

Creating a Global Consciousness by Embracing a World of Women: A Pedagogical Strategy Dedicated to Regaining the Momentum for Women's Rights

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Abstract

If we are to regain some of the energy which characterized the Women's Movement during its earliest years and again during the 1960's and 1970's, we must endeavor to raise awareness among young people about the work for social justice that remains undone and we must find ways to inspire them to re-embrace activism and to develop, what Smyser (2003) calls, "the humanitarian conscience."

This task has become increasingly difficult in our current American culture, which strongly promotes the idea that equal opportunity exists for all and that those who fall behind do so primarily because they will not work hard and have made poor personal choices. Paradoxically, most of the young people who have the skills and freedom to effectively advocate for social justice and gender equality are those who have suffered relatively little oppression themselves and whose life experiences thus far have affirmed the proposition that hard work does yield the promised fruits.

Given these realities, a large proportion of college age women do not identify themselves as feminists and they frequently argue that the problems addressed by the Women's Movement essentially have been solved. Although this mind set clearly challenges efforts to regain the momentum for women's rights, it also provides us, as educators, with the challenge of developing new strategies to engage young women in the struggle for equality and social justice. Accordingly, this paper describes efforts to develop a pedagogy based on the idea that teaching young women about the obstacles to equality that still exist around the world will broaden their awareness of the work still undone, will generate a spirit of solidarity with women everywhere, will capture their youthful energy, and will infuse new momentum into the quest for women's rights.

Introduction

When asked if they are "feminists," the answer my students at Assumption College almost always give is a resounding, "NO!" They go on to tell me that they no longer see a need to work for women's rights because, they assert, gender no longer limits their opportunities. In answering this question, they also show difficulty in stepping outside their own circumstances to recognize that, even if total equality has been achieved for them (itself a dubious assertion), such is not the case for women in less advantaged circumstances.

Given this context, questions about how to "regain the momentum" for women's rights, how to inspire young women to critique their world views and to work passionately for social justice are, to my mind, crucial and deserving of serious and sustained thought. What follows is the outgrowth of my attempts in the past few years to address these questions and to develop some initiatives for change.

One Potential Strategy

It is my contention that instead of trying to convince young women that their perceptions of gender equity in America are incorrect, it is more effective to emphasize in our teaching the

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challenges still facing women in many parts of the world. If we can help students feel a sense of connection to the concerns of women living in circumstances that clearly limit their development, we may re-awaken the spirit of sisterhood which has energized feminism throughout history and we may foster within our students a willingness to embrace Adrienne Rich's maxim "that no woman is liberated until we all are liberated" (Rich 1986, 8).

To assure progress toward this goal, those of us in academia with an interest in regaining the momentum for women's rights by focusing on the lives of women around the world, must begin to develop courses which look at women's rights within a global context, using materials that generate deep and thoughtful engagement on the part of our students. Finding course materials with a global perspective and an emphasis on the challenges facing women is not difficult, in fact, quite the opposite problem exists - the amount of information available is overwhelming. The challenge comes in finding materials that will resonate with students, that will respect the fact that their knowledge of international affairs is often limited, and that will help foster a sense of connection with and respect for, rather than a feeling of superiority over or alienation from, the women they are reading about.

To this end, two colleagues, (Deborah Kisatsky from Assumption College's History Department and Steven Farough from the Sociology Department), and I initiated a search for published materials addressing globalization and its impact on the lives of women, that we thought our students would understand and find engaging. From this search we concluded that while an extensive list of scholarly articles and discipline specific texts exist, very few resources of the type we envisioned were available. This finding in turn led us to begin the process of developing our own interdisciplinary anthology, focused on the lives of ordinary and extraordinary women from all parts of the developing world.

We decided to model our anthology on the book, *Images of Women in American Popular Culture*, edited by Dorenkamp, McClymer, Moynihan and Vadum (1995), which is used to teach the gateway course into Assumption's Women's Studies Program. This text, which includes a variety of materials, such as speeches, poems, essays, documents, etc., has been highly effective in illuminating the issues and concerns central to the American feminist movement, and it is our hope that our anthology will accomplish a similar awakening of curiosity about the lives of women around the world. The *Images* anthology is so effective because its entries are relatively short, come primarily from the popular press and assume very little prior knowledge of the issues

addressed, thus making them very accessible to students. Often the content of the passages used in the anthology is quite surprising to students and, on first reading, may seem ridiculous to them or silly. A good example is the article entitled “How To Get Plump” which instructs women on the proper way to eat, recommending, for instance, that “Two quarts of milk and six eggs are not too much taken during the day” and that “A quarter of a pound of butter should be consumed during the day” (Harper’s Bazar 1995, 137). From our current perspective, such advice seems outrageous and yet it was provided by “the experts” of the period. Such an article helps students take a fresh look at so-called “authorities” in general, hopefully promoting more critical thinking about advice given to them today as “truth.”

Perhaps even more illustrative is the excerpt from Edward Clarke’s classic book, *Sex in Education: or, A Fair Chance for Girls*, in which he argues that higher education may damage the reproductive organs of girls because intense studying diverts needed blood and nourishment from the reproductive system to the brain. (Clarke 1995, 16). According to Clarke, this diversion often results in menstrual difficulties and, at times, permanent infertility. While initially students often react with laughter to this idea, once the historical context is provided, namely that Edward Clarke was a highly respected professor and influential member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard Medical School for a significant period of time, his words take on greater significance and power. Articles such as these help students to see the degree to which socially constructed ideas can profoundly influence the lives of both women and men, how the ideas governing cultural practices can change over time, but that such change cannot occur without sustained resistance. Once young women see that ideas that are put forward as “facts” are instead opinions, and that change comes about only through active resistance to erroneous opinion, they often become more engaged in working for change themselves. Our proposed anthology, presenting the challenges to equity still facing women around the world, is modeled on *Images of Women in American Popular Culture*, because it has been so successful as a tool for raising consciousness and motivating action.

Challenges Inherent In This Pedagogy And Proposed Solutions

Developing an anthology with an international focus, however, poses significant challenges both for the editors of such a text and for potential students who might use it. This

section of the paper, therefore, focuses on some of these problems and presents several potential solutions.

The most significant difficulty we, as editors, have faced so far in our work on this project is the overwhelming nature of the task. As is true for most faculty, we have been trained within specific disciplines and have, over time, developed sub-specialties within our academic fields. To add to the scholarly base of our fields, in-depth knowledge is required and therefore, specialization is the logical response. However, developing an anthology with a global focus, centered on issues far from the specialties we have cultivated, is not only daunting in its scope, but may pose significant challenges to our accustomed habits of research and scholarship. Each of us has at various times expressed our concern that we can “never know enough” to select truly representative readings and to contextualize these readings precisely in our headnotes and chapter introductions. Not surprisingly, these concerns have been documented by many scholars attempting to internationalize their teaching. (See for example, Chatterjee, 2002). And yet our belief that this pedagogical strategy is important, that it will broaden the knowledge base of all of our students and that it will also help rekindle the momentum for women’s rights, keeps us going. Those beliefs, along with the support of colleagues, both at Assumption and elsewhere, have also been important motivating factors. The enthusiasm we feel for the project, the excitement we have experienced as we explore areas of scholarship new to us, our reflections upon the enormous educational value of interdisciplinary work, and the goal of helping to create a global consciousness stand as powerful antidotes to the vertigo we sometimes have felt in our work thus far.

Many of our potential readers, college women, will also face a number of significant challenges in reading an anthology such as ours. There is no doubt that looking into the eyes of women who struggle daily for food, for safety, for reproductive rights, for ways of protecting their children, evokes powerful emotions - perhaps guilt, or anxiety, maybe confusion or helplessness. Intense and discomfoting feelings such as these often produce defensive responses and resistance to the information being presented. This is a natural, psychological process designed to contain the original, provocative feelings. While recognizing the predictability of this response, the question becomes, what to do about it?

One of the most important things to be done is to find ways to engender hope. If we hear only about the enormity of the world’s problems, without the belief that change is possible,

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feelings of helplessness and despair and the paralysis that is their aftermath are the only likely outcomes (Edmonds 2006). One strategy to engender hope is to present examples of women demonstrating creativity, courage and strength in the face of enormous odds. Sources such as the Paola Gianturco's book, *Women Who Light the Dark*, published in 2007, is an excellent example of what I am suggesting here. While outlining significant challenges to women's equality and well-being, such as a lack of educational opportunities, human trafficking, the gendered nature of domestic violence, lack of access to clean drinking water and the like, Gianturco celebrates ordinary women around the world by highlighting the actions for change that they have taken. Images of their successes - children rescued from brothels, rural wells built, free schools set up on the platforms of train stations where children routinely beg - demonstrate that change is possible if imagination, hope, and vision are mobilized. Including readings that also inspire action, even in the face of fear, such as Audre Lorde's 1984 essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," provides a vehicle that allows students to begin to imagine themselves as also having the capacity to be one of those ordinary women who can do extraordinary things. From this grows hope, confidence, courage, and the renewal of the momentum for women's rights.

Familiarizing students with international conferences and documents that uphold the rights of women, such as the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995 and its ten year follow-up conference held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, or the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals, accepted by the General Assembly in 2000, is another strategy for generating hope and action. The existence of these initiatives shows students that, at least on paper, the world is committed to universal human rights. In fact, it is remarkable that with only eight Millennium Development Goals specified, one of those eight, to "promote gender equality and empower women." (UN Millennium Development Goals, 2000) focuses exclusively on the circumstances of women around the world. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 also is a remarkable document in that it is the first Security Council resolution that specifically requires that the impact of war on women be addressed in all United Nations interventions (UN Security Council Resolution, 2000). While the full implementation of the initiatives described above is far from a reality, women everywhere can take heart in knowing that more than ever before international law prohibits discriminatory action against women, thus giving them potent legal means to fight gender based injustice. Knowing that such

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documents exist enlivens and emboldens us; it motivates us to work to see that the idealistic goals specified are met, and with that the momentum for change is reawakened.

Even with these efforts to engender hope, encountering the enormity of the task of working for social justice remains daunting. And given this fact, it is my view that when we invite our students into the arena of globalization and its complex effects, we must do so by using avenues that are familiar and engaging to them, precisely because the material is so overwhelming and frightening. This can be accomplished by finding fascinating “stories” of heroic women who have overcome significant odds, as mentioned above, but also by incorporating music, videos, computer games, provocative blogs, graphic novels and other materials that are commonplace within their cultural milieu and in that sense comforting. Feelings of inadequacy and anxiety about the content will be balanced in this way by familiarity with and competence regarding the media used in conveying the content.

One of the things I like best about moving toward the inclusion of less traditional teaching materials as the platform from which to launch students into more in-depth analyses of content, is that I learned this strategy from them. Several years ago, for a final exam project, I asked my students to design their own Women’s Studies course, stipulating that there needed to be an emphasis on social justice and diversity. The students surprised me with the breadth and energy of their ideas and with their emphasis on materials common to their world outside the classroom. They also placed much greater emphasis on taking action to foster change than is typical of most college courses designed by many faculty. They developed assignments and classroom activities that moved from “talk” - so comfortable and second-nature to us academics - to action and social interaction, such as performing plays, starting clubs, organizing community projects - more congruent with their way of life. Their insights, described in my 2006 paper entitled, “Enacting Social Justice: Raising Awareness: Engendering Hope,” have clearly influenced my thinking about writing and teaching and have prompted me to include less traditional materials within the current anthology.

In addition to dealing directly with students’ discomfort regarding the process of internationalizing their education, comes a second significant challenge - namely, divesting themselves of their ethnocentrism and coming to see how their own life experiences have formed their perceptions of others. So often these perceptual schema remain unanalyzed because we have so little conscious awareness of their fundamental place in organizing our thinking.

However, this ethnocentrism, or “politics of location,” as Rich (1986) termed it, creates barriers to connection with the women whose lives form the centerpiece of our anthology. Unless we can help our students and, of course ourselves, recognize how privileged we are, how safe and protected, and how free from terror, we can entertain the delusion that somehow if we were in the same circumstances as many oppressed women of the world, we would simply “find a way to make a better life.” After all, many of us have stories of parents or grandparents, or even ourselves, whose hard work and diligence resulted in the creation of lives of greater freedom and security.

Acknowledging the presence of whatever blinders our experience imposes on us allows us to understand how difficult it really is to resonate fully with the lives and circumstances of individuals whose worlds are so unlike our own. Therefore active and concerted attempts to bridge this gap will form a significant section of the anthology. One of the ways to “de-construct” the impact of “location” is to directly explore with students the ways in which their own particular circumstances have formed their definition of self and the fundamentals of their belief systems - in this way making their pervasive perceptual structures more transparent to them. As a way of approaching this process, our anthology will include certain classic pieces such as Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege” (McIntosh 2007) and Rich’s article, “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” (Rich 1986) along with more recent considerations of the same topic in Mohanty’s (2005) article “Antiglobalization Pedagogies and Feminism” and Freedman’s (2007) article entitled “The Global Stage and the Politics of Location.”

Another strategy to help students move beyond the construction of reality their own experience has fostered in them is to contrast their experiences directly with those of others and thereby to demonstrate the relativity of conceptions of reality developed as a consequence of highly disparate circumstances. In keeping with the notion of using less traditional materials to engage connection with issues, an excerpt from a song entitled “Kisangani,” performed by Priscilla Herdman (2003) and written by Henning Kvitnes will be used as an example. Even without access to the music, the words, I believe convey the intended message in a powerful way.

Kisangani
Never waited for a plane away from Kisangani
Never walked 600 miles without shoes

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Never went to sleep in the mud behind barbed wire
And tonight, my Lord, I thank you

..... Never had my family split up by any army
Never woke up from gunfire in the night
Never stood with a gun to my head
Saw my children being dragged out of my sight

Chorus: They always said that there could come a time
When you feel you have to stop and you have to draw a line
Make a choice for life, and leave a lot of things behind
They always said that there could come a time, such a time, such a time

What is so gratifying about confronting our privilege in a way that respects the experience of “the other” as well as our own experience is that this fosters the feelings of solidarity with others that we are hoping for, freeing us of the guilt we might feel about our good fortune and allowing us to recognize that our privilege gives us the power and opportunity to reach across the divide with a helping hand. How transformative to see that now is the time “when you feel you have to stop and you have to draw a line” and then to actually “make a choice for life, and leave a lot of things behind.” If our work promotes the type of perceptual shift addressed in the song, what a wonderful educational outcome that would be.

At the root of this transformative process is the evocation of empathy. As we embrace the experience of others and try to assimilate whatever aspects of it we can, we feel the ground shifting under our feet. And in the poetic words of Naomi Shihab Nye (2006), we gain a more profound understanding of the concept, kindness.

Kindness
Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weak broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

..... Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the
Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see that this could be you,

he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow
as the other deepest thing.

Once kindness and empathy are established, differences, which appeared so significant initially, begin to blur and building upon elements of experience that are universal becomes possible. At that point, the introduction of pedagogical materials which emphasize commonality begins to make sense. Darraj's article "We All Want the Same Things Basically: Feminism in Arab Women's Literature," published in 2003, is a good example of the process of evoking the factors that unite all women. Another remarkable resource, which stimulates deep feelings of connection between young women in American and those in Iraq, is an internet blog by an Iraqi woman, with the username Riverbend. She has been interacting actively on-line with those who responds to her internet journal, called "Baghdad Burning," since August of 2003 and selected segments of her blog have been collected into a book entitled *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog From Iraq* (2005). Riverbend still continues to describe online the terrible upheaval in her life since the American invasion of Iraq and eloquently expresses her lost opportunities and dashed dreams; dreams not unlike those of her American counterparts. Her honest and passionate descriptions, presented in perfect English, her technological savvy, and her familiarity with many things American, make her seem like a sister to us all. And from this feeling of sisterhood comes a sense of solidarity and the will to work for change.

Conclusion

To achieve greater justice and humanity, including equal rights for women, requires tireless commitment and effort. We need every woman and man of good will to reflect upon the circumstances that call out for change and for each of us to consider the ways our unique talents may be applied to the work of social justice. We need to inspire our young people to join with us, just as we need to learn from them new and creative ways of advocating for change. It is my hope that our efforts, expressed in our anthology, to create a global consciousness by honoring the women of the world and celebrating their strength and resilience, will play an effective part in forging this partnership. With generosity of spirit, openness to the differences among us as

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well as to the universals that unite us, I have no doubt that we can regain the momentum for women's rights, universal human rights, and bring more freedom and safety to our world.

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