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## Developing Feminist Activist Pedagogy: A Case Study Approach in the Women's Studies Department at the University of South Florida

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Developing Feminist Activist Pedagogy: A Case Study Approach in the Women's Studies

Department at the University of South Florida

by

Stacy Tessier

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Women's Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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### Dedication

To the Women's Studies Department at USF. May the department continue to stay strong in the face of uncertainty.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my mom for always allowing me to be myself and for her endless support through this long journey. To Rich, thank you for being my rock. To Leisa, thank you for being the life preserver when I felt lost at sea; you have been more of a friend to me than I can express in words. To the Women's Studies Department, thank you for both challenging me and inspiring me; you provided a home to me and made me feel like I belonged to something important. To my students, thank you for allowing me to push my boundaries and yours. To Marilyn, who started me on this journey, a big thanks for your energy and spirit. To Kim, Linda, and Gurleen, I could not have completed this journey without all of your support and guidance.

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Stacy Tessier

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the relationship between activism and the two introductory-level Women's Studies classes, Introduction to Women's Studies and Issues in Feminism, and the social justice mission of the Women's Studies department. These two classes are the pillars for the program and are often the first classes that draw students into the program. I propose that the Women's Studies department does promote social justice through the curriculum and there are ways that the department could do more to facilitate activism in the classroom and beyond the classroom.

The Women's Studies department at the University of South Florida is one of the longest freestanding Women's Studies departments. The department was established in 1970 and as an academic field is a child of the idealism and activism of the feminist movement. I believe that Women's Studies as an academic discipline has a responsibility to promote social justice because of its parentage. A case study approach enables me to see how activism manifests in a very specific location and provides real-life examples that can then be applied and adapted to other programs.

I conducted two different analyses of the department: a syllabus review and in-depth interviews with instructors. The intention of the syllabus review was to see how the classes present on paper. The interviews allowed me to examine what actually

occurred in the classroom. I was able to provide a snapshot of the call to activism, the manifestations of activism, and the facilitation of activism, which enabled me to theorize new ways to incorporate activism into not only introductory-level classes, but to all Women's Studies classes.



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Activism to me at the most basic level means taking action for change in order to achieve social justice and it has been a part of my life since I was a child living in New England. My earliest action was a boycott against the celebration of Thanksgiving in second grade after learning from a friend the experiences of how her indigenous ancestors were actually treated by the colonists, which did not coincide with the lesson being taught by my teacher. That experience made a lasting impression on me, and shaped my conceptions of social justice. The extent of my activism has waxed and waned over the years and the issues that have taken precedence over my time have gone through phases, especially in relation to current world events, but I continue to be moved to action through knowledge, just as in elementary school.

My introduction to feminism occurred at the college level, where my exposure to feminism occurred through my activities with other activist organizations. I began to see the ways that the issues that I am passionate about, such as, but not limited to, the destruction of the environment, animal rights, and indigenous rights, are all feminist issues. Feminists argue that women and nature are often devalued and exploited by men, and women are often expected to be closer to nature and animals. Indigenous women face multiple oppressions due not only to their gender, but to their race as well. It was seeing the connections that brought me to enroll in Women's Studies classes. I wanted a deeper understanding of how feminism connected to activism.

The discipline of Women's Studies is often described as the "academic arm" of the feminist movement (Boxer 1998, 163). My previous activist involvement influenced my expectation that the Women's Studies department on the Tampa campus at the University of South Florida<sup>1</sup> would encourage students to take part in activism, whether it is visible, such as holding protests, marches, and walkouts, or more subtle, such as boycotts and letter writing campaigns. The way that I conceptualized activism, as direct action for the purpose of change, was not explicitly encouraged as class content on any syllabus I received as an undergraduate student in Women's Studies classes, although in some classes extra credit could be earned for attending campus and community events. When I did not see such activism in the curriculum, it prompted me to ask deeper questions about the definition and scope of feminist activism and how Women's Studies classes present feminist activism, a concern that I carry with me into my graduate work and experiences as a Women's Studies M.A. student.

As I began to teach Women's Studies classes, I began to think deeply about feminist pedagogy. I began to question what sets feminist pedagogy apart from other types of pedagogy. The more I learned about pedagogy and the more experience I gained in the classroom, the more I began to view feminist pedagogy as not only a form of activism for the instructor, but as an avenue for students to engage in feminist activism.

The relationship of feminist pedagogy and activism interests me on three levels: as an activist, as a student, and as a teacher. As an activist<sup>2</sup>, I think that the academy is an

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<sup>1</sup> From this point forward, when I refer to the University of South Florida, I am referring specifically to the Tampa campus, which is the main campus of the university.

<sup>2</sup> I consider myself an activist not only because I belong to activist organizations, but also because I am involved in activism independently. I am active within the feminist movement, the environmental movement, the animal rights movement, human rights and indigenous rights movements, labor rights movements, peace and anti-war movements, and more.

environment that provides students with opportunities to expand their ways of thinking, and disciplines that advocate for social change are important vehicles for students to engage in activism. I argue that it is not enough to read texts or watch videos about activists and activist movements; students should be encouraged to act. As a student, I am always looking for inspiration as much as I am seeking knowledge because both are components of an education. Since entering college, much of my activism has been spurred by what I have learned in the classroom, even if the relation to activism was indirect. As a teacher, I would like to be the spark that ignites change. I know that as a teacher I potentially have considerable influence on the ways that students think, not only about the curriculum, but about life in general, although I am aware of, as Scanlon (1993, 9) argues, that “students must decide if and when they are ready to take what they have learned to the world outside the classroom.” I feel obligated, because of my passions, to at least make students aware of the ways that activism can be incorporated into their lives, if they choose, from local actions to statewide, nation-wide, or world-wide actions. The most important goal is helping students to recognize that changes can be small and still be effective and that the change is not going to be immediate. It is also important to note that it is not student engagement that is the goal, but that the student has changed.

I began writing this thesis during the fall of 2006. At that point, the Women’s Studies Department was an independent department with a chair, three other tenured professors, as well as one tenure-track professor and one visiting professor. As I conclude the writing process in the spring of 2009, the Department has changed due to the “ongoing changes in the landscape of higher education” (Dever 1999, 219). One professor has retired; one has accepted a position at another university, and two have

sought positions with other departments within the university. This is important, because the Department constantly feels threatened because of the critical work produced in the Department. I do not know how the Department will be composed after the conclusion of the semester, but that does not detract from the usefulness of the research to the Department. In fact, the research is urgent because of the threat to the Department. As bell hooks (1994) argues, critical theory is necessary for liberatory activism. This research provides tools for Women's Studies knowledge that can be offered to both students and teachers interested in sustaining Women's Studies.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Women's Studies**

Women's Studies departments began to establish themselves through grassroots collective action of feminist scholars and students in the early 1970s, inspired by the feminist movement of the 1960s, where the writings of feminist activists provided the basic questions that spurred the development of Women's Studies programs (Boxer 1998). The so-called "first wave" of feminism focused on the right for women to be educated; the so-called "second wave" of feminism focused on the right for women to criticize knowledge, the right to create knowledge, and the right to be educators (Reinharz 1992). Women's Studies as an academic field is the child of the idealism of the 1960s and feminist activism. "From the beginning, the goal of Women's Studies was not merely to study women's position in the world, but to change it" (Boxer 1998, 13). However, this relationship between academics and activism is slippery because of the institutionalization of Women's Studies, and as Women's Studies programs expand, the liberatory nature of the discipline does not always follow. "We must encourage activism in our classroom to keep feminist culture alive" (Scanlon 1993, 8); the work of keeping both feminist activism and feminist culture continues.

Women's Studies, or Gender Studies as some programs choose, is an interdisciplinary academic field. According to the 2007 National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) Mapping Women's and Gender Studies Data Collection report

there are 652 programs at colleges and universities in the United States. According to the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), there are Women's Studies departments<sup>3</sup> granting B.A. degrees at 184 colleges and universities and there are currently more than 40 Women's Studies academic journals published. The institutionalization of Women's Studies provides "a legacy on which future generations of activists and scholars can build" (Boxer 1998, 190). Women's Studies as a field continues to grow as more colleges and universities expand their programs and new journals are published.

At its most basic level, Women's Studies places gender at the center of inquiry because "gender is an organizing principle of our society" (Armstead 1995). As the field of Women's Studies has grown, analysis has expanded beyond gender and "content about diversity [is] at the center of inquiry (Enns and Forrest 2005, 16). The academic feminist commitment to activism manifests through the selection of faculty, the construction of curricula, and the encouragement of student participation in internships, community action projects, and extracurricular events. "It appears in the teaching of content that is based on research whose questions reflect contemporary feminist concerns, and in pedagogy that draws students into participating in their own education" (Boxer 1998, 183).

The first Women's Studies department was established at San Diego State University in 1970 (Boxer 1998). The Women's Studies Department at the University of South Florida<sup>4</sup> was also established in 1970, making it one of the oldest in the country.

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<sup>3</sup> Although many universities offer Women's Studies courses, not every university has an independent Women's Studies department. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of Women's Studies, Women's Studies faculty may hold appointments in other departments.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the information in this paragraph comes from the department website, [http://www.cas.usf.edu/womens\\_studies/department\\_overview.html](http://www.cas.usf.edu/womens_studies/department_overview.html) and from informal interviews with Women's Studies faculty and students.

The program began after an ad hoc committee focused on the status of women demanded a need for a space for Women's Studies and a responsive president helped to implement the program (Kim Vaz, personal communication, March 23 2009). The Department began granting B.A. degrees in 1987 and M.A. degrees ten years later. The Department gained independent status in 1991. The Department currently has one full-time professor, an interim chair, three visiting professors, and an extremely uncertain future.

The mission statement<sup>5</sup> of the Department states:

“The mission of Women's studies is feminist undergraduate and graduate education and research for social justice. We seek to connect our work as academics with the social and political world outside of the university ... We seek to empower students through a feminist critique of social, cultural, and institutional structures that enables them to think more critically about their own lives and that inspires them to work as active citizens for social justice.”

This excerpt demonstrates that social justice and action are integral to the academic intentions of the department. I am asking the question of whether this mission is being accomplished.

### **Feminist activism**

I came to this project with my own conceptions of activism. As I began to research, I realized that my definition was anything but simple. Defining activism became the most difficult part of my research because I constantly had to reexamine my conceptions of activism.

I conceptualize activism as direct action. “Activism is conscious, purposeful, political activity ... activism entails movement, and this movement can be theoretical and

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<sup>5</sup> This was the mission statement at the time of my research. This mission statement was recently modified, but the department continues to advocate a social justice mission. The mission statement was given to me by one of the founders of the program.

thoughtful, as well as physical” (Cuomo, 1996, 43). Feminist activism is activism that centers on not only issues about gender, but also the way that gender is inter-connected to key aspects of life, including marginalized identities and material realities resulting from those identities. The goal of feminist activism is to improve the situation of people that experience oppression because of their actual or perceived gender and identity. “Political action can be conceived as either empowerment of individual women ... the societal transformation of patriarchy, or a more limited goal of policy implementation” (Armstead 1995, 629).

Rather than reveal to my interviewees my own definition of feminist activism, I am allowing each of the interviewed women to define feminist activism in her own terms. Allowing self-identification “allows me to go directly to the work of people” and avoids deducing what feminist activism is “from the standpoint of my personal definition” (Reinharz 1992, 6). During the interview process when I was asked what I meant by feminist activism, I gave the question back. As a feminist activist and researcher, it is not my intention to make the interviewees fit my conception of activism but to constantly reexamine and redefine my conception of feminist activism based on interviewees responses. In this way, I “acknowledge and validate the participant’s own knowledge” (Armstead 1995, 628).

What moves people to become activists? I argue that taking Women’s Studies classes is one way that people are introduced to activism. “Women’s Studies need not indoctrinate. It is sufficient that it empowers students with the passion to learn and to utilize their learning in living” (Boxer 1998, 189).



## **Feminist pedagogy**

Just as there are many feminisms, there are many feminist pedagogies. One basic principle of feminist pedagogy is that it involves “the fusion of feminist values into the process and methods of teaching” (Enns and Sinacore 2005, 25). Cohee et al. (1998) identify six tenets that are prominent among feminist pedagogies. The first is that feminist pedagogy evolves from feminist social practice, so it is “oriented toward social transformation, consciousness-raising, and social activism” (3). Second, feminist pedagogy develops “epistemological frameworks that stress both the subjective and communal reality of knowing” (3). Third, feminist pedagogy is concerned for women students inside and outside of the classroom and “is committed to improving the lives of women” (3). Fourth, feminist pedagogy not only addresses, but also explores the complex intersections of the categories of race, class, and gender for analyzing experiences and institutions. Fifth, feminist pedagogy addresses sexism and heterosexism in society. Finally, feminist pedagogy explores honestly issues of sexuality and aids students in developing language to discuss sexualities.

Enns and Forrest (2005) recognize four principles that define feminist pedagogy: power, holistic learning and integrating dichotomies, diversity, and social change. For feminist educators, rather than being an oppressive force, power is “a source of energy, potential, and capacity” (11). Feminist educators integrate emotional learning and personal experience with rational analysis and make connections between objective textbook learning, self-awareness, and personal growth. Multiple and intersecting forms of privilege and oppression are recognized by feminist educators, and in response

“develop knowledge of and sensitivity to a wide array of cultural realities and foster healthy and productive forms of disagreement and conflict resolution” (14). Finally, feminist educators connect ideas in the classroom to social change, “which may include transforming oneself, the learning process, and the larger society” (15).

The view of feminist pedagogy as consciousness-raising is sometimes viewed as the core of feminist pedagogy. Consciousness-raising has four components: sharing experiences and listening nonjudgmentally to others; expressing feelings about these experiences; analyzing these feelings and experiences for antioppressive theory development; and acting to challenge and end oppression (Fisher 1998). In this view, personal experience becomes invaluable to learning. Reinharz (1995, 220-1) conceives of consciousness-raising as “meetings by small groups of women over an extended period of time for the purpose of discussing personal experiences without professional leadership. In these meetings, women attempt to articulate a political analysis that will facilitate change.”

Knowledge is not something that can be imparted upon people; knowledge must be “claimed.” The relationship between the student and the course material is that students can actively learn rather than passively receive (Parry 1996, Robertson 1993). Furthermore, the knowledge is not neutral; it exists within a social and political context (Robertson 1993). Dialogue is often central in active learning; dialogue between the teacher and the student as well as dialogue between students and between knowledge and experience (Wright 1998). This dialogue is crucial in allowing students to relate course material to their own lives and to the lives of others (Boxer 1998). hooks (1994, 86) says, “I am most thrilled when the telling of an experience links discussion of facts or more

abstract concepts to concrete reality.” I think of this moment as the ‘a-ha!’ moment, a place of significant learning. Feminist pedagogy is fueled by these ‘a-ha!’ moments, whether they occur for the student or the teacher.

In the feminist classroom, the teacher and the student bring their own subjectivities and identities. “The key is for the instructor to link discussions of personal identity to knowledge of how to work towards changing and transforming the oppressive parts of society” (Wright 1998). Self-reflection is one avenue for analyzing the relationship between identity and knowledge. Journaling is one tool that encourages self-reflection. Feminist educators assign journals to students because “the journal is considered a safe place for students to address difficult personal issues” (Boxer 1998, 88). Feminist educators to reflect on their own identity and pedagogy also use journals. Other tools for encouraging personal revelation are autobiographical essays, oral histories, visual presentations with film, videotapes, or slides, and role-playing (Boxer 1998). “Feminist instructors, intent on keeping the ‘feminist’ part of our descriptive titles alive, attempt to foster in students a desire for both personal and social change” (Scanlon 1993, 8).

Feminist pedagogy not only challenges what is talked about in the classroom, but also challenges the structure of the classroom. Feminist teachers disrupt hierarchical classrooms, in which the instructor stands at the front of the room and students sit at desks or tables in rows in front of the instructor, by physically changing the classroom, whether by re-arranging the desks from rows into circles or semi-circles or by refusing to stand behind a podium. The physical changes to the classroom allow for shifts in power and create a space which is “collaborative, proactive, and producing change” (Sinacore

and Boatwright 2005, 123). The feminist classroom as a collaborative space confronts the conception of learning as what Paulo Friere calls the banking system, where students are passive consumers that memorize information, regurgitate it, and store it for use later (hooks 1994). Choosing to work against the banking system, hooks argues, is inherently political.

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility within the academy” (hooks 1994, 12). I believe the classroom IS the most radical space of possibility within the academy, for both the teacher and the students. At the end of the semester “unless I provide them with tools ... and unless I encourage them to use what they learn, my work has to some degree been in vain” (Scanlon 1993, 9). The classroom is the space for the teacher to open a dialogue with the students; it is a space for the students to participate in an open dialogue. In the radical space of the feminist classroom, the boundaries between the teacher and student often blur; a feminist activist pedagogy demands such a blurring of boundaries.

## Chapter 3: Methods and Data Analysis

### Feminist Methodology

*“Once a researcher finds herself in a particular situation and recognizes the research potential in her surroundings, she may decide to make a study of it” (Fonow and Cook 1991, 12).*

As a Women’s Studies student, there is potential for research all around me. I am interested in the relationship between feminist activism in the introductory-level Women’s Studies classes and the social justice mission of the Women’s Studies department. Boxer (1998, 32) states, “the introductory courses should begin by defining Women’s Studies and feminism and their relationship.” The introductory-level classes at the University of South Florida include Introduction to Women’s Studies and Issues in Feminism. I chose these two classes because they attract majors and non-majors and they are the two foundational courses for the program. I have two main questions: What is it that the Women’s Studies instructors are doing in the classroom to accomplish the social justice mission of the Department? If it is the case that the instructors could be doing more, what else could be done to accomplish the social justice mission?

To answer these questions I employ a feminist research methodology. “Feminist research methods are methods used in research projects by people who identify themselves as feminist or as part of the women’s movement” (Reinharz 1992, 6). Armstead (1995) identifies three ideals of feminist research: to democratize the relations

between the researcher and the researched; to build knowledge for women; and to galvanize women toward political action in their own interests. Cook and Fonow (1986) outline five basic principles of feminist methodology: continuing and reflexively attending to the significance of gender as a basic feature of all social life; consciousness-raising as central to methodology and as a general orientation; challenging norms of objectivity; concern for the ethical implications of feminist research and recognition that women have been exploited as objects of knowledge; and emphasis on empowerment of women and the transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research. Feminist research is for women rather than about women (Neilson 1990), and the categories of analysis broaden beyond gender to include identity and the intersectionality of identities. As a self-identified feminist researching feminist activism and feminist pedagogy, I am employing a feminist research methodology, or rather, multiple methodologies, also known as triangulation (Reinharz 1992, Cook and Fonow 1986). Neilson (1990) argues that feminist inquiry should include empirical, interpretive, and critical components. Reinharz (1992, 204) points out that a multiple methods approach is useful for long-term projects because “we may learn new ways of doing research or may discover that the circumstances of the people we are studying have changed.” I further argue that the circumstances of the researcher may change and employing multiple methods enables the researcher to build on existing research without having to discard it. In addition, since I am researching one specific department, a multiple methodology allows the research to continue regardless of the composition of the department.

I am not only the researcher, but I am a participant in my own research. I constantly engage in self-reflection, “the tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine

critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process” (Fonow and Cook 1991, 2). I view this research as action oriented, as a process rather than as a quest for the truth (Reinharz 1992, Fonow and Cook 1991, Armstead 1995, Gatenby and Humphries 2000). Furthermore, as action oriented research, the “results should lead to some sort of political action that benefits women” (Armstead 1995, 629). Gatenby and Humphries (2000, 89) outline three components of participatory action research: a commitment to liberationist movements; a commitment to honouring the lived experiences and knowledge of the people involved; and a commitment to ‘genuine collaboration’ in the research. I am emotionally invested and “deeply identified” (Reinharz 1992, 232) with my research as an activist and as a researcher.

There are three ways that personal experience is employed by feminist researchers. The first method is when the researcher starts with personal experience, analyzes it, and does not collect other data. The second method also starts with personal experience, but the researcher is troubled by the experience and collects other data to compare experiences. The third method involves studying other people’s experiences and in the process, recognizing that she or he is part of the group being studied and uses that identification to deepen the study (Reinharz 1992). I follow the second method as far as starting with my own experience as first a student and then a teacher of Women’s Studies and collecting data from other teachers about their pedagogical methods.

“Researchers have an ethical responsibility to their participants to conduct research that will be useful to them; to do otherwise is to expect them to participate in and contribute their labors to a study that benefits only the researcher” (Kumashiro 2002, 17). This research allows the interviewees to reflect on their own pedagogy. In addition,

their experiences become part of the larger research on feminist pedagogy.

### **Data Analysis**

First, I conducted a literature review of historical and contemporary views of pedagogy with a focus on feminist pedagogy. The literature is written not only by feminist researchers, but also by education researchers who identify as feminists. This literature will ground my own perspectives on what is meant by feminist pedagogy.

Second, I conducted a textual analysis of syllabi. At two different points in time, I collected syllabi from the introductory-level Women's Studies classes taught at the University of South Florida over the past 20 years in order to examine how activism is presented in the curriculum. My own syllabus for Introduction to Women's Studies is included in this analysis. I conducted analyses at two different times: the first was in 2006 and the second was in 2009.

Third, I conducted interviews with four former and current Women's Studies faculty and graduate teaching assistants about their experiences teaching the introductory-level Women's Studies classes at the University of South Florida. I interviewed women in my Department because "a feminist interviewing women is by definition both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which she is observing" (Oakley 1981, 57). The interviews, or "pseudo-conversations" (Oakley 1981, 32) lasted an average of thirty minutes, and each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed.

The interviewees were known to me before the interview process, which eliminated some of the power differentials often found in the interview process when the interviewer is distanced from the interviewee and the research, such as the interviewee



having “a passive role in adapting to the definition of the situation offered by the person doing the interviewing” while the interviewer “must actively and continually construct the ‘respondent’ (a telling name) as passive” (Oakley 1981, 35). However, I recognize that this previous relationship may have influenced the responses by the interviewees because “it is sometimes quite difficult for female researchers, and especially feminists, to maintain the role prescribed by traditional methodological structures” (Devault 1990, 101). The traditional role of researcher involves being a mechanical instrument of data collection, having specialized conversation in which one person asks the questions and another gives the answers, the characterization of the interviewee as passive, and reducing interviews to a question-asking and rapport-promoting role (Oakley 1981). In following tradition, I collected data and asked specific questions; by allowing interviewees to deviate from the questions, I recognized them as active participants in the research process.

The interviewees were given the opportunity to disclose their real names in this research or to be identified with a pseudonym; all chose to be recognized by name. I did not gather any demographic information of my interviewees; I only asked three direct and specific questions about their pedagogy: how they interpreted the call to activism; how activism is incorporated in the classroom; and the institutional support or constraint of their ability to create activism. To respect women’s words, I use direct quotes as well as paraphrasing, which allows room for the reader’s analysis as well as providing my own (Reinharz 1992). As a researcher, I recognize that there are things that are “incompletely said” and “my job is to listen for these translations, and to analyze the disjunctures that give rise to them” (Devault 1990, 102).

The purpose of the interviews was not to learn about the participants themselves, but “to see what differences their stories can make to my theoretical framework” (Kumashiro 2002, 18). In other words, I was more interested in the experiences in the classroom than in learning about the person in the classroom. A picture of how feminist activism operates at the curriculum level in the Women’s Studies department cannot be complete without the personal experiences of the women who teach the classes. My interest is in how the women conceptualize their own pedagogy; I present their experiences as they tell them, not how I interpret them.

If “the aim of feminist research is liberation” (Fonow and Cook 1991, 6), this research may be utilized by anyone interested in using feminist pedagogy as a tool of liberation. This research provides an example of how activism operates on one campus of one university, but the experiences of the feminist instructors are in no way unique to this one location.

## Chapter 4: Results

At the beginning of each semester, each instructor in the Women's Studies Department is required to submit her or his syllabus to the Department for archiving; many are submitted in hard copy, although more recently they are submitted electronically as well. The Department has experienced two major moves since 1999, which means that many physical copies of syllabi and other archival records were potentially lost in the shuffle.

I conducted two different textual analyses of available syllabi from courses entitled Issues in Feminism and Introduction to Women's Studies. The first analysis, which included syllabi I collected from the Department office manager in the Fall of 2006 and syllabi I collected directly from instructors in the Spring of 2005, was conducted in the fall semester of 2006 and included 14 syllabi from Fall 2000 through Fall 2006; the second analysis, which included syllabi that were discovered by a new Department office manager in Fall 2008 and syllabi that I collected after soliciting instructors, was conducted in the spring semester of 2009 and included 49 syllabi from Spring 1990 to Fall 2008. In addition, I revisited the first set of syllabi, taking into account information gathered during the interviews. The purpose of the analysis is to examine how each instructor is presenting feminist activism in each course on paper. The syllabi for the Spring and the Fall semesters are both set up for 16 weeks: 15 weeks of class and the last week for the final exam. There are three different Summer sessions offered every year:

“A” and “B,” which are each six weeks in length; and “C,” which is ten weeks in length. The length of the semester helps to give context for the structure of the course.

In the first level of analysis, I read the syllabi, first examining the required and recommended texts assigned for the course and the written course description and objectives to see what voices and perspectives were guiding the course. I then looked for the keyword “activism,” whether in the course description and objectives, in the course requirements, or in the course outline. Finally, I looked for what I perceived to be visible feminist activist requirements in the course description and/or the objectives and assignments/activities, such as attending activist events either on or off campus or performing community service. In this stage, I used my own understanding of feminist activism, which I define as confronting and taking action against oppression, in identifying activism in the curricula.

In the second analysis, I revisited the first 14 syllabi after conducting my interviews and examined an additional 49 syllabi. Building upon the earlier analysis of both the keyword of activism and my perception of activism, I expanded my own definitions and perceptions, incorporating the definitions and perceptions of activism provided from each of the instructors that I interviewed. I expanded my keyword search, realizing that the word “activism” is limiting, looking for terms such as “social change,” “transformation,” and “women’s movements” or “social movements.” I looked for instances of activism cited by the instructors that did not necessarily meet my previous definitions or perceptions. In the first analysis, I was limited by my own definitions and biases of what constitutes feminist activism, so this second analysis allowed me to create a bigger picture of the feminist activism that occurs in the classroom. In the second

analysis, I focused more on the course outline than on the course descriptions and objectives because the interviews allowed for discussions of what actually occurred in the classroom; the interviews made visible what was not previously visible. I also took note of specific instances of feminist activism that were mentioned in the interviews that did not appear on the syllabus.

### **Introduction to Women's Studies**

I had nine syllabi, including the syllabus from my own course, ranging from the Spring of 2000 to the Fall of 2006. All syllabi were from either the Spring or Fall semesters. It is important to note that all nine of these syllabi were from graduate teaching assistants. This is an important point for two reasons: the first is that each graduate teaching assistant may teach a particular course only once or twice in her<sup>6</sup> career as a graduate student in the Women's Studies department. It is difficult to determine from reading the syllabus alone whether this is a first-semester instructor or a more experienced instructor. The drawback of a first-semester syllabus is that the instructor does not have the benefit of self-reflection that is so critical to feminist pedagogy (Boxer 1998). The second reason is that many graduate teaching assistants model their syllabi on the syllabi of other graduate teaching assistants. In this level of analysis, I noticed particular phrases and assignments were identical verbatim among several of the syllabi. It is not uncommon for Women's Studies instructors at any level to borrow syllabus content from other instructors.

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<sup>6</sup> I use the pronoun "her" here with caution. Although there are male graduate teaching assistants in the department, all of the syllabi I reviewed at this point were from females. I feel it is important to use feminine pronouns when applicable rather than rely on general or "gender-neutral" (often-read male) pronouns.

The first thing I looked for in this level of analysis was the required and recommended texts for the class. Although many instructors did supplement required texts with electronic reserve readings, which are electronic documents that students can access through the University of South Florida library website and are often expected to print out to bring to class, all instructors did assign physical texts for the course. The number of assigned texts ranged from two to seven, with 3.6 being the mean and four being the mode, appearing on four syllabi. Among the nine syllabi, there were several texts that were common to several instructors, although because of the time span of the syllabi, different editions of the book were used. The text that was a requirement on the most syllabi, six, including my own, was *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions* by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, which is an introductory-level Women's Studies textbook. The second most common text was *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World* by Joni Seager (previously published as *The State of Women in the World Atlas*), which appeared on five syllabi. This book is a reference book that provides specific topical information about women all over the world. The book features a map for each topic, with color-coded graphs, charts, and other information. Six different instructors used novels as texts, although no two syllabi had specific novels in common. Two other texts each appeared on two syllabi: *Women, Images, and Realities* by Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Schniedewind and *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. There were twelve other texts represented on the syllabi, including one magazine. The range of titles and types of texts used, as well as the supplemental readings on reserve, demonstrate that Women's Studies classes integrate a broad range of voices in the classroom.

The course description and objectives varied for each syllabus, but there are several objectives in common among the syllabi. One objective is to examine women's experiences and lives, and how those experiences are situated historically, politically, and culturally, often through texts written by or about women. Another objective is to look at the way gender shapes women (and men, although this is explicitly mentioned on only one syllabus), as well as how gender, race, class, and sexuality are socially constructed. One syllabus states the importance of deciphering values and how those values are reinforced or undermined. Only two syllabi specifically mention "activism" in the course description and objectives: the first one encourages students to develop feminist foundations for and useful methods of activism; the second one encourages students to understand the role that activism plays in Women's Studies. The course description and objectives are useful for determining when instructors explicitly include activism and social change as integral to the course.

The keyword "activism" appeared as a topic in the course content of four of the syllabi, and all were located near the end of the semester. Two instructors had "Activism" as one of the topics during week 14; also during week 14 one instructor had the topic of "Women's Activism and the Future of Feminism." One instructor divided the course content into two units with activism the central theme for the second unit of the semester, which was from week six forward. Although not specifically listed as activism, one instructor did include the topic of "Feminism as a Social Movement" for week three. Activism was not specifically mentioned as a topic or unit for the remaining four syllabi.

In the final part of this analysis, I looked for assignments and activities that I interpreted to be activist in nature, because as Enns and Forrest (2005, 15) argue,

“activism can also be integrated into class projects and papers.” All nine instructors utilized ongoing self-reflective journaling as a student assignment. As discussed in the previous chapter, the use of journals is a feminist pedagogical tool to encourage students to relate personal experience to the course material. I perceive this to be a form of activism because students are often required to confront and challenge topics that test their personal values and beliefs. Journals were required on a weekly basis, but length requirements, quantity requirements, and collection requirements varied across the syllabi.

Another activity that invites students to confront their personal values and beliefs is the “Liberating Act,” which was a requirement for five of the instructors and an option for one other instructor. The Liberating Act is an assignment where the student must push her or his personal boundaries or beliefs in a self-chosen act. Each instructor had different requirements for this act, but all instructors did require that the student write a paper about her or his experiences performing the act.

Activism appeared as an extra credit opportunity for two of the instructors, allowing students who engaged in feminist activism outside of the classroom to write a short paper about their experiences. Other ways that activism appeared as an assignment or activity included an instructor who had students choose four of the activities provided in the Shaw and Lee text to perform throughout the semester and write a short paper about each activity. One instructor assigned a creative expression identity project, which was assigned during the topic of “Women, Art, and Culture” where students were instructed to “develop your own form of expression that explores aspects of your own identity” (E.A., Spring 2005). The self-reflection and the exploration required for this



project make it both feminist and activist. One instructor assigned a media analysis project. Finally, one instructor required students to engage in at least three hours of feminist activism outside of the classroom, although students were able to choose how and when they were going to engage in activism, with the instructor's guidance and approval.

By analyzing these nine syllabi, it is apparent that activism is present in the texts of many classes; understanding or performing activism is an explicit course objective for many classes; and activism is present in every class through projects and activities. Even when not explicitly mentioned, activism is taking place in the course discussions and the projects and activities.

After conducting my interviews, I performed another analysis. I had 29 syllabi from Spring 1990 through Fall 2008. In this group of syllabi, I had three syllabi for summer courses, two for session B and one for session C. Furthermore, one summer B syllabus was for an online class. The majority of these syllabi were from professors, and several professors taught the course in multiple semesters with only minor changes in the structure and content of their syllabi.

As with the first analysis, the first thing I looked for were the texts for the class. Only one instructor assigned a course packet instead of a text or texts, and 18 other syllabi supplemented a text or texts with reserved readings (either Electronic Reserves or library reserves depending on the year the course was taught) or course packets. There were 41 different texts assigned across the syllabi. Assigned texts ranged from one to six, with two being the mean and four being the mode, appearing on eight syllabi. There were four different texts that appeared on six syllabi: *Issues in Feminism* by Sheila Ruth, an

introductory-level Women's Studies textbook; *Women, Images and Realities* by Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Schniedewind, also an introductory-level Women's Studies textbook; *Gate to Women's Country*, a novel by Sheri S. Tepper; and the pamphlet *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. Other common texts include *WAC Stats: The Facts About Women* by Andrea Blum and Jule Harrison, which was present on five syllabi; *Race, Class and Gender* by Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins appeared on four syllabi; and on three syllabi each were *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions* by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World* by Joni Seager, and *Women's Lives, Multicultural Perspectives* by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey. Three other texts, *Changing Our Power: An Introduction to Women's Studies* by Jo Whitehorse Cochran, Donna Langston, and Carolyn Woodward, *Women, Race and Class* by Angela Davis, and *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* by Gloria Steinam each appeared on two syllabi. There were 29 other texts represented, including three magazines and one film. There was a greater variety of texts in this second set of syllabi, which demonstrates a greater variety of voices.

The course description and objectives for the syllabi varied, and there were 11 syllabi that had none listed. One common objective was to provide a feminist analysis and critique of the status, roles, experiences, problems, and lives of women, in the US and internationally, both currently and in the past. Several of the syllabi specifically mentioned changing the lives of women, changing the lives of students, or changing society as an extension of this critique. One instructor stated that a goal of the course was "to promote constructive social action and change, recognizing that change begins at

home, the self being the primary unit of evolution” (G.G., Fall 1995). The linking of the feminist movement with Women’s Studies was another common objective. One instructor listed “rediscovering women as active social and historical agents” (D.S., year unknown) as an objective.

The keywords “activism,” “social change,” and “women’s movements” appeared as topics on 16 syllabi. The topic “Feminist Activism” appeared on five syllabi, in week 11 for two syllabi, week 14 for two syllabi, and on week 4 as “Feminist Theory and Feminist Action” for another. One instructor’s final theme for the course, which was included on the syllabus for three different semesters, was “Putting it All Together: Awareness/Practice/Action” (C.D., Fall 1996, Spring 1997, and Fall 1999). One instructor’s final of five units, which was used for two different semesters, was “Solutions to Women’s Problems, Including the Women’s Movement and Feminism from Past to Present” (R.W., Fall 1996 and Spring 1997). The topic “Activism, Change, and Feminist Frontiers,” which is the title of the final chapter of the Shaw and Lee text, appeared in week 14 for one instructor and week 15 for another instructor. “The Women’s Movement Into the Next Century” was the topic for week 14 for one instructor; “Creating Change: Theory, Vision and Action” was the topic for the final class for one instructor; the topic for week 14 for one instructor was “Women Globally and Social Movements”; and finally, one instructor titled the final class “Creating Change.”

Activism was represented on the syllabi in other ways as well. Weekly journals were a requirement for ten syllabi, and one syllabus listed journals as an optional activity. One instructor deviated from the practice of journals as self-reflective and instead required students to write entries as letters to the editor of local newspapers or magazines

based on current articles. Other projects and papers that were required include reaction essays for three syllabi; the use of a listserv or bulletin board created specifically for the course was required on three different syllabi; the presentation of objects representing women's culture appeared on two syllabi; a Liberating Act was required by one instructor in two different semesters; an oral history report for one instructor and an autobiography for another instructor; an ongoing Learner's Log for one instructor; the creation of a website for a women's organization for one instructor; an Internet project, a media project, and a women and work project, each required for one instructor; a discussion starter folio for one instructor and presentation of readings for another instructor; a group reflective paper for one instructor; a paper about "Gender in Everyday Life" for one instructor; a film response for one instructor; and finally, survey work for one instructor. Two different instructors created activism in the classroom by allowing the students to choose the content topics for the last weeks of the class.

One instructor included in the syllabus directions for a closing ritual, which was to occur in the last fifteen minutes of each class period. This closing ritual was a space for each student to speak in class. Students had the option of passing on their turn to speak, but everyone was responsible for listening to what each student had to say. This ritual is feminist because it actively engages each student and it is activist because it gives every student in the classroom a voice.

Revisiting the first nine syllabi, activism became apparent in other ways than previously determined. The discussion format of the class opens the space for activism. Active participation was a graded requirement for a total of 30 of the 38 collected syllabi. In addition, listening was specifically listed as a requirement on six of the syllabi. One

instructor described listening to women as “an active political act” (C.D., Fall 1996, Spring 1997, Fall 1999).

The presence of activism became more apparent with this second analysis. Expanding the keywords allowed me to recognize more activist topics on the course outline. The activities and projects challenged students to participate in feminist analyses of themselves and the world.

### **Issues in Feminism**

I had five syllabi from the Fall of 2000 to the Fall of 2005. Four of the syllabi were from graduate teaching assistants, including two from consecutive semesters by the same instructor, and one syllabus was from an adjunct professor who had recently graduated from the department. One specific point of relevance here is that unlike Introduction to Women’s Studies, which is usually offered in several sections by several instructors each semester, Issues in Feminism is usually offered as one section and by only one instructor, and is not available every semester. It is also important to note that Issues in Feminism is intended to be the second part, or the follow-up, to Introduction to Women’s Studies, but there is no prerequisite for the course, so it may be the first Women’s Studies course for many students.

There are significantly fewer assigned texts represented on the five syllabi, although as in the case of the Introduction to Women’s Studies course, supplemental readings were available through Electronic Reserve. Two instructors did not require any textbooks for their courses. One instructor had the same two assigned texts for each semester she taught: *Listen Up!: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* by Barbara

Findlen, an anthology of short essays written by feminists that identify with the third wave, and *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* by Paula S. Rothenberg, an introductory-level Women's Studies textbook. The other instructor also had two texts: *Women's Minds/Women's Bodies* by Joan H. Rollins, another introductory-level Women's Studies textbook, and *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich, one woman's personal undercover experience of minimum wage jobs in America. There were no other texts assigned. These texts reflected more personal experiences rather than authoritative textbooks.

The course description and objectives among the Issues in Feminism syllabi, although worded quite differently, were much more similar than among the Introduction to Women's studies syllabi, and explicit references to activism appeared on only one syllabus. One instructor focuses on key concepts and issues relevant to the contemporary US feminist movement; another instructor puts women's lives at the center of the course study; yet another instructor analyzes women's experiences from an interdisciplinary approach; and finally, one instructor, among several questions, asks how individuals and groups encourage social change to eradicate gender discrimination, racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.

The keyword "activism" appeared on only one syllabus, where the topic for week 10 was "Contemporary Feminist Social Activism." This topic appears several weeks earlier than in the Introduction to Women's Studies classes.

Among course activities and assignments, three of the instructors include ongoing self-reflexive journaling and the fourth refers to weekly writing assignments, and although not specifically labeled as journaling, these do require some self-reflection from

the student. Two of the instructors assign a Liberating Act. One additional assignment that is activist in nature is what one instructor refers to as the “Feminist Artifact,” in which students are expected to find an object, such as an audio or film clip, a newspaper article, or even an excerpt from a book that demonstrates feminism(s) in action. The purpose of this assignment is to make students aware that feminism is not something that occurred only in history, but that feminist acts continue to happen in the present (S.Q., Fall 2005).

For the Issues in Feminism class, the presence of activism appears more in the activities and assignments and in the course objectives than in the outline of the course or the texts. The Feminist Artifact project in particular is an example of how students are encouraged to identify current expressions of feminism. There were fewer texts assigned than in Introduction to Women’s Studies, with only four total texts assigned, which demonstrates how the Issues in Feminism class has a narrower, more topic-specific content than the Introduction to Women’s Studies class.

I had 19 syllabi from Summer 1992 through Spring 2006, which included syllabi from five Summer courses. The majority of the syllabi were from professors, and the same instructors often taught multiple semesters of the class. The wording of the syllabi was more similar with this group of syllabi than with any of the other groups analyzed, which again can be contributed to the shared pedagogy that occurs frequently within Women’s Studies.

There were 20 different texts represented among the syllabi, and eight different syllabi supplemented the texts with reserved readings. Assigned texts ranged from one to seven, with 2.65 being the mean and two being the mode, appearing on eight syllabi. The

most common text was Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* by Elly Bulkin, *Surface Tension: Love, Sex and Politics Between Lesbians and Straight Women* by Meg Daly, *Debating Sexual Correctness: Pornography, Sexual Harassment, Date Rape, and the Politics of Sexual Equality* by Adele Stan, and *Women's Lives, Multicultural Perspectives* by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey each appeared on four syllabi. Three different syllabi included *All American Woman* by Johnetta B. Cole and each of the following appeared on two syllabi: *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Wolfe, *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances* by Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer, *Race, Class and Gender* by Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, and *Race Class and Gender in the United States* by Paula S. Rothenberg. Six other texts each appeared once on the syllabi. Again, there was less reliance on standard textbooks and more inclusion of personal narratives.

The course description and objectives for the syllabi were very similar, and there were four that had none listed. Feminist proposals of social transformation/change and examining the issue of political activism appeared as an objective on 12 syllabi. To become familiar with the history of the women's movement and to develop organizing and activist skills was an objective for one instructor for two different semesters. One instructor's objective included "the ability to utilize a feminist approach to academics, including the place of personal experience and activism in the study of women" (SC, Fall 2004). One instructor had the objective to "examine not only the critiques of contemporary society by feminists but also point to possible alternatives for the future suggested by these critiques" (J.O., year unknown).



The keyword “activism” appeared as a topic on only four syllabi, but representations of activism appeared on nine more syllabi. One instructor titled the last unit of her Summer B course “Activism.” “Activism and Change” was a topic during week 7 for one instructor’s Summer C course. One instructor’s final class was “Creating Change: Theory, Vision, and Action” was the title for two different classes, a title that is taken from the Kirk and Okazawa-Rey text. One instructor held a mock conference for her final class meetings in three different semesters, and classes were titled “Conference on Women’s Multicultural Alliances/Gender Issues and Social Change.” These conferences grew out of her previous class, whose final class meeting was “Women’s Multicultural Alliances.” The topic “Resistance and Strategies for Social Change” was the title of the last class meetings for two different instructors. Another instructor titled her last class “Feminist Strategies/Looking Forward.” One instructor’s topic for week 13 was “Feminism, the Global Context, and the Future.” Finally, “What Are We Going to Do About It?: Creating Change” was the final topic for one instructor.

Activism was represented on the syllabi through projects and papers. Again, weekly journaling was a common assignment, appearing on 12 syllabi. Two syllabi required a Liberating Act, two required a current event summary, and two required participation in an online bulletin board. Other projects that each appeared once include a “Gender Bender” project, which resembles a Liberating Act in the requirement of pushing student’s boundaries; a critical essay; a webpage/article summary/analysis; a media evaluation project; a group reflection paper; and finally, a film response. One instructor encouraged the boycott of Nike for the labor day holiday, although it was not a requirement.

Revisiting the first five syllabi, it became apparent that one syllabi that had previously been determined to have no assigned texts actually included films as texts. The films were shown in class; therefore, the students were not responsible for purchasing them. Other omissions of manifestations of activism include a current event summary assigned by one instructor and a media evaluation by another. Active participation was a requirement for all of the first five syllabi and for nine of the second set of syllabi.

Activism was explicitly stated as a course objective for more than half of the syllabi in this second analysis. Active participation and the projects and papers are the key ways that feminist occurs in the Issues in Feminism course.

## **Interviews**

Between December 2006 and September 2007, I conducted interviews with current faculty members and graduate students who have taught either Introduction to Women's Studies or Issues in Feminism courses since the program began. Each interviewee was asked the same three questions, but conversations that extended beyond those three questions were not discouraged. The interviews were brief, with each interview conducted in less than thirty minutes. The responses were organized and analyzed by question, although many of the themes and responses overlapped. Each interviewee agreed to have her first name and status used in this paper.

I interviewed one professor, Marilyn, who began teaching at the University of South Florida in 1972 and retired after the Spring 2008 semester. The remaining three interviews were with graduate students. Jodi has been teaching in the Women's Studies

department the longest and has taught both introductory-level classes. Clare taught Introduction to Women's Studies for four semesters between the Fall of 2005 and the Spring of 2007, when she graduated from the Women's Studies department. Leisa began teaching Introduction to Women's Studies in the Fall of 2006 and taught both introductory-level classes several times before she graduated in the Spring of 2008.

The three interview questions were:

1. Feminist pedagogy/Women's Studies scholarship advocates for social change. This implies that we engage and encourage students in engage in some form of activism. As a Women's Studies scholar, how do you interpret that call to activism?
2. What are some of the practical ways that you incorporate activism in the classroom? What about outside of the classroom?
3. Some educational settings are more or less amenable to encourage and facilitate social change. How has the University of South Florida facilitated or constrained your ability to create activism?

### *The Call to Activism*

One recurring theme throughout the interviews was that teaching a women's studies class is a form of activism. One of the self-defined founders of the early Women's Studies courses, including the Introduction to Women's Studies course, Marilyn, noted that in the beginning, teaching a Women's Studies class was an act against the bureaucracy of the university. The founders had to fight for classes and fight for a department, a struggle that continues today. Clare pointed out "active women in history have created Women's Studies," which allows activism to "naturally happen" in Women's Studies classes. Marilyn describes early Women's Studies courses as focusing on consciousness-raising, about turning on and opening up changes in students own lives, such as roles and identities. Marilyn notes that current students are more familiar with feminist issues. Jodi says, "I challenge issues that are promoted in the mainstream

culture, and critically discuss issues that, at time[s], these young people have never actually considered.”

Another way that the introductory-level Women’s Studies classes answer the call to activism is by creating a place and space where students, both majors and non-majors, are allowed and encouraged to find their own voices. Clare emphasizes that these classes allow students to be less afraid to participate and advocate in class discussions than they do in other classes. Leisa finds it especially important to reach out to non-majors who may not have the same feminist foundations as Women’s Studies majors to recognize oppression and speak out against it.

The call to activism entails providing the option of getting students involved in the community or on campus by attending talks and events and writing about them. One option available to students from the beginning of the program was to volunteer at places such as the Spring, the local domestic violence shelter. Oftentimes students are given credit or extra credit for taking initiative and doing feminist work, even when not explicitly required by the instructor.

### *Manifestations of Activism*

Activism occurs both inside and outside of the classroom. At the most basic level, several instructors pointed out that the choice of course readings and topics are examples of activism. The early courses focused on the women’s movement and women’s agency. The reading lists for the recent and current introductory courses include many marginalized voices that are invisible in other classes, voices of people that have historically been oppressed. These voices include, but are not limited to, women of color,

lesbians, transgendered persons, transsexuals, and women involved with sex work.

Although many instructors push students to go out in the community to perform service to the advantage of women or participate in campus events, many of the instructors bring the community into the classroom in the form of guest speakers and guest panels, such as sexual orientation panels. A sexual orientation panel is a panel composed of students and community members of varying sexual orientations that allow students to ask them personal questions in order to break down stereotypes and misconceptions about sexual orientation. As Leisa explains, these speakers allow students to “put a face to ideas.” The speakers act as a bridge between the ideas that students read and the lived experiences of actual people. Leisa further notes that the speakers also “encourage students to think about how they view the world.” Marilyn notes that the use of certain films in the classroom, or the encouragement of viewing certain films outside of the classroom, is another way to connect experiences to the topics. Jodi states, “I promote activism in the classroom by examining the personal views that people hold and allow[ing] them time to deconstruct and re-form these views.”

One way to get students to work through their views is through group discussions of readings and issues. Group discussions facilitate the sharing of personal experiences. The emphasis on personal experience is a classic tenet of feminism, as noted by the popular slogan, “the personal is political.” Women’s Studies classrooms are often the first place that students are made to feel that their personal experiences can contribute to academic discourse, mainly because personal experiences are not necessarily valued in other classrooms. Furthermore, Jodi states “I believe a great deal of people’s causes that they become activists for [are] issues that personally affect them through personal

tragedy.” Jodi uses herself as an example. Jodi devotes one class period for every course that she teaches on HIV/AIDS because of how many people in her family have been affected by the disease.

The use of journals is a common practice among the introductory-level Women’s Studies classes. Journals allow students to respond to readings, issues, activities, and anything else from the classroom. It is a one-on-one dialogue between the student and the instructor, and many of the instructors interviewed noted the time and effort spent reading and responding to these journals. As students work through their own ideas by journaling, they have the opportunity to examine where their beliefs come from, and potentially come to the realization that these beliefs can and may change. Leisa explains to her students that they should not assume where they stand on an issue. She emphasizes that teaching is activism when it allows students to realize that they can change and that they can do things like the people that they are reading about or meeting as guest speakers.

Students are also encouraged to critically examine their ideas through writing research papers. Jodi assigns research papers to her students and grades students on their ability to analyze the subject fully. Students are obligated to move beyond their own personal opinions and look at the bigger picture.

Clare encourages her students to use the Internet to do further research beyond the readings. In particular, Clare has students look at organizations that are involved in the issues that they are reading. For example, when discussing women in the workplace, Clare had students research unions, such as the AFL-CIO. This is another instance of allowing students to put actual faces to what they are reading, and allows for the realization that this work continues, that it is not something relegated to the history

books.

One form of activism that Leisa is especially passionate about in her classroom is getting students to vote, because “not voting is a slap in the face to women suffragists.” Leisa helps students stay informed of election issues so that they can become educated voters. By providing the information, Leisa allows her students to make their own decisions about whether to vote and how to vote.

After taking the introductory-level Women’s Studies classes, many students go on to careers and degrees that they may not have chosen before taking the classes. Marilyn professes her “Grandmother pride” when students go on to earn a PhD or to do activist work. The fact that students do continue with important feminist work demonstrates the legacy of the Women’s Studies experience.

### *The Facilitation of Activism*

The Women’s Studies department exists as an autonomous department, which, as Marilyn points out, gives faculty and students a distinctive level of freedom, although with limits from the university. All of the graduate students that I interviewed agreed that the department provides both encouragement and support for activism. Leisa notes that the support<sup>7</sup> the department provides to the Feminist Student Alliance (FSA), an on-campus feminist group, is proof that the department cares about activism. Clare notes that she has never had a problem with department, stating that she does what she does in the classroom and is “waiting for the hammer to fall,” meaning that she will continue what she is doing until she is asked to stop.

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<sup>7</sup> The department supports the FSA by providing them with office space, with a meeting space, with use of the copy machine, and by advertising their events throughout the department, including allowing the FSA to distribute flyers through the department mailboxes.

Although the department is a great source of encouragement and support, the University of South Florida as a whole is not necessarily as encouraging. Clare notes that encouraging activism is not squelched, but it is not really promoted by the university. Jodi echoes this sentiment: “I believe that the University of South Florida’s Women’s Studies department is very encouraging for activism. However, I am not necessarily sure that the university in general supports our liberal and free thinking.”

One way that activism is hindered by the Women’s Studies Department is through the lack of financial resources. The Department is small and struggling, and runs on a very tight budget. The resources the Department does provide to students is aimed at student scholarship. The Marilyn laments that there just are not enough resources to support student activism financially, and laments that the lack of resources prevents more connections to the community. This has not stopped faculty members from providing money out of their own pockets to help student activists, such as when members of the FSA traveled to South Dakota in November of 2006 to help overturn the state’s anti-abortion law. Leisa noted that informing students of the South Dakota trip by inviting the participants to speak in her classroom allowed her students to realize that they too can do things to change policy.

Another way that activism is hindered is by choosing not to disclose politics unless related specifically to the readings or activities. All instructors face the challenge of how much to disclose to their students; for feminist instructors, self-disclosure is a component of feminist pedagogy. Jodi feels comfortable sharing her experiences with HIV/AIDS because she feels that putting a face to AIDS activism is beneficial to students. However, disclosing personal politics can be detrimental to an instructor’s



position within the university, and it demonstrates one of the costs of activism.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

I began this research with two basic questions: what are the instructors in the Women's Studies Department doing to accomplish the social justice mission of the department and what more could be done to accomplish that mission. I utilized a text-based analysis of syllabi and conducted interviews with faculty and graduate teaching assistants. I participated in my research first by being a part of the Women's Studies Department and utilizing the resources around me, by including my own syllabus as part of the analysis, and by continually engaging with my own conceptions of feminist activism as well as examining the way the research has influence my own pedagogy. I learned that activism does not always appear in specific terminology, and that activism need not be physical or visible. After this research, I feel that my pedagogy has improved by creating a more open classroom dialogue and allowing students to determine their own level of activism.

Analyzing the syllabi enabled me to explore the ways that activism is said to be occurring within the two introductory-level classes. Activism was apparent in specific ways, by mention of as course topics, objectives, or in projects, and it was also alluded to in the structure of the courses. I analyzed a total of 53 syllabi from Introduction to Women's Studies and Issues in Feminism from 1990 through 2008. There were 34 different instructors, from 15 professors, 14 graduate students, and the status of the remaining five being unknown. There were 87 total texts across the syllabi, including ten

different texts that were utilized by both courses. The keywords I used to “find” activism, which began with first “activism,” and then “social change” and “women’s movements,” allowed me to “see” that activism as a topic appeared 25 times. Common objectives for the two courses include the importance of women’s experiences, examining social change, and locating the feminist movement both historically and in contemporary times. The assignment of self-reflective journals was present on 34 syllabi, and the Liberating Act was present on 11 syllabi. Other assignments that required self-reflection and feminist analysis occurred on the majority of the syllabi.

The four interviews made visible what was not apparent from reading the syllabi by demonstrating the experiences in the classroom. The use of guest speakers and panels, the extra work that takes place online and outside of the classroom, and the nature of the classroom discussions open the possibilities for feminist activism. The syllabi present what is supposed to occur in the classroom; interviews allow a deeper conversation about how activities and discussions play out in the space of the classroom.

Researchers, and in particular feminist researchers, face obstacles such as limits to access, records, peoples, or activities. “Feminists have to be particularly resourceful when it comes to getting around these obstacles” (Fonow and Cook 1991, 12). In the three years that it has taken me to write this thesis, I have faced many obstacles, getting around many, but still being limited by access. The discovery of additional syllabi was one way to overcome the shortage of interviews conducted. A multiple methodology allowed for a shift in my research to accommodate the additional syllabi and expand the scope of the analysis. The syllabus analysis set the stage for expectations of where activism occurs in the classroom; the interviews highlighted the actors in the production of feminist

activism.

Feminist activism is present in the introductory-level Women's Studies courses at the University of South Florida, both on paper and in praxis. Feminist activist pedagogy is present in the textbooks, articles, magazines, and films assigned to each class. Feminist activist pedagogy is present in the course objectives and descriptions in the two courses. Feminist activist pedagogy is present in the assigned papers, projects, and activities, from journals to analytical projects. Finally, feminist activist pedagogy is present through the instructors that link feminist activism to the course materials.

For Women's Studies courses that claim feminist activism as a course objective, whether explicitly stating activism as an objective or simply alluding to activism, instructors have a responsibility to guide students when they choose their feminist activist pursuits. Instructors should provide resources to students whenever possible, such as by distributing information about topics that interest students and events in which students can participate at the level of their choosing.

Journals are an excellent tool for self-reflectivity, as are autobiographical projects. Other classroom activities that are self-reflective include in-class writing responses to course material, especially when classroom discussion become polarizes by sensitive material and short response papers to current events, which can be in the form of a letter to the editor. Feminist instructors should encourage students to examine their beliefs in order to foster personal change and growth.

As students become more reliant on the Internet, feminist instructors can use the Internet to their advantage. Allowing students to research feminist organizations is one way for instructors to use the Internet. Another way to use the Internet is to allow

students to blog about course topics and discussions on one of the many free blog sites available. Instructors can take advantage of the University's computer platforms to create discussion boards and listservs to allow for discussion beyond the space of the classroom.

The two introductory-level Women's Studies courses at the University of South Florida are offered each semester, but the more it can be offered, the more of an impact the courses can have. The courses are upper-level, which attracts students at all levels of their education, but the sooner students enroll in these courses, the more likely they are to be impacted by the course content, and the more likely they are to seek other Women's Studies courses.

"Many would argue that teaching Women's Studies itself constitutes political action" (Boxer 1998, 174). Continuing to teach Women's Studies in a political climate that devalues liberal arts education in general and identity-based curricula specifically is a form of political activism. The Women's Studies classroom sustains a legacy of the feminist movement, linking past and current feminist struggles for students that may be unaware of their existence. The continued struggle for Women's Studies to remain viable autonomous Departments and programs highlights the need for a feminist activist pedagogy.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A - List of Texts by Title

*Addams Family Values*  
*All American Woman* by Johnetta B. Cole  
*Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison  
*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison  
*Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and Body Image* by Ophira Edut  
*The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* by Joan Jacobs Brumberg  
*Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances* by Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer  
*Bust Magazine*  
*Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel* by Jean Kilbourne  
*Caught in Crisis: Women and the U.S. Economy Today* by Teresa Amott  
*Changing Our Power: An Introduction to Women's Studies* by Jo Whitehorse Cochran, Donna Langston, and Carolyn Woodward  
*Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* by Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman  
*Conflicts in Feminism* by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller  
*Couldn't Keep it to Myself: Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Institution (Testimonies from our Imprisoned Sisters)* by Wally Lamb  
*Debating Sexual Correctness: Pornography, Sexual Harassment, Date Rape, and the Politics of Sexual Equality* by Adele Stan  
*Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks  
*Feminist Fatale: Voices from the Twentysomething Generation* by Paula Kamen  
*Feminist Frontiers* by Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor  
*Feminist Theory: A Reader* by Wendy Kolmer and Francis Bartowski  
*Fraternity Gang Rape* by Peggy Reeves Sanday  
*Free Spirits* by Kate Mehuran and Gary Percesepe  
*Gate to Women's Country* by Sheri S. Tepper  
*Gender Race and Class in the Media* by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez  
*Glamour Magazine*  
*Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards  
*The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy  
*A Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood  
*Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman  
*Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* by Suzanne Pharr  
*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros  
*Immigrant Women* by Maxine Schwartz Seller  
*An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World* by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan  
*Issues in Feminism* by Sheila Ruth

*Listen Up!: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* by Barbara Findlen  
*The Meaning of Difference: American Constructions of Race, Sex, and Gender, Social Class, and Sexual Orientation* by Karen Rosenblum and Toni-Michelle Travis  
*MS. Magazine*  
*Nickel and Dime* by Barbara Ehrenreich  
*No Turning Back* by Estelle B. Freedman  
*Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* by Gloria Steinam  
*The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World* by Joni Seager  
*Perspectives: Women's Studies* by Renae Bredin  
*Race, Class and Gender* by Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins  
*Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* by Paula S. Rothenberg  
*Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* by Toni Morrison  
*Race, Gender and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States* by Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei  
*Radical Voices: A Decade of Feminist Resistance from "Women's Studies International Forum"* by Renate D. Klein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg  
*A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Wolfe  
*Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture, and Identity* by Elena Featherstone  
*A Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid  
*Surface Tension: Love, Sex and Politics Between Lesbians and Straight Women* by Meg Daly  
*Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender* by Margaret L. Anderson  
*this bridge called my back* by gloria anzaldúa and cherrie moraga  
*To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* by Rebecca Walker  
*Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* by Dorothy Allison  
*WAC Stats: The Facts About Women* by Andrea Blum and Jule Harrison  
*When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* by Joan Morgan  
*Wicked* by Gregory Maguire  
*Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English  
*Women: A Feminist Perspective* by Jo Freeman  
*Women, Images, and Realities* by Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Schniedewind  
*Women in American Society: An Introduction to Women's Studies* by Virginia Sapico  
*Women in the Global Factory* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Annette Fuentes  
*Women, Race and Class* by Angela Davis  
*Women's Minds/Women's Bodies* by Joan H. Rollins  
*Women's Lives, Multicultural Perspectives* by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey  
*Women's Realities, Women's Choices: An Introduction to Women's Studies* by Hunter College Women's Studies Collective  
*Women's Voices, Feminist Visions* by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee  
*A World Full of Women* by Marth Ward  
*Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* by Elly Bulkin

## Appendix B - List of Syllabi

Table B-1: Introduction to Women's Studies

<b>Term</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Instructor's Initials</b>
Semester I 1990	WST 3010	Dr. J. O.
Spring 1990	WST 3010	Dr. B. R-C.
Fall 1991	WST 3010	Dr. L. M.
Spring 1992	WST 3010	Dr. K. V.
Spring 1994	WST 3010	Dr. K. V.
Fall 1995	WST 3010-001	Dr. G. G.
Fall 1995	WST 3010	L. S.
Spring 1996	WST 3010	L. S.
Summer B 1996	WST 3010	Dr. K. V.
Fall 1996	WST 3010	Dr. R. W.
Fall 1996	WST 3010	Dr. C. D.
Spring 1997	WST 3010	Dr. R. W.
Spring 1997	WST 3010	Dr. C. D.
Fall 1997	WST 3010	L. S.
Spring 1998	WST 3010-003, -002	A. S.
Fall 1998	WST 3010-001	Dr. C. E.
Spring 1999	WST 3010-001	G. C.
Fall 1999	WST 3010-003	Dr. C. D.
Fall 1999	WST 3010-901	G. C.
Spring 2000	WST 3010-001	E. T.
Summer B 2003	WST 3015 Online	Dr. K. V.
Fall 2003	WST 3015-006	L. D.
Fall 2003	WST 3015-005	A. B.
Fall 2004	WST 3015-003	T. W.
Spring 2005	WST 3015-001	C. O.
Spring 2005	WST 3015-003	E. A.

Fall 2005	WST 3015-901	C. W.
Fall 2005	WST 3015	C. K.
Fall 2005	WST 3015-001	S. T.
Spring 2006	WST 3015	Dr. O. S.
Spring 2006	WST 3015-901	Dr. C. E.
Spring 2006	WST 3015-004	Dr. J. W. H.
Fall 2006	WST 3015	L. C.
Fall 2007	WST 3015	L. C.
Fall 2008	WST 3015-001	Dr. G. L.
Spring, year unknown	WST 3015	Dr. D. S.
Fall, year unknown	WST 3010-901	A. S.
Summer C, year unknown	WST 3010	Dr. C. D.

Table B-2: Issues in Feminism

<b>Term</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Instructor's Initials</b>
Summer C 1992	WST 3011	Dr. J. O.
Semester I 1993	WST 3011	Dr. J. O.
Semester I 1994	WST 3011	Dr. J. O.
Semester II 1995	WST 3011	Dr. J. O.
Fall 1995	WST 3011	Dr. L. M-B.
Fall 1996	WST 3011	L. S.
Fall 1997	WST 3011	L. S.
Fall 1998	WST 3011	Dr. I. B.
Summer B 1999	WST 3011	Dr. I. B.
Spring 2000	WST 3011-901	K. E.
Summer A 2000	WST 3011	K. E.
Fall 2000	WST 3311-901	K. E.
Spring 2001	WST 3311-001	K. E.
Fall 2001	WST 3011	Dr. I. B.
Spring 2002	WST 3311-001	J. S.
Spring 2002	WST 3311	C. C.
Fall 2003	WST 3311	Dr. I. B.
Spring 2004	WST 3311	J. N.
Summer C 2004	WST 3311	J. N.
Summer 2004	WST 3311-002	M. G.
Fall 2004	WST 3311-001	Dr. S. C.
Fall 2005	WST 3311-001	S. Q.
Spring 2006	WST 3311-001	Dr. J. W. H.
Unknown	WST 3011	Dr. J. O.
Unknown	WST 3011-001	C. P. E.