

Fall 2008

# Bridging the Divide: Connecting Feminist Histories and Activism in the Classroom

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## Recommended Citation

Blake, Holly, and Melissa Ooten. "Bridging the Divide: Connecting Feminist Histories and Activism in the Classroom." *Radical History Review* 2008, no. 102 (Fall 2008): 63-72. doi:10.1215/01636545-2008-013.

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*Bridging the Divide:  
Connecting Feminist Histories and Activism in the Classroom*

Holly Blake and Melissa Ooten

Learning about the historical traditions of social change movements is critical for today's students. Students need social justice role models to understand what has changed as a result of people's organized and individual efforts over time. Students need to learn from the successes and challenges of past movements in order to know that change is not only possible but that they, too, can be change agents. When exposed to the depth and breadth of activist histories – histories of which they usually have little to no knowledge of – students start to think more critically about their own education. They begin to consider what narratives they have been taught and what/who have been left out. They begin to question, in the words of Ronald Takaki, the “master narrative” of U.S. history.<sup>1</sup> They not only become inspired by the successes and challenges of past movements, but also seek more knowledge about how to effectively engage in social activism themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Our co-taught course, “Gender, Race and Activism,” for first year students at the University of Richmond makes this happen by connecting history, theory, and praxis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Takaki, “The Twenty-first Century: We Will All Be Minorities” in Ronald Takaki, editor, *Debating Diversity: Clashing Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Donald Howard's *Bringing Theory to Practice Project* for a detailed account of how Bates College, among others, integrates community-centered action on a campus-wide level in an effort to overcome the compartmentalization of many students' college experiences. Howard discusses how such projects can force students to examine their own privilege, question assumptions about entitlement, learn how to practically apply knowledge gained in the classroom, and generate a sense of responsibility to the larger community. Donald Howard, “Engaged Learning and the Core Purposes of Liberal Education: Bringing Theory to Practice” in *Liberal Education* 93: 1 (Winter 2007), 6-15.

<sup>3</sup> The University of Richmond is a co-educational, private, four year, liberal arts university situated in the suburbs of Richmond, VA. The university is structured around coordinate colleges: Richmond College for men and Westhampton College for women. WILL has been part of Westhampton College since its

The course is one requirement of the Women Involved in Living and Learning (WILL) program, which combines coursework in women, gender, and sexuality studies with activist-oriented, co-curricular opportunities for women students. The WILL mission is to teach students how to apply insights from their coursework to leadership and activism.<sup>4</sup> As a bridge between the history of social movements and informed action on current social justice issues, “Gender, Race and Activism” helps to realize this goal.

### *Course Objectives*

The course has two specific objectives. First, it exposes students to the development of historically-situated social movements, particularly the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the gay rights movement. By examining and analyzing the strengths and challenges of these social justice movements, students gain knowledge and appreciation for the work of earlier social change activists; inspiration and hope for creating present-day social change; information about different social change strategies; and awareness that social change is a long-term process. Second, the course provides opportunities for students to apply their historical knowledge to current social issues. The culminating assignment is a social justice action project and related literature review that historicizes a contemporary social problem. After studying social movements, students identify, research, and take action on a present-day challenge. The assignment compels students to make connections between history, theory, and praxis.

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founding in 1980. Representation from historically underrepresented groups in the program generally fluctuates between 20-25%, which is more diverse than the university as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> The WILL (Women Involved in Living and Learning) program’s mission is accomplished through coursework in women, gender and sexuality studies (WGSS) which leads to a minor; a required internship, preceded by the course *Women and Work*; participation in WILL’s student leadership organization; and engagement with gender and diversity-related programs and events on campus and in the Richmond community. The effects of this experiential model strengthen the connection between theory and practice, foster an understanding of the ways in which ethnicity, nationality, race, class, sexuality, and gender intersect, and encourage activism. For more information about the WILL program, including information about replicating this model, see <http://oncampus.richmond.edu/WILL/>.

These two course objectives reflect our firm belief that neither theory nor practice should be learned in isolation.

### *Pedagogy*

Our pedagogical approach in “Gender, Race and Activism” reinforces and reflects the theory to practice dynamic that is vital to the course. Critical discussion and active student participation are cornerstones of the class. On the first day of class, students read and discuss Adrienne Rich’s “Claiming an Education” as a way to recognize how they must take an active role in their own education.<sup>5</sup> We also have students question constructions of knowledge. As educators Ira Shor and Caroline Pari stress, any educational-centered politics must question who defines “knowledge,” who controls its construction, and who determines what is learned and how it can be applied.<sup>6</sup> We want students to become activists both inside and outside the classroom – to recognize that they can and should think critically about what they are taught, how they are taught, and what they are learning. We take seriously educator Antonia Darder’s notion that critical pedagogy “give[s] students the tools to examine how society has functioned to shape and constrain their aspirations and goals.”<sup>7</sup> Our students apply this awareness not only to their social justice action projects, but also to courses across the curriculum throughout their college tenure and beyond.

Central to the structure of the course is what Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas suggest in “Discomforting Truths:” social change and critical inquiry require

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<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Claiming an Education” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979). This article originated as a commencement address Rich gave at Douglass College in 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Ira Shor and Caroline Pari, eds., *Education Is Politics: Critical Teaching Across Differences, Postsecondary* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Antonia Darder, *Culture and Power in the Classroom: A Critical Foundation for Bicultural Education* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1991), xvii.

students to question and rethink their worldviews.<sup>8</sup> Given that students are often steeped in liberal individualism, which emphasizes personal agency and equal opportunity to the point that systemic oppression is not recognized, Boler and Zembylas underscore the importance of rendering the invisible visible.<sup>9</sup> Thus a central component of our course is to discuss and explore privileges and oppressions, including male privilege, white privilege, class privilege, and heterosexism. As sociologist Michael Kimmel argues, “Students who are white, heterosexual, male, or middle class...need to see how [they] are stakeholders in the understanding of structural inequality, how the dynamics that create inequality for some also benefit others.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Texts and Assignments*

In terms of organization, we spend the first half of the class exploring our first objective – the history of social activism – with a particular emphasis on post-World War II United States history and present-day inequalities. Students read Estelle Freedman’s *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*; Anne Moody’s autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*; *Class Matters* by the *New York Times* and Bill Keller; selections from the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective’s *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; and Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” along with several other books and articles.<sup>11</sup> They also watch

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<sup>8</sup> Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas, “Discomforting Truths” in Peter Trifonas, ed., *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for Social Change* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 117.

<sup>9</sup> Boler and Zembylas, 117.

<sup>10</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, “Toward a Pedagogy of the Oppressor” in Michael S. Kimmel and Abby Ferber, eds., *Privilege* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002); Ann Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, (New York: Dell, 1992); *New York Times* and Bill Keller, *Class Matters*, (New York: Times Books, 2005); Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies Ourselves for the New Century*, (New York: Touchstone, 1992); Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack,” in Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair and Nancy

documentaries such as *Fundi: The Ella Baker Story*; *Tough Guise*; *After Stonewall*; and *TransGeneration*, and feature films such as *Iron-Jawed Angels*.

As an example, the film *Iron-Jawed Angels* provides an interactive forum in which to explore how Hollywood producers present historical movements to their audiences, and the successes and problems of such approaches. The film's nearly non-existent treatment of women of color in the early women's movement mirrors the too-common lack of people of color in Hollywood films today, and this type of analysis provides a starting point for engaging classroom discussion. Another example is the powerful pairing of Moody's autobiography with the documentary *Fundi*. Not only overwhelmed and shocked by the many forms of violence in *Coming of Age*, students are also surprised by the end of Moody's narrative when she questions what the civil rights movement will achieve. Her hope and despair provoke considerable discussion. With *Fundi*, students gain an historical appreciation of the Civil Rights movement and grassroots activism. They also question the construction of historical knowledge, grappling with why they know about the role of Martin Luther King Jr. in the movement, but not the role of Ella Baker.

Through this historical focus, students gain an understanding of social change movements. They also recognize, in the words of Carlos Tejeda, Manuel Espinoza and Kris Gutierrez, that "the present can neither exist nor be understood outside of the past."<sup>12</sup> Students learn about grassroots organizing and understand how the work and power of

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Schniedewind, editors, *Women: Images and Realities, A Multicultural Anthology*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> These authors also emphasize the importance of using critical race theory in conjunction with historical analysis for it "helps explain how, despite the changes brought about through the Civil Rights movement and thereafter, white privilege and its attempts to nullify difference persevere." Carlos Tejeda et al, "Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy" in Peter Trifonas, ed., *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for Social Change* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 13, 30.

“ordinary” people like themselves are critical components for social change. Students begin to comprehend what worked and what was problematic in earlier social change movements while developing an awareness of different social change strategies. They learn that social change takes time and that perseverance is a key ingredient for success. They begin to recognize and consider structurally-embedded institutional constraints or barriers. They also learn not to take their own rights for granted. This combination of historical context and social change strategies serves as the foundation of the course and is critical as students begin to organize their own social justice efforts.

During the semester, essay questions and an interview assignment reinforce the connection between the past and present, and between history, theory, and praxis. For example, one essay addresses the theory and practice of participatory democracy and another asks students to interrogate class privilege and the popular notion of America as a meritocracy. The interview assignment, due after students read Estelle Freedman’s *No Turning Back*, asks students to conduct an oral history of a woman who was of age during the 1960’s and 1970’s women’s movement in the U.S. or elsewhere. Students use the knowledge that they have gained about the women’s movement, in part through an analysis of Freedman’s *No Turning Back*, to provide context to the interview. They then integrate the oral history within an historical narrative, so that personal experience is framed within the context of broader social change, and broader social change is personalized. Often students interview their mothers or grandmothers and gain a generational understanding of the complexities of the women’s movement and varied responses to the movement. Some discover for the first time that a family member had a fervent commitment or opposition to the movement, which in turn helps them to better

understand their own place within or outside of feminism today. As educational theorist Paulo Freire stresses, teaching and learning must not be about the transfer of knowledge; learners must discover themselves and the social problems they have experienced, including ways in which they are privileged.<sup>13</sup> Students discuss their oral history essays with their classmates, flushing out and analyzing similarities and differences between their interviewees and discussing intergenerational responses to feminism.

*From Theory to Praxis: Social Justice Action Projects*

The second half of the course deals with our objective of informed action. In the culminating assignment, called the social justice action project, students work in groups to research and take action on a social justice issue. Each member of this group also crafts a literature review related to their social justice action project.<sup>14</sup> Thus this assignment is both collaborative and individual in design.

There are several stages to the assignment. In the first stage, students choose a topic to research and on which to take action. Passion about the topic is one of the necessary ingredients for success.<sup>15</sup> We each take half of the groups to mentor and evaluate. Although the projects are student-driven, we play an active advisory role by giving support, offering suggestions and asking questions. While emphasizing that social change is a process (often a lengthy one), we require students to formulate and execute a

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<sup>13</sup> Ana Maria Araujo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, eds., *The Paulo Freire Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 19.

<sup>14</sup> For the literature review, each group must determine which books and essays are most important to read and understand in order to undertake their specific project. All group members read one text in common on the broader subject of their project. Then members read different books and essays that pertain to their own more specific portion of the project. The idea is to have group members gain an analytical and historical understanding of the issue by reading one text in common, but then focus their additional reading on texts relevant to their particular research. In the literature review, students compare and contrast their sources and critically analyze how this information will inform their action projects.

<sup>15</sup> We make sure that each student is able to work on a topic of importance to her, which may mean creating an additional group.

concrete project that can be completed within the confines of an academic semester. As historian Jennifer Scanlon notes, this type of project utilizes feminist pedagogy “as students decide how to break down a topic, how to present material to the class, and how to work together as a group.”<sup>16</sup> Our hope is that students will continue to address the broader questions and issues of their projects throughout their time at the university and beyond. Indeed, our students frequently engage in these issues beyond this class. We realize, however, the importance and practicality of students executing a project that can be completed during a semester and stress that such actions are mere beginnings.<sup>17</sup>

The second stage takes place approximately two months before the final project is due. Each group submits a paragraph describing the chosen issue, an annotated bibliography of appropriate sources and an outline of the action they plan to take. Each student in the group also submits a paragraph describing what books and essays she will read and analyze for her literature review. We read these proposals carefully and comment extensively. Problems typically include topics that: are too broadly conceptualized; ignore the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class intersect and interact; fail to historicize contemporary problems; and involve action plans that are not thought through carefully or lack depth. After students have had time to consider our comments and proceed accordingly, each group meets with one of us for a final update. These deadlines help students avoid the sloppiness of last minute work and enable us to effectively support their research and action efforts.

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<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, “Keeping Our Activist Selves Alive in the Classroom” in Ira Shor and Caroline Pari, eds., *Education Is Politics: Critical Teaching Across Differences, Postsecondary* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000), 129.

<sup>17</sup> To this end, students can use internships, faculty-directed research projects, and independent study opportunities to further pursue these interests if there are not other courses that they can use to directly engage in these issues and actions.

The final stage in the social justice action project takes place in class when students present their research and activism to their classmates. Each social justice group educates their classmates about their projects. Information shared includes historical contexts, actions, successes, challenges, remaining questions, and ideas for continued activism. Students have completed their literature reviews and prepared handouts for classmates with information on internet resources, bibliographies and action steps. We stress that these presentations be interactive and that students engage their classmates in a meaningful dialogue about their particular issue. Their ultimate goal is not only to enable their classmates to understand the issue, but also to take action on it themselves. The students have forty-five minutes to present an overview of their problem, highlight their research, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their action and answer questions. For some, it is the culmination of their social justice action project; for others, it is a springboard to further activism.

What follows is a discussion of two social justice action projects that illustrate the ways our students apply historical insights to contemporary social problems – how they bridge the divide between theory and practice. Both examples underscore how local history informs grassroots activism. The first example, evaluating inequities in area public schools, focuses explicitly on the importance of incorporating historical analysis into the study of contemporary social problems. The second example, changing the stalking laws in the state of Virginia, draws on the history of the women’s movement as a motivational force and highlights institutional barriers to social change.<sup>18</sup>

In the first case, the student group focused its social justice action project on educational inequities in local Richmond schools. It required the students to research and

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<sup>18</sup> Since the second project extended long after the class ended, it is discussed in more length.

understand the history and politics of public education in Richmond, Virginia. Students learned about the segregation of the city's schools in the past, and the efforts in the 1950s and the 1960s to integrate schools. They learned about the rapid opening of a variety of private schools in the area, and how this combined with white flight and residential segregation (both economic and social) to enable white students to leave the city school system – which continues today. They learned why most city schools' majority populations are students of color and operate with few resources while area suburban schools have much greater resources and majority white populations. Historical knowledge was critical. These students could not understand the current status of Richmond city schools without understanding the history of segregation, the Civil Rights movement in which activists demanded integration, and the reactions of many whites who used their economic and political resources to leave the city's public school system (and why they have yet to return). Our students needed to learn how history informs contemporary problems in order to understand the structures that create such disparities among different racial and economic groups as well as the interconnections between race and economic inequality.

For their action, this group worked with students at Hotchkiss Community Center in Richmond's Northside, and a program at a local pediatrician's office for patients in the same neighborhood to provide books and reading services to the children and youth who frequent it. The group conducted this action in conjunction with Reach Out and Read Virginia – a project supported by the community-based partnership for Families Northside, a local collaborative effort that brings together a wide range of established organizations to help local low income families prepare their young children for entering

school at age five. By working with existing programs that provide necessary and ongoing services to two city schools, they avoided making a one-time only connection that would have only benefitted their own learning.

For their presentation to the class, the students devised activities around issues of economic justice to highlight to their classmates the diversity – and inequities and privileges – within their own educational experiences. Their questions, for example, encouraged other students to think about their own educational histories, asking whether their schools had enough books for all students, what extracurricular activities their schools did or did not offer, and whether a diverse student body populated their schools. By providing historical context, these students understood clearly how inequities developed and compounded over long periods of time in Richmond. Their understanding of history helped them design their action project, and influenced how they chose to educate their classmates about educational inequities.

Another group of students began work on a subject tragically close to home for them. In December 2005, University of Richmond senior De’Nora Hill was stalked and murdered by her former boyfriend at her off-campus home. Prior to her murder, she had pursued all legal outlets to ensure her safety. Hill had a protective order against her ex-boyfriend when he shot her eight times. The existing laws proved woefully inadequate in ensuring her safety. As Hill’s mother, Becky Bieschke, explained:

To me, it seems the victim is not only a victim of the stalker but also a victim of the law. Why does the victim have to disrupt her whole life while the person stalking doesn’t have to change his life at all? Something is seriously wrong with this picture.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Joan Tupponce, “Waiting and Watching,” *Richmond Magazine*, November 2006, 147.

In response, a group of students began to research the stalking laws in Virginia. They had learned during the first half of the semester that stalking, domestic violence and rape were made public, named and criminalized as a direct result of the women's movement.<sup>20</sup> But they also recognized that much more needed to change if stalking victims were to be protected in the state of Virginia. Although stalking is classified as a felony in fifteen states, Virginia classifies it as a misdemeanor. Students decided to change the law for their action project.

The students worked with Becky Bieschke to gather nearly 2,000 signatures on petitions that called for increased penalties for stalking in Virginia. They also received local television coverage when they spoke publicly about their work in a ceremony to honor De'Nora Hill. The students continued to collect signatures after the class was over and made plans to take these petitions to the Virginia General Assembly in spring 2007. This project became much more than an assignment for them.

They quickly encountered significant barriers to social change. The first challenge was to understand the policymaking process. Having no legal expertise or experience, they decided to act on their professor's suggestion to contact the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance. They met with a policy analyst who shared strategic advice, explained how to change a law, what to expect in the process, and the politics of testifying on behalf of legislation.

A second challenge involved the unintended consequences of the proposed legislative change. As students collected signatures, they were confronted with the argument that increased penalties for stalking might actually lower the number of guilty

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<sup>20</sup> Stalking was criminalized in Virginia in 1992, and the law was strengthened in 1998 when the General Assembly increased penalties for the convicted.

verdicts as a judge might be reluctant to turn an accused stalker into a felon. The students wrestled with this question and discussed it with the policy expert from the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance. Ultimately, they decided to pursue their original plan since they believed that a felony conveyed the seriousness of the crime. Their research had also revealed that there was a positive impact in other states where stalking was criminalized as a felony.

The next challenge was finding a delegate to patron their bill. The students contacted the delegate for the University of Richmond district and she agreed to patron the bill. The students gave her their research so that the legislative drafting team could craft the exact wording of the bill. The bill was submitted in January 2007 before the General Assembly convened. Shortly thereafter, the students and Becky Bieschke testified in support of “their” bill before the General Assembly. The bill passed the House of Delegates unanimously, but it did not pass the Senate’s Finance Committee.

Students learned even more about institutional barriers to social change once they were in the thick of the political process. First, they witnessed statistics they had previously only read about as part of their research. The low numbers of women and people of color in elected positions were clear. Also, the women and people of color who were present had been elected recently and held the least power and influence in the legislative hearings. Second, the importance of their main goal – to have stalking taken more seriously – was painfully reaffirmed when they witnessed delegates joking about domestic violence during the hearing. Third, they watched their bill morph and change without their input. In the end, the bill made stalking a misdemeanor with mandatory jail

time rather than a felony. This change happened behind closed doors and was a disappointing shock to the students and Becky Bieschke.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the students learned about the limits of legislative change. For example, judges receive annual training, but domestic violence sessions are not mandatory. With increased training, judges might better understand the significance of stalking, enforce laws already on the books, and not express reluctance to convict someone of stalking. Next year, students plan to continue their work with Becky Bieschke and the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance to have judges and legislators in Virginia better understand that stalking is a serious crime.

#### *Learning Outcomes*

By acquiring historical knowledge about social change movements and participating in social justice action projects, such as the two outlined above, “Gender, Race and Activism” offers students an activist-oriented education that bridges the divide between theory and practice. Students apply historical knowledge both in and outside of the classroom in order to address specific local, national or global problems. In particular, the social justice action project helps students learn how to employ historical methods to research contemporary social justice issues; use this knowledge to create action steps; understand that social change is possible; and utilize effective, versatile tools of grassroots organizing in application to contemporary and future social justice issues. By utilizing a pedagogical approach that infuses theory and praxis into our classroom, we convey the symbiotic importance of both. In the words of educator

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<sup>21</sup> The reason given was financial since a felony carries more jail time, which costs the state money whereas the cost of housing an individual convicted of a misdemeanor with less than a year of jail time is borne by local jurisdictions rather than the state.

Antonia Darder, “cut off from practice, theory becomes simply verbalism. Separated from theory, practice is nothing but blind activism.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Darder, 84.