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"I want to help people": Using feminist pedagogy to get beyond the savior complex

Abstract:

As director of a program at a women's college which draws students with international interests and leadership aspirations, my students frequently tell me that they want to get involved with global gender issues because they: "want to help people." This phrase points to some of the core difficulties in teaching women's and gender studies from a global perspective in Western institutions, making students aware of global and local connections while simultaneously deconstructing the charity model of global interaction which pits those who "have" against those who do not. Drawing on feminist pedagogy, as well as critical development theory from the post-colonial tradition, this paper will explore some of the ways to help students find ways to move beyond the desire to "help" and towards critical engagement with global gender debates, in the classroom and beyond.

## 1. Introduction

I am the director of a global program at a women's college that is rather uniquely positioned – we're the only women's college that is situated within a large, public research institution. I'm fairly new to the university – I started in the fall – and the students are just fantastic and engaged, with international interests and leadership aspirations. But there is something that I'm starting to dread; and that something was the impetus for this paper. When students hear that I have a background in international development (especially when they hear that I worked for the United Nations), very often they seek me out to tell me that they want to get involved with global gender issues because they: "want to help people."

Aside being pretty sure that they have no idea what actually goes on at the UN, of course I'm not against the sentiment. I believe that they genuinely *do* want to help; but I also believe that they (for the most part) do not understand why their impulse to help – “other” people, people over there, people unlike them – is problematic.

It is not surprising, since not only are they encouraged through gender norms, but a (religious-based) ethos of charity (that has particular connotations in this country the Judeo-Christian tradition). Both of these are beyond the scope of this paper: what I want to focus on today is the ways they are encouraged by the structure of the university to think in this way. Specifically, I want to discuss the “civic engagement” programs that have gaining popularity in US universities since the 1990s, and that include everything from “service-learning” to “community partnerships.” The program that I inherited last fall, includes service-learning elements, some of it local, and some international, as a core part of its curriculum.

[And note that will be using civic engagement\* and service-learning rather interchangeably for the purposes of this paper.]

Being as we are at a conference on the topic of feminist pedagogy, are well aware of the critiques of traditional service-learning, both locally and internationally. The major critiques include: that service-learning programs reinforce social inequalities and do more harm than good, or to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak: they are projects premised on the idea of white students saving brown community members. Like the projects themselves, these critiques resemble (quite closely, in fact) the kind of critiques of international development with which I was engaged during my PhD research. (Although the two are not necessarily tied together in the literature, and this is where I come in.).

Following a long line of feminist, postcolonial, and critical race scholars, I believe that it doesn't have to be this way. So today I'm here because I am working on (re)visioning this program, which is happening in two stages:

- a. Restructuring the current approach to service-learning (making more clear the feminist/critical approach)
- b. Developing an ethics of engagement, following the work of Donna Haraway, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Ann Ferguson, and others working in a postcolonial, intersectional feminist tradition.

I'm on the first part of the visioning, and pretty early in at that! So basically, all that is to say that I'm **very** early in this process and I'm looking forward to being here today and hearing from all of you – especially those of you have had experience working with service-learning or civic engagement in your classrooms.

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\* I want to acknowledge the feminist contention with the term "civic engagement." I am thus using Risch's (2013, 201) working concept of citizenship in the context of feminist SL: "an active, responsible role that promotes social justice in one's family, neighborhood, community, city and region, regardless of whether those entities are confined within one nation state."

## 2. But first: why civic engagement?

Because I believe that when developed and implemented in a critical, feminist way, civic engagement projects follow in the tradition of feminism's long commitment to social justice, both in and outside of the academy. I also believe that this commitment is – or can be – realized in a very specific way in women's college environments. As Janet Jakobsen noted recently, a women's college that is rooted in a social justice framework can, and should:

“develop ideas of feminism that are about more than advancing individual women ... [and] show that knowledge and education are not merely ‘academic,’ but can have important effects in the world.”

From an institutional perspective, there are both historical and contemporary reasons that Rutgers is a space for developing critical civic engagement programs. Today, student body at Rutgers is highly diverse (48% minority), meaning that high numbers of students of color participate in civic engagement programs, disrupting the “white students helping brown community members” narrative from the start. This phenomenon has not (yet) been fully researched and is something that I hope personally to explore further in the second part of my visioning project (and I welcome comments from those of you who might know of research in this area).

Historically, Edward Bloustein, the president of Rutgers University in the 1970s and 1980s, was one of the first university presidents in the country to promote civic engagement on campus. [Bloustein activist in his own right; while researching for this project I found out that he was arrested – while serving as president – during an anti-apartheid demonstration. I ask you: can you **imagine** this happening today?].

Which brings me to: the contemporary university. Higher education represents the largest growth sector in the youth travel and tourism industry (Hartman, ND). This seems a fairly unfeminist thing to say, but in the context of the neoliberal university,

it most assuredly is not. Programs – especially programs with social justice at their core (women’s studies, black studies, cultural studies) are being cut left and right, as are more traditionally structured year and half-year study abroad programs. Now I am not suggesting that we stop critiquing those cuts, and the broader corporatization of the university. What I am suggesting is that terms like “civic engagement” and “service-learning” are buzzwords that come with funding, and therefore it makes sense that we should engage with them, albeit in a critical, feminist way.

I’ll turn now to the key components of a critical/feminist approach to feminist civic engagement.

### **3. Key Components of Critical/Feminist Civic Engagement**

Definition that I find most appealing comes from Lori Pompa (2002), who describes the critical service-learning approach as:

“becoming conscientious of and able to critique social systems, motivating participants to analyze what they experience, while inspiring them to take action and make change.”

In short, what we want to do is shift from “how can I help these people?” to “why are things this way?” (Bickford and Reynolds, 2002). And feminist pedagogy is the way to get there, since it provides what we might call the “critical departure” from traditional service-learning approaches. Critical/feminist approaches to civic engagement generally follow three key pedagogical points, which I have organized following Leeray Costa and Karen Leong (who edited a special issue of *Feminist Teacher* on the topic of civic engagement in 2012). These points are: a) attention to difference; b) emphasis on power; c) advocacy for social justice. I will (very) briefly examine each point in turn.

#### **a. Attention to difference.**

Attention to difference is a core part of the critical/feminist pedagogical approach to service-learning because this approach is concerned with developing authentic

relationships based on reciprocity. A commonly cited example is collaboratively deciding on a service-learning project based on discussions that involve both university and community members and, further, that the benefits to students should not outweigh the benefits to the community. Importantly, as Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds point out: while “many service-learning programs are designed to “cause...encounter with difference, how students respond depends on pedagogy and design.” A critical/feminist SL program is therefore designed to make clear the differences in racial, ethnic, and/or economic status; differences that are often a core (though unexamined) part of traditional civic engagement encounters. Further, a key part of this recognition is to “traverse the boundaries separating the academic from the public or the ‘community’” which are often reinforced in the “us/them” set up of traditional SL programs. Using critical/feminist approach, students are encouraged to see the university and community as “connected, albeit differently related in terms of the power structure of the university” and reminded - ala Judith Butler, Patricia Hill Collins, and Donna Haraway - “that we must learn to see our differences as ‘categories of connection’” (Mitchell, 58). And this brings me to the second element of a critical/feminist approach to SL: the emphasis on power.

b. Emphasis on power relationships.

No surprise that a feminist/critical approach would involve an analysis of relationships of power. Power analysis is the set of tools that allow students to critically examine the service-learning experience from its conception all the way through to the “legacies that have created the dynamics and tensions” that shape not only the interactions between university and community, but the world (Risch 2013, 201). This type of analysis asks our students to look at the bigger picture: it asks them not only to help build a house, but also prompts them to consider why there is a lack of affordable housing in certain communities (and ultimately – if house building is the best response). It asks students not only to tutor low-income students, but also to examine the racism inherent in our education system. Further, this approach asks that we critically examine the power structure not only between the university and those located outside, but also inside the university as well. This

was the lesson articulated by Begum Verjee, whose research on faculty and staff of color's perspectives on civic engagement resulted in a call for:

“institutional accountability and transformation of hegemonic structures and practices from within before any genuine, respectful, and authentic relationships with [outside] communities [especially communities of colour] can be developed”

Echoes Mohanty's (1997) assertion that: “any collaboration across social hierarchies must involve a critique of hegemony.” Further, recognizing that the university is also a site in need of “help”/critique helps to continue the blurring of the distinction between “university/community” that is often reinforced in more traditional service-learning approaches.

c. Advocacy for social justice.

The process of institutionalization of civic engagement often dilutes (or removes altogether) its activist potential (Bickford and Reynolds, 230). Critical/feminist approaches call for a return to that potential, by developing programs which “encourag[e] students to see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (Mitchell, 51). Brenda Risch (2013: 209) argues that the perspectives, methods, and pedagogical goals of women's and gender studies are important here, as they seek to “radicalize students to see that education serves not only to gain class privilege or financial security, but also to adopt roles of community responsibility.”

#### **4. Conclusion**

In sum, I want to underscore the point that critical/feminist civic engagement does not have to be traditional service-learning. As I said at the start of this discussion, I want to suggest that using the term “civic engagement” – or whatever the hot term may be in your institutional setting – will allow us to disrupt the traditional narrative while continue doing the social justice work that we, as feminists, as queers, as critical race scholars, have been doing all along.

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I also hope to hear from you in the discussion session: if you run these programs, what do they look like? How have you managed to keep a critical/feminist foundation in light of the shifts in institutional imperatives?

Thank you for your time.

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