so forth, were all-important issues for older women and for nursing homes.

After projects were selected, the students spent several weeks conceptualizing, researching, and planning their actions (a process that was supervised by instructors). By mid-semester they went into the implementation phase, taking note of important disconnections between their plans, the actual implementation and practice of their actions, and modifying and even re-conceptualizing when appropriate. Towards the end of the semester, they wrote a brief report and presented their ideas, plans, actions, and what they had learned to the rest of the class.

The data and analysis strategies

We randomly selected and analyzed 60 self-reflection essays written by students at the end of WS 240 from winter term of 1998. Half of these students engaged in an “action project” and half did not. These students completed the same course with the same instructors; they were encouraged, but not required, to engage in an action project as one assignment for the course.

These essays were part of the “Praxis Project,” a method of student self-assessment based on Beverly Tatum’s work. Students interviewed themselves at the beginning of the course (half of them on audiotape and half in a written format), and submitted these interviews to their instructors (who did not read/listen to, or evaluate them). Then, as a last assignment in the course, students evaluated their initial interviews in terms of what they had learned in the course by writing a 3-5-page essay regarding their experiences in the course. Four questions asking them to assess their knowledge and its application guided students’ final essays (described more fully in Peet and Reed).

For this paper, we analyzed responses to the questions: “Do you see yourself as actively confronting oppression either now or in the future? If so, do you feel empowered to do this as a result of this course? Explain.” We used several types of qualitative analyses, primarily within a grounded theory paradigm (Glaser; Glaser and Strauss). Techniques included identifying clusters of concepts within the data, including several types of triangulation (theoretical, investigator, and methods), in vivo coding, and continuous comparisons (Denzin 1989). Some of our analyses were aided by the software program N’vivo (Krathwohl).

The impact of the action project

One of the original goals of this paper was to further our understanding of the differences in responses between students who completed the action project and those who had not. During analyses of students’ essays, however, we discovered that a) their responses identified many important elements that contributed to their learning, and b) the greatest difference was not between the groups with and without action projects, *but between white women in each group*. Almost uniformly, at the end of the course, white women who did not engage in an action project expressed strong doubts about and described barriers to engaging in activism. Although the sample of women of color is much smaller than the numbers of white women, they did not appear to have such deep and consistent differences related to whether or not they had engaged in the action project. For these reasons, in this section, we first discuss patterns in the responses of white women who did not engage in an action project. Then, we describe how the responses of white women who did engage in the action project differ from those who did not. Finally, we discuss issues that emerge in the responses of women of color, whether or not they completed an action project. No consistent themes emerged across the experiences of men who took the course, and their numbers were too small to be able to analyze them by race.

White women without an action project acknowledged powerful ways that they had learned, said that they felt strongly about the need for activism, and asserted that they felt empowered. Overwhelmingly, however, they said they would not take action for various reasons, and expressed several types of discomforts and barriers to engaging in activism. Some described very delimited ways in which they might act, or they followed their declaration of action with a long list of concerns and barriers—a “yes, but” type of response that was not followed with “but I will act nonetheless.” We clustered the responses of white women without action projects

into four themes: 1) difficulty in connecting knowledge and action; 2) activism as incongruent with their conception of themselves; 3) concerns regarding loss of privilege or being “misabeled” by others; and 4) limiting their activist activities either to actions that affected them directly or only confronting others with whom they personally interacted. Many expressed more than one of these.

All students in the course were exposed to the activist panel, read course materials regarding feminist activism, and participated in class discussions. Most white women who did not engage in an action project readily acknowledged the need for action in ways they said they had not before the course. Their responses on the final self-reflection suggest, however, that they still experienced important disconnections between what they learned and whether they felt they could apply that learning through action. They describe feeling blocked from taking action by strong feelings and/or a sense of futility, or by not perceiving that they were ready or skilled enough to engage in action. For example, one upper class white woman wrote: “Even though this class was very exciting, interesting, and even angered me at times when I learned about certain things, I don’t exactly see myself doing anything to actively confront these issues. I feel like I should, but just don’t know where to begin, or see how it will have any direct affect on my own life.”

The majority of white women who did not participate in an action project saw themselves as not actively confronting oppression because it was “not part” of their personality, even though, in many cases, they had a strong desire to do so. Interestingly, these women often invoked stereotypical conceptions of activism that were deconstructed earlier in the course:

“To think that racism, sexism, and classism are still occurring in society makes me very angry, but as much as I am especially angered by the idea that I am personally affected by one of these issues, if not by all three, I am not usually one to get involved in the fight. I do feel empowered to do so, and I would really like to say someday that I made a difference, but getting involved in the heat of the battle is something that I do not see myself doing. I would just like to work hard at achieving my own goals.” (middle-class Jewish woman)

Many white women who did not do the action project did not see themselves as “actively confronting” inequality and discrimination because of what they perceived to be the consequences of doing so. Their concerns generally focused around “not being heard” or being mislabeled in some way:

“I would like to see myself actively confront racism, sexism, and classism. However, although I finally recognize the presence of these problems within my own life and social sphere, I do not know that I feel empowered to actively confront these issues. First of all, women are not taken seriously because of their traditional weak, passive demeanor and soft voice. Their roar is usually not loud enough to be heard. This is precisely why I should be prepared for battle. Yet, after personal experiences, I know that I would not be taken seriously enough. And especially because I have a soft voice, as many women do, I do not feel that I have the forceful attitude that is required to actively confront these issues and protest. I realize this is exactly what I am supposed to be combating against, the attempts to suppress women because of their stereotypical weak characterizations. However, I cannot help but feel this way.” (white woman, other characteristics unknown)

Another middle-class white woman wrote: “I do not see myself as actively confronting oppression either now or in the future. The reason is because I don’t want to be labeled a lesbian, feminist or a man-hater. I know we talked about this in class, and I shouldn’t really

care, but I have noticed that I enjoy being a nice person and that I'm not willing to sacrifice that."

Finally, some white women who did not do the action project said that they felt empowered to "actively confront," but did so in ways that limited their sphere of influence to the micro-level. That is, the extent of their activism was only within their personal and private sphere of influence:

"I do feel like I will actively confront oppression as a result of this course. Although I do not see myself as joining an organization or some other public demonstration, I do feel empowered to speak up to some people in my life. I have always had a strong voice and I can easily see myself using it to change the minds of my family and friends." (upper middle-class white woman)

These four categories provide examples of how white women who did not participate in an action project generally did not experience sufficient "connected learning" essential to feminist praxis to consider more activism within the larger world. We believe that their responses reflect how the intersections of being both "white" and "woman"—ladylike, private, privileged, and personal—acted as a formidable barrier to developing the political consciousness and agency to act on behalf of themselves and others. The process of socialization in what it means to be both "woman" and "white" (with its inherent skin privilege) occurs for most white women within contexts in which they are engaged in complex and intimate interactions with white men (Hurtado). Their previously unexamined privilege, embedded in the context of their self-concepts, family and closest relationships (especially those with men), hinders them from perceiving themselves as capable of action in the larger world, although they report that they learned much in the course about gender, critical thinking, and activism. As we describe in the next section, the action project apparently broadens the options that white women perceive to be possible, increases their confidence and skills, and helps to reshape their assumptions about what is appropriate, possible and necessary.

White women who participated in an action project: In their end-of-the-term self-reflection papers, students who engaged in action projects, including white women, almost uniformly embraced the concept of being and/or becoming an activist. Here are some typical excerpts from students' essays: "I didn't know that this is possible. I never thought that I could do what I have achieved in this course." "I definitely have changed my whole outlook on what I can achieve. "It was so rewarding to work with people who were so different than myself. The action project completely changed my opinion of activists." Many gave considerable detail about how they were going to engage in action in the future. For instance, they discussed pursuing the next steps in the project they began for the course, a few said they were going to change their career goals (to pursue law, for instance), and many discussed explicitly how their activist work will now take race and class into account, and not just gender. A few raised concerns about potential consequences from activist work (being labeled or stigmatized, offending people they care about) but then immediately moved to discussing how they can reduce or remove these barriers.

"When I think about confronting oppression, I am exhilarated and scared. At first I want to think that I cannot do it, but then I realize that I have been doing it. Because of our action project (which was doing workshops on white privilege in the dorms), I have learned so much about myself. Mostly, I have learned that I do have a voice, and it matters what I do with it. I don't want to sound sappy, but we really did "make a difference," and I will continue to do that

after I leave this class. I feel like I have to.” (white woman, other characteristics unknown)

Women of color and activism: Most women of color who did not do an action project still reported feeling empowered to actively confront oppression at the end of the course. Although they may not have had a direct experience with activism in the course, these students describe many incidents in which they have had to confront discrimination and be assertive on behalf of themselves and their families. The following response is typical of this group.

“Of course I will actively confront racism, classism, and sexism as a result of this course. I feel a deep obligation to do so. I have already had to confront racism, so the fact that I am now aware of other forms of oppression simply means that I am going to respond to those as well.” (Asian-American woman, other characteristics unknown)

What was an issue for most women of color, however, was beginning to understand how gender was also an issue they needed to consider. Most reported that the course as a whole, and the action project in particular, allowed them to consider themselves intersectionally, rather than as a single category of identity:

“I think that what the course as a whole did, and the action project in particular, was to make me come to terms with sexism. Before this class, I would never let a racist comment slide, but I ignored all sorts of sexism—even when it was directed at me. I said at the beginning of the semester that I already was actively confronting racism on a daily basis. Now I can say that I can and will confront all forms of oppression on a daily basis—including sexism. Not all of the craziness in my life is due to race; I have learned that a lot of it has to do with the fact that I am a woman.” (middle-class African-American woman)

These patterns suggest that previous experiences with confronting one type of oppression (in this case, race), often within the context of their families, create more activism skills and a greater commitment to act. The course and an action project that includes a gender analysis broaden their understanding of oppression and what they view as appropriate targets for change. In the next section, we explore further some other components of the course that promote political consciousness and activism.

The process of becoming political actors: the multiple dimensions of empowerment

The goal of this section is to understand better how the action project and other course elements supported development and change towards activism. As we clustered the responses of the students who did the action project, we found that these responses, aside from reflecting positive experiences derived from participating in the action project, also represent dimensions of empowerment that we adapted and modified from Gutierrez and Lewis. This framework asserts a process of development and change that integrates both personal and social/political dimensions.

We discuss below six important dimensions of personal, social, and political development that help to explain and illuminate students’ responses. The intrapersonal dimensions focus on changes within oneself, the interpersonal include changes within one’s interactions with others, and the political emphasize one’s interactions with, and understandings of, the larger world. We discuss not only the impact of the action project, but also how this project is implemented and inter-relates with other important course elements.

Within the literature regarding feminist, multicultural, and liberatory pedagogies (e.g., Sleeter; hooks), “critical consciousness refers to an understanding of how power relationships in the society shape one’s perceptions and experiences, as well as an ability to identify how

one can assume a role in social change” (Gutierrez and Lewis, 7). Critically conscious students are aware of the various cultural and historical processes that have shaped their lives and their identities. They understand how their assumptions, attitudes, and perceptions have been shaped by their families, communities, and their multiple locations within larger systems of privilege and power (for example, their race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth). In short, students first see themselves as influenced by specific social and historical processes, and then they develop a deeper understanding of themselves as conscious social and political actors who can influence and change their present historical moment.

Inherent within critical consciousness is developing an awareness of ourselves within multiple contexts, and this in turn helps us to see ourselves in relation to others in different ways. In the course, we make the distinction that we do not “have” a gender, but that we “do” gender in ways that are specific to the choices before us in culture and society (West and Zimmerman). By interrogating how we “do” gender, we no longer non-consciously enact our gender socialization. Rather, we can see how our present understanding of gender has been shaped through various social forces (e.g. how present ideals and cultural representations of femininity and masculinity are different from those of thirty years ago). In making gender visible, we can make decisions about which aspects of our gender socialization work, and which do not.

In the course, students also developed the ability to think of themselves intersectionally (as affected by gender, race, economic class, and other social identities interacting together). They began with a single aspect of identity (e.g., race, class, or gender), and then created more complex conceptualizations by looking at how aspects of their identity were shaped simultaneously and interactively. That is, we examined dramatic differences in gender socialization depending on how one’s race, class, religion, geographic home, and sexual orientation are considered. According to students, developing this critical consciousness about their multiple identities increased their confidence and ability to name what previously had been invisible to them—allowing them to take advantage of opportunities for action and influence within their various domains of individual, family, and community. For many students, this dramatically increased their confidence and capacity for insight and agency in regards to where and how to act:

“I see and hear things so differently now. The other day my roommates and I were talking about the people in our hall. When it came to the African-American women who live across from us, I could see how we were so much more critical. As soon as I noticed this, I stopped and just listened. What I realized was that our criticisms were because these women didn’t act like us, and that was a problem. Even more scary, was the fact that to other white people, we would sound “reasonable,” not as racist. I shared this insight with my roommates and, for the first time, we had a conversation about what it meant for us to be white, rather than what we thought about those students being black.” (Jewish-American white woman, other characteristics unknown)

An important difference for white women students who did not have the action project is that their critical consciousness developed, but did not seem to reach the same level of analysis and critical self-reflection. These students were able to discuss many issues theoretically and identify where they “fit” in the social matrix in relation to others, but they did not generally have the ability, confidence, or commitment to apply and integrate the theoretical concepts at the level of experience or action. A very typical response from students is to acknowledge

their white privilege and how they benefit from it, but then add that they do not see where they could play a role in fighting racism. They often say that they do not see it as their fight. Their learning about gender is apparently not fully connected to their understanding of their place in relation to race or to a sense of being able to influence the larger world. Implementing an action project appears to assist white women students to cross some important “threshold” in the development of their critical consciousness that moves them towards activism. We believe this is related to their increased experience with recognizing and applying these inter-related concepts in the “real” world, and thus understanding themselves and their worlds differently.

Bringing domains of action into view: understanding institutional forms of power

Lorraine Gutierrez and Edith Lewis delineate another important principle for empowerment: “Understanding the multidimensional nature of power in social relationships” (5). Within the course, we implemented this principle by expecting students to learn how to identify and discern institutional forms of privilege and oppression. Examples of this include the following: how historical labor policies have led to present inequities in opportunities and pay (Amott and Matthaei); how cultural representations are related to the continued devaluation of women’s lives and experiences (hooks *Race*); and how institutional forms of racism and sexism impact the health of women (Krieger and Fee). As this knowledge became available to students, we expected them to engage in “critical analysis of power” (Collins) through in-class exercises and course assignments.

Many students found this process crucial to their intellectual development and their sense of empowerment overall: “I’ll never forget the day that we had to construct a racist community in class. When we finished with the various organizations and institutions in the community and articulated their “subtle” practices, I was floored. It wasn’t just a make-believe community anymore; it looked just like the town that I grew up in.” (middle-class white woman from the suburbs)

Furthermore, as students learned about the multidimensionality of power within social structures, they were offered alternative ways to think about power in their own lives. At the heart of empowerment theory is the assumption that power is not a limited and finite resource that can and must be reserved for a privileged few at the top of various social hierarchies. Rather, *empowerment* is seen as relational, obtained through interactions with others, and found in the various “spheres” of influence that we encompass in our everyday lives. Engaging in an action project allowed students to engage in actions with others, and experiment with enacting different notions of power.

Although developing critical consciousness enhanced students’ ability to see various aspects of their social environments in new ways, they need further support in order to enact that consciousness. Theories of empowerment assert that students are further empowered to act when their sense of self-efficacy and confidence is increased. Four methods help to enhance self-efficacy: Personally mastering a new activity, seeing a person similar to oneself master the activity, being told one is capable of mastering the activity, and experiencing manageable levels of anxiety while attempting the new activity (Bandura).

Within the context of the course, students engaged in various activities to enhance self-efficacy. These included engaging in action projects within small groups in which students supported each other and learned from other groups’ action projects. They also interacted with a diverse panel of activists; they received encouragement and direction from instructors

and peers; and they participated in class discussions that addressed their anxiety, frustrations, and personal resistances to various aspects of the course. Many students reported that these experiences did indeed increase their ability to develop and bring their newly forming consciousness into their everyday lives. Students without an action project experienced some of these elements, but not all of them.

“I can’t believe how much I have changed as a result of this course. Whenever I heard things before (like a racist comment) that bothered me, I would just let it slide because I didn’t feel confident or sure enough about myself to say anything. Now, I speak up! It’s so cool, because I just don’t say, “You shouldn’t say that, that’s racist or sexist!” I ask them to consider their assumptions. And, when they look at me confused, I tell them the assumptions that I hear in their comments, and why they might want to reconsider them.” (upper-class white woman)

Expanding our connections with others

According to Gutierrez and Lewis, fostering connection serves two purposes: the development of social support networks and the creation of power through interactions. Through group discussions within the course, students were given the opportunity to hear diverse perspectives, share thoughts and ideas with other students, and provide feedback, challenges, and support for each other. For example, diversity within the course allows students from predominantly white suburbs to interact with students from communities that are much more racially diverse (e.g., students from Detroit) on a regular basis. Many of the students are quite amazed to learn that people who grew up in communities in the same metropolitan area can have vastly different experiences and worldviews.

As Gutierrez and Lewis suggest, our data confirm that these group processes played a crucial role in students’ developing consciousness and confidence. On the one hand, they were instrumental in providing a challenging but supportive context for students to reflect upon their own positionality, assumptions, and worldviews. On the other hand, they facilitated and encouraged students to think differently, and to venture out of their behavioral comfort zones. Students also remarked that these processes allowed them to truly connect with others who were different from them for the first time. Although tentative and scary at first, developing relationships with others across these differences made students feel connected to the world in qualitatively different (and better) ways. Group work activities that allow students to make new connections across identity group boundaries are very important for the development of activism, both within the class, and among those working together on or discussing action projects.

“Once, in a class, I asked why all the black students sit together in the dormitory cafeteria. A black student then asked me “well, why do you think all the white kids sit together?” I was speechless. At first I thought that was a dumb question, until I realized that I see white people’s sitting together as normal and black people sitting together as a problem. A week after that class, I made a point to cross “the color line” and sit with some African-American students from my hall. It was so scary at first, but now it’s no big thing; I do it all the time.” (upper middle-class white woman)

Changing our minds: what is activism? who does it? and what does it mean?

Through various course materials, students learned to broaden their assumptions, definitions, and representations of what “activism” is, and who does it. In the course, we

constructed activism as the sharing of power through connections with others in various domains of both public and private life. Students read works that deeply undermined traditional notions of activism that are public, hierarchical, and organizationally mobilized. For example, Patricia Hill Collin's chapter, "Rethinking Black Women's Activism," illuminates how everyday acts of survival and resistance can be seen as activism.

The activist panel also contributed strongly to broadening students' understanding of activism. Even though students at first did not perceive all panelists as activists, as the panelists talked about their work, and how it "fit" into larger social justice and feminist goals, students were able to expand their definitions of activist work. Many students had previously viewed activism as assertive actions (often militant and challenging), carried out in public, often with anger, in organized groups that required extensive energy and commitment. Students' comments regarding the panel were that it allowed them to see everyday people engaged in activism through their work in various communities. These comments reflected how the panel showed students opportunities for action and "making a difference" that they previously had not considered:

"One of the most memorable moments in class was the activist panel. First, the fact that both women and men were working together to end violence against women was very surprising. Also, it seemed like all the panel members were doing such interesting and exciting work. I have been pretty bored and uninspired with school, but when I listened to them, I realized that there are so many ways that I can do interesting activist work while I am a student, and I can bring that activism back to my academic interests." (African-American woman, other characteristics unknown)

"What I learned from the panelists was that I can make a difference in whatever profession I choose. I think that all of us want to do meaningful work in some way. But I know for me, I had no idea what it would look like. The panel was exactly the type of experience I came to college for. Seeing ways to make a difference instead of staying numb and insulated from the world around me." (white woman, other characteristics unknown)

Furthermore, as students worked together, and learned of other groups' action projects, they saw and discussed additional forms of activism. Through the panel, readings, and learning from each other's projects, students were exposed to myriad ways in which they can transform their multiple everyday roles into conscious acts that bring about social change. This broader understanding of activism created "entry points" to activism that did not exist before the course. The action project added to this by allowing students to gain more in-depth experience with implementing activism in larger and smaller ways. As they reported their activities to their classmates, they were increasingly able to articulate discrete elements within their activities. Thus, students, especially those who engaged in the action project, saw expanded everyday opportunities to exercise their ability to act in numerous ways that simply were not visible (and therefore not available) to them previously.

In terms of self-efficacy and activism, an important element of empowerment for students was learning how to apply the knowledge and awareness from the course directly to their lives through planning specific actions and interventions that were geared towards bringing about change. The process of conceptualizing, planning, implementing, reflecting on, and evaluating their action projects allowed them to directly confront the inherited sense of cynicism from the dominant culture (Peet and Reed). Overwhelmingly, students who participated in action projects found that they had abilities and opportunities to affect change in their lives that they literally had not seen before. By connecting theory and concepts from the course to their immediate

experience, many students found a sense of themselves that was well beyond their usual “individual” terms. They also learned some new skills.

“Doing the action project opened up a whole new world for me. I can’t believe how well our project went and how much I learned (like no matter how much you plan, there is always a lot more to learn once you start doing it). I look back to who I thought I was at the beginning of the semester, and who I am now. I didn’t think one class could change me so much.” (middle-class white woman)

Other factors involved in the development of activism

Important aspects of adult development are also important in understanding how students move toward political consciousness and agency. First, students came to the course with varied levels of community participation. When students had previous and/or current experiences with action/participation within their communities, they entered into the course and the action project with quite different frames of reference for political action than students without community experience. These students used the activism component of the course as an opportunity to formalize their experiences and construct new meaning for themselves as community participants. The following student’s response illustrates this point:

“Before I entered this class, I was already involved at the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC), and I also published several anti-racist and anti-sexist “zines” on the internet. As a result of this class, I was able to see these “hobbies” and “interests” of mine in a larger way. I now see them as forms of activism. Before, I used to think that I wanted to make a difference, but was not sure that I could. Now, I see that I have been making a difference, that it does matter, and I am much more proud and inspired by what I can do. In fact, I’m inspired to enlarge what I do.” (working class white woman)

Second, when students enter the course, they vary a great deal in terms of their racial and gender identity development (Hardiman and Jackson). Some have considerable insight and knowledge about gender and gendering processes, while others are considering issues facing women for the first time. Most white students do not have an awareness of themselves as racial beings, although some have much higher awareness levels than others. Those who are not aware that “whiteness” is relevant to how they see and experience their world at the time the course begins do not move as quickly to an understanding of how gender interacts with race and other identity dimensions. Conversely, students of color generally come to the course with knowledge that they have a racial identity and that it is meaningful to their life experience. This racial awareness that most students of color bring to the course does not necessarily translate to gender consciousness, however, and it may even interfere with the ability of women of color to recognize and understand how gender and factors other than race also shape their lives.

These differences in background and awareness help to determine where people are in relation to activism when they begin the course, and they also affect what issues students will need to struggle with in order to absorb the content and issues that the course addresses. Students may also have even less (or more) knowledge and awareness of economic class, sexual orientation, and other identities linked with privilege and oppression. All of these are important to ultimate critical consciousness and informed activism.

These two sets of differences—identity development and previous participation in community endeavors—are illustrative of the many ways that students’ positionalities and

experiences within the larger social context can mediate how they learn about and engage in activism. Students' age, sexual orientations, religious backgrounds, economic class, and living experiences are important aspects of students' intersectional identities, and will be impacted by and will affect their experience as activists.

These differences have important implications for course structure and teaching strategies. As instructors, being conscious of the various developmental, positional, and experiential trajectories of students allows us to understand their learning needs more fully, and prepares us to respond more effectively and reflexively to various types of student readiness and resistance that emerge in the classroom. For example, understanding the particular barriers to white women's growth toward activism makes us more aware of the need to construct course materials and in-class discussions that directly "unpack" their personal narratives in regards to the "type" of people who do activist work. After the analyses presented here, we are much more convinced of the importance of the action project for all students, but especially for overcoming the barriers of socialization and privilege that face many white women.

The data also clarify how such courses can be made more relevant and meaningful for women of color. In terms of activism, many women of color expressed the need to integrate more gender consciousness into their heavily racialized experiences. Even though the course readings by women of color addressed this in multiple ways, our analysis of these essays suggest that we need to further "de-center" the experiences of white women. One possibility is to introduce concepts related to intersectionality and activism at the same time that we introduce the concept of gender (in the first weeks of the course) rather than several weeks later.

The class as a whole would also benefit from addressing more openly and earlier (rather than in their final essays) the question "Will you actively confront oppression and do you feel empowered to do so?" This can create a space for students to hear each other's concerns about engaging in activism in terms of their multiple identities and their positions in the social matrix early enough for more substantial changes to occur. For example, we can ask the question "How does privilege insulate us from feeling like we have to take action?" of the class as a whole. Since women of different races and ethnicities have experiences with different types of privilege, their responses and the incentives and barriers to activism that their experiences help to create are also likely to be quite different.

Next steps, dilemmas, and precautions

Our further analyses of students self-reflection papers continues to support the conclusion that an action project assignment in an introductory women's studies course, coupled with relevant theory, analysis, and class activities, has a significant effect on what students learn, and how they enact their knowledge. In this paper, we discussed specific personal, social, and identity-related processes that mediated students' growth in political consciousness and action, and some implications of these differences for course design and class processes.

In the future, we hope to explore further the issue of students' readiness for, and resistance to, activism. We believe that a growing literature on stages and readiness for change can provide some frameworks for this work (e.g., Prochaska, et al.). This literature suggests that different strategies are useful for initiating and continuing self-change, depending on where someone is in a change process. For instance, if someone has never contemplated engaging in activism, she is likely to benefit from experiences that will raise her consciousness about what changes are needed, and that help her to contemplate the possibility of engaging in activism.

For those who have decided they would like to participate in activism, they may only need assistance in locating an appropriate activity, developing initial skills for the situation, and having opportunities to reflect on, learn from, and receive support for their actions. For those who are discouraged about previous activist activities, they may need opportunities to assess what they have learned and accomplished, and to evaluate their priorities.

Other texts are also likely to contribute important dimensions that are very relevant for understanding factors that influence students' readiness for political awareness and activism. Literatures on stages of racial and gender identity-development and change, for instance, suggest particular barriers important to address at different developmental points, and experiences likely to be helpful (Hardiman and Jackson).

In the future, we would also like to investigate the connections between how various types of action projects empower students differently. For example, we assume that people develop different skills and perspectives depending on what actions they undertake, and that these will influence what actions they would consider in the future. We'd also like to know if and how an action project in one domain (for instance, volunteering in a community organization) translates into students becoming empowered to act in other domains after they leave the course (e.g., broadening representations).

We were stunned the first time we actually compiled these data and realized the extent to which the essays of those with action projects differed from those who chose some other project. We worried that perhaps those who chose to engage in an action were already more predisposed to activism than those who chose other assignments, although there is nothing in their essays that suggests that this is the case. In semesters prior to the ones in which this research was conducted, the action project was mandatory, and only a few students with extenuating circumstances were given permission to substitute a research paper or some other type of project. Instructors who taught the course before and after the action project became optional believe that participating in an action project greatly increased students' readiness for activism when it was required of all, even if students initially resisted undertaking this assignment. We cannot know this for sure, of course, unless we are able to collect additional data from classes in which there is some random assignment to different types of assignments, or everyone is required again to participate in an action project. In sharing this information with our own women's studies faculty, however, we have urged that the action project (or at least the processes that it embodies) be more fully integrated into the course structure, and not just as an optional assignment that disproportionately benefits those students who engage in it.

In our experience, instructors may express resistance to teaching an action project for a number of reasons (Peet and Reed). They may not feel adequately trained to help students plan and implement an action project, or they do not feel that it is appropriate to require students to engage in political action. In responding to these concerns, we stress the fact that there are resources on campus, in the larger community, and in the literature that can be used to guide faculty and instructors through their own learning processes about action planning and implementation. And, in terms of "making students engage in political action" our response has been that it is in politicizing an action, through the use of feminist theory, that students experience praxis and therein empowerment. In other words, the action project's impact on learning and active engagement justifies its inclusion as a critical course component.

There are, however, other ethical issues. Of great concern to us are questions about students' ability to handle, complete, and follow through on activities they begin. We do not wish to

inconvenience or disrupt on-going projects in the community, or raise hopes about the potential for change that is never implemented. For some activities, student turnover happens regularly, and the project is structured to accommodate this. These concerns can also be raised with students during the planning process in several ways. Depending on the project, students can be careful to design actions that can be completed by the end of the term, and to be realistic about their skills and experience. They can also seek expert advice, and/or be sure that they are working with others who can follow through with next steps if the student(s) cannot be involved past the end of the term. In our experience, many students continue with actions they began during this course for many semesters. Agencies that provide volunteer experiences often require that students make at least a six-month commitment and we encourage this, even if the organization does not require it. Otherwise, the organization expends considerable resources educating and training students with very little immediate return on their investment.

We acknowledge that all these issues are important and must be considered in planning and course design. We feel strongly, however, that praxis is an important part of feminist learning and that praxis requires action. We also need more activists who can work toward a more socially just world, and continue to challenge and disrupt gendering, racing, and other processes that create inequities. If we believe this, then we need to learn more about how to assist the students we are teaching to become committed to and skilled in activist work. We hope that the work presented here will contribute to that goal.

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