

**Global Feminisms Conference, Sept. 15, 2006:
Changing the World, Changing the Academy**

**USING GF PROJECT IN CLASSROOMS:
FEMINIST ACTIVISM & SCHOLARSHIP (STEWART, ZABOROWSKA)**

Introduction:

- Currently no course exists at UM on Feminist Activism & Scholarship
- Continuing demand for such courses:
 - From undergrads, interest in activism and reconciliation of activism with theoretical literature
 - From grad students greater need for integration of perceived tension/contradiction between career pursuing academic feminism & activist feminism
- Syllabi available on the web for examples of relevant courses already in existence were distributed: Amherst, Minnesota, University of Rhode Island, American University (mini-courses)

Using Global Feminisms archive as central: where to from there?

Three proposed aims of discussion:

- How to discuss/teach/reconcile the often thought-of as binary concept of Feminist Activism & Scholarship
- General outline of potential course
- Share clips addressing alleged tension between activism and scholarship from Andy Smith, Cathy Cohen, Ai Xiaoming

Goals of a feminist scholarship and activism course:

- Challenge the binary opposition
- To recognize them as “women’s work”
- Recognition of all types of activisms, feminisms, scholarships: need to avoid exclusionary definitions
- Reassess the place of the university: enabling/disabling activists?
- Problematize the concept of the “public intellectual,” emphasize engaged scholarship
- Note intersectionality of activist movements: racial justice, reproductive rights. Activism as not tied to one single thing and as accommodating changes over a lifetime, i.e., the dynamic aspect to activist careers.

Overview of general themes which emerged (elaborated below):

- “Family” and “culture” as social elements informing all interviews
 - importance of avoiding cultural essentialisms, lessening cross-cultural assumptions → can draw on statistics that illustrate that variance within groups can be equal to or greater than the variance between groups; can draw on two widely-differing cases within a culture, etc.
- Academy as a site of activism

- Intersection of feminisms and social movements; how different feminisms affect one another
- How personal material reveals the process of feminism scholarship and activism over a lifetime and illustrates that there may be “seasons” in particular women’s emphases and activities
- Global focus of GF materials
- GFP interviewers’ roles and organizers’ aims
- Relationship of archive to the content of a course

Specific themes elaborated:

Family & Culture informing interviews:

- Important to acknowledge family as common site of political socialization, but also widely differing experiences leading to political commitments
- Cross-cultural expressions of “family”
 - Important to recognize cultural differences, while avoiding essentializing cultures
- Notice that family includes both family of origin/family of identification and both can be sites of political socialization
- What does feminism mean in other cultures? What are important goals? Forms of organizing? Approaches to social change?
- Differences in cultural specificity, e.g., different language structures/usage.
- Identify themes within countries that do not emerge across sites

Academy as site of activism:

- Problem of university setting raised – incentive structure does not support activism (Cathy Cohen clip)
- Conversely, some note academy provides various resources for activism – scholarship informed by activism (Andy Smith)
- Need to make any course relevant to students’ lives; issues of diversity and range of experience in students’ backgrounds and what they bring to the classroom.
 - Draw on their own activism issues within the university
 - Can build on community activism? Service learning courses? Risk may be of absence of real “social change” agenda
- Acknowledgement of differing educational structures/institutions, locally and globally
- Issue of professionalization of grads to PhDs, undergrads more “active”: possible difficulty in combining types of students in courses. However, also discussion of “cross-fertilization” between undergrads and grads for the same reason.
- Logistics issues: Idea of not privileging any single feminist theory: whose theory anyway? What is to be assumed? Should there be prerequisites to any course using GF material (much assumed by interviewees)? What level of course? Multidisciplinary course? Seminar?
- Distinction made between addressing women’s issues and Social Work.
- Students should not view “scholar-activism” goal as another pressure to be “Superwomen”.

Intersections:

- Feminisms and social movements, illustrated by two clips: Loretta Ross (Reproductive Justice) and Limanowska (Trafficking in Women)
- Grass roots/local activism; unofficial channels for activism. Not easy to “package” women activists’ lives
- Dynamic nature of activism
- Coalitions/collaborations can be articulated and explored
- Differing activisms, differing feminisms

Global focus/Less essentializing:

- Beijing conference of 1995 as illuminating differences in different sites; “same” event with very different key experiences and implications
- Interviews situated within a culture (begin with particular assumptions, exposures)
- Broadening of perspective – less US-centric (for US interviewees)
- Many different cultural guises of feminism/activism; “located” activism.
- Illustrates situated knowledges of interviewees → many variables to consider

Use of personal materials/interviews:

- Personal as political – activism is not “out there” but local, and located within personal life; shifts focus on personal life from “anecdote”; permits analysis of personal life

Interviewers’ roles:

- Differences in process; influence of interviewer’s presence
- Many filters or interpretations in process of interview; can expose/discuss these
- Explore difficulty in transcribing the non-verbal by juxtaposing transcript and film
- Consider differences in style of posing/structuring/editing interviews
 - “Contentless questions” (in Polish site); actual difficulty in conducting completely unstructured interviews.
 - Sites varied in how much they edited (Poland and US not at all, China a little perhaps, and India a great deal)

GFP Organizers’ aims:

- Would be of interest to add these to the website – provides background/context. How do organizers conceive of concepts of activism/s, feminism/s, scholarship/s?
Overviews and views of organizers.

Relationship of archive to the content of a course:

- As a base: primary source used throughout semester to identify main themes, theoretical concerns
- As a starting point: use in combination with other resources, e.g., articles and footnotes in transcripts.
- As a springboard: a set of tools for certain research topics. Examples: women's health, meaning of feminism across cultures, comparative feminisms.
- Illustrative of methodology: narrative, oral history as a valid methodology, i.e., quantitative resource as adjunct to qualitative.

Brief discussion of website:

- How to track others' use of the GF materials? Sharing of material, teaching tips, syllabi, etc, on the GF website
- Discussion of access to site and availability of DVDs, transcripts.