

Jane Simonsen
Teaching Narrative

Course Goals

“Women and Change” (WG201) is an introduction to the history of and current issues in feminist thought in the U.S. The course asks students to attend to the intersections between feminist theory and lived experience, to understand social problems through a feminist lens and then to develop strategies for change. I developed a group project to address several of my goals for students: to recognize that understanding gender is essential to developing a more complex sense of vocation at work, at home, and in the community; to develop a voice for speaking out on issues of social equality; and to work with others to imagine strategies for change.

Group Activism Project

The Group Activism Project (GAP) was the major assignment in the course and combined research, writing, and public activism in a multi-step, term-long project. I gave groups of four students a real-life scenario facing a hypothetical Augustana student along with four questions that needed research to answer. Members divided research tasks and shared findings with each other before crafting a statement to the Augustana community and/or QCA that called attention to the broader issues surrounding the student’s dilemma and described what resources were available (or not available) to the student. Next, they outlined a plan of public action. After receiving feedback from me, they put their plans into action. Their action plans included creating a billboard in the library, writing letters to the editor of the *Observer* and/or *Quad Cities Times*, meeting with campus administrators to discuss the problem face-to-face, and helping to sponsor a “Think Pink” event at a women’s basketball game. Finally, students presented their experiences to the rest of the class and collected their research, statements, action plans, evidence of activism, group meeting reports, and personal reflections in a portfolio for me. In the process, they helped to raise their own awareness of problems such as access to birth control on campus, sweatshop labor, sexual harassment online, and gender inequalities in college sports.

Evaluation

For my part, I evaluated group work by outlining specific goals for each step and assessing the quality of their research and writing, their engagement with the problem, and their collaborative efforts (demonstrated both through the written work and group meeting reports). Evaluating each step allowed me to head off problems and to assess progress; while this demanded a lot of engagement from me, my workload was also reduced in that I had only seven projects to evaluate rather than 28.

Student Responses

Many students began the course with the all-too-common perception that feminism is synonymous with “man-hating,” that activism means bra-burning, or that gender inequality is something that happens to “other” women, elsewhere—that women’s very presence in college signifies that there is no more need for feminism. By giving students plausible scenarios that might affect them or someone they know, I attempted to avoid this sense of distance as they tried to define why and how each of these situations demanded feminist action. By the end of the course, students had a much more capacious understanding of the way gender informs social inequality, why gender inequality is not only a “woman’s issue,” and how inequality can and does affect their own lives and choices. They appreciated the connection to “real life” and felt a sense of accomplishment, writing that the “project had a major influence on me because the cases

we were given were real issues....From domestic violence to diversity, all these issues affect us as women, students, and human beings” and “after listening to all of the presentations I became aware that all of the students in the WG201 class have made a difference on Augustana’s campus.”

Students also appreciated the opportunity to develop a voice. They were sometimes surprised at the feedback—positive and negative—that they received for speaking out. They felt satisfaction even in small steps, in speaking directly to administrators, and in being listened to. One student wrote, “I now realize that it is difficult, often times awkward, and embarrassing to put yourself out there and try to make people aware of an issue that they may not care about. It seems as though apathy is one of the biggest obstacles activists must face.” The obstacles they met with were also a lesson in activism: making a difference takes collaboration, a lot of work sometimes results in small victories, and speaking out can provoke backlash.

Several students noted that the project took more work than they thought, but that they also became more involved in the project—and the problem—than they thought they would. One student wrote that “Though I always knew that activism is important, I was never actually active myself. I still considered myself a feminist, but I thought that I could just write and discuss ideas to take myself as a serious feminist. After the activism experience, I have a lot more respect for activism and its importance, and I do not think that I can continue to be inactive. Feminists can talk as much as they want, but this is only one step in the larger process of social change.”

Finally, a number of students noted the project’s practical application to their own futures. One student responded to the project by writing that “Through the involvement of this campus activism, I’ve learned a lot about myself as an individual as well as how I fit into my community. Vocation is finding the personal qualities to meet the needs of the larger community, and this class has enabled me to apply my personal skills to meet the community needs. This project has allowed me to take a look at why I am at college as well as the skills I am taking from my college experience.”

Appendix 1: Sample Scenarios

Scenario:

Carla is a high school senior who is active in basketball and volleyball and is considering attending Augustana. She knows that under Title IX, women are guaranteed equality in athletics, but that institutional factors—scheduling, access to facilities, women’s representation in leadership and coaching positions—sometimes fail to make the grade. Before committing herself, she wants to find out how Augustana measures up.

- 1) What is Title IX? What was the logic behind it, and how has it affected sports at the collegiate level? At Augustana?
- 2) What information can you find about participation in organized sports by both men and women at Augustana? How many participate in team sports? What teams does the college have? Are there women-only and men-only sports?
- 3) Are there other factors influencing equity at Augustana? What information can you find about event scheduling for men’s and women’s teams, access to facilities, and representation of men and women in leadership positions (coaches, assistants, etc.) in sports at Augustana?

Scenario:

Sue is an Augustana student whose family immigrated from Vietnam before she was born. Her second cousin came later and lives in Los Angeles, where Sue knows that she works in a sweatshop making blouses for a prominent clothing retailer. She also knows that many of the clothing stores and brands her friends at college like best have ties to sweatshops where women

like her aunt work. She wants to find out more about sweatshops and wants to convince her friends at college that the places where they shop don't pay their workers fair wages—and that they should think twice about where and how they spend their money.

- 1) Who is likely to work in sweatshops run or used by U.S. retailers? What kinds of working conditions are these workers likely to encounter?
- 2) Where do Augustana students buy the bulk of their clothing? What brands do they buy? What is the likelihood that they are wearing clothes that were made, in part or in whole, by workers in sweatshops?
- 3) What kinds of organizations exist to help workers in sweatshops? What can or have the workers done to strive for better working conditions and fair wages?
- 4) What kinds of organizations or strategies exist for students in the U.S. like Sue to understand their role as consumers?

Appendix 2: Sample Group-authored plan

GAP Step #4
Group-Authored Plan

To address the issue of Title IX's potential affect on our campus, we plan to take a closer look at one of the major sports at Augustana: basketball. This is one of the sports that exists for both men and women and theoretically should have an equal place to start from when we investigate. There is a clear difference in the way that the men's and women's basketball teams are treated at Augustana. To begin, we plan on addressing these issues and documenting them through pictures, video, and interviews with members of the teams. There are obvious differences in the amount of people that attend these sporting events, the enthusiasm at the games, and overall feeling at the games. There are also basic differences that can be shown through pictures and video. For example, the men's games have cheerleaders and poms performances, advertisements during the day in the form of the "GAME DAY" signs around campus, the large screen TV on showcasing their team (it remains off for the women's game), "Event Staff" at each game, news crews from surrounding areas, a higher number of spectators, and an avenue to bring in revenue (the men's games sell the programs for a dollar whereas they are available free of charge at the women's games).

To try and foster change for this injustice in men's and women's sports, we plan to try and focus more attention on a women's basketball game and to promote attendance and

knowledge about the differences in the programs. To begin, we would like to create a “WOMEN’S GAME DAY” sign to put up on days in which women’s games are going on. We do recognize that the men’s sign does not say “MEN’S GAME DAY” but the Augustana community has grown accustomed to that sign meaning that the men are going to be playing. To encourage attendance for the program, we plan to support two women’s basketball games. The first game will be either February 5th or February 23rd and we plan to work in conjunction with SAAC to promote this game as a “Women’s Spirit Game.” SAAC has the funding that we as students would not be able to provide and would therefore be able to offer incentives such as free shirts, Augie prizes, and other such things. We can also ask the cheerleaders and poms to participate in the day’s events to bring a different aspect to the game. The second game will be Saturday February 9th and is a “Think Pink” Game. We will work in conjunction with Jen Winmiller, the women’s assistant basketball coach, to promote this game that offers a free hot dog to anyone that wears a pink shirt.

The last thing that we as a group need to evaluate at these games is how we plan to bring awareness to these issues and what our goals are once we complete the next step of our project. There is an obvious difference between the way that men’s and women’s athletics are treated at Augustana, and we would like to highlight these differences so the community is more aware of the disparities between the programs. Although our steps are proactive, it would be helpful to the women’s athletic department to have this information presented to the Athletic Director or other such official to bring awareness to these issues. Some sort of follow up will be necessary and we will have to decide whether we believe it should be to an official of the college or Augustana community through such publications as the Observer. Hopefully, regardless of the steps we take, awareness of this discrimination and lack of enthusiasm for women’s sports will be addressed and – eventually – equalized.

Appendix 3: Sample Result

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: The readers' viewpoint

Buchanan should thank black Americans

I am grateful to Pat Buchanan for opening my eyes ("America has been 'best country on Earth for black folks,'" March 23). I was unaware that I was being conned by "black hustlers."

I am grateful to learn that "no people anywhere have done more to uplift blacks than white Americans." (such as uplifting the 4,743 who got lynched between 1882 and 1968, including 14-year-old Emmet Till in 1955).

I am grateful to know that all the untold trillions which have been spent on entitlement programs "designed to bring the African-American community into the mainstream." (together with the 75 percent whites who are also in the poverty programs).

I am truly grateful to Buchanan to know that "affirmative action has advanced black applicants over white applicants."

I am grateful to Pat for pointing out that the high rate of incarceration of blacks is the failure of the "black community itself." (even though one out of every 100 Americans are in prison) — that black

criminals choose white victims more times than the other way around (Bank robber John Dillinger also knew who had the money).

Pat, we hear your grievances, but where is the gratitude for almost 250 years of free labor?

Vincent G. Thomas
Rock Island

Take an active role against sweatshops

Take a moment to consider your shirt, pants, shoes — even your underwear. Chances are, if the tag does not say sweat free or fair trade, these items were made in a sweatshop by women.

Life for these female workers is much different from the life we know. Their rights to fair wages, hours and working conditions are exploited. Many times their reproductive choices are violated, as they are forced to take birth control or fired for being pregnant.

So, what can we do about this? Runestone Bookstore at Augustana College has made a tremendous effort by ensuring that the products they sell are not made in sweatshops. With a simple Internet search, you will be able to find out infor-

mation about the brands you buy.

A tremendous impact could be made if everyone switched to sweat free brands. If you are interested in doing this, check out www.edun-live.com.

We hope you decide to take an active role and engage in this fight against sweatshops.

Allison Connelly
Chantel Howell
Courtney Ward
Ashley Pedersen
Augustana College
Rock Island

Israel has made many contributions

2008 marks the 60th anniversary of Israel's rebirth after 2,000 years.

Most of us know that Israel is on the front lines of the war against genocidal terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. But did you know that Israel — a country of only 7 million citizens — is one of the most dynamic, innovative, democratic and economically thriving countries in the world?

With virtually no natural resources to speak of, Israel has had to use brainpower instead of oil or natural gas to fuel its economy. And it is working.

Did you know that Israel boasts some of the top ranked universities in the whole world, and has had eight Nobel Prize winners in its short history?

Did you know that Israel is on the cutting edge of the high tech industry, with giants such as Microsoft, IBM, Cisco, Intel, Motorola and many others having established factories or research and design centers in the country?

Did you know that Israel is also a world leader in the biotech industry, medicine, generic pharmaceuticals, scientific papers produced, satellite technology, and airport security?

So the next time you turn on your computer, talk on your cell phone, text a message, buy a DiskOnKey, instant message, use voicemail, get tested for breast cancer, put on sunscreen, and need complicated surgery at a reasonable price — think Israel. And thank Israel for all her amazing achievements and contributions.

Allan G. Ross
Executive Director
Jewish Federation of
the Quad-Cities
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