

Encountering Gender Theory: A Service-Learning Approach

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Abstract

Service-learning, a teaching method wherein students learn by combining academic concepts with community service, has received much attention as a means to empower youth and equip them with important skills that are conducive to both community engagement and self-esteem. However, it also functions as a mediator between gender issues and educational practice, an important divide that has enormous implications for academics and educators alike. Youth development is not an inherently unified field; young people present a multiplicity of identities that cannot easily be addressed by a totalizing methodology. Theories of gender and sexuality remind us that reforms for girls in public schools must not take an essentialist stance that purports to speak for all girls and women, given that there is no easy reform for a category so unable as “woman.” The key question becomes how to keep this principle in mind in practice. Curricula that are designed to serve the “needs” of “women” make the mistake of purporting that there is a delineated population called “women” that has specific issues to be dealt with. Though there is no doubt that girls in public schools need attention, especially when one contends with the masculinist tendencies of the American schooling system, there is such a wide array of voices within the category of “woman” that some are silenced for the sake of others. Service learning combats this by allowing young people to examine the structures of power that occupy their lives while encouraging personal achievement and growth alongside fellow classmates.

Education’s impact is not only felt in measurable indicators of success, but also in the more subjective arenas of self-esteem and social conditioning. Education, curriculum development specifically, can be seen as a primary force in the creation and dissemination of cultural norms, such as those pertaining to gender roles (Lather 1994, 245). Among the various institutions that shape American youth, “only the school has the socialization of youth as a principal function” (Saario, Jacklin, Tittle 1985, 99). Teachers prepare students for entry into the public sphere, and in doing so instill the values of the dominant society, often to the detriment to marginalized voices (Lather 1994, 245). Indeed, the “work of the teacher is part of the discursive practices that enable these [normative] processes” that perpetuate institutionalized systems of power that directly hamper girls and women within a patriarchal society (Coffey and Delamont 2000, 13). Specific identities therefore become very important when

inscribed in this framework of the preparation and instillation of norms, and one need not look far to see that public education has failed women and girls in a variety of ways, from achievement to self-esteem to safety. An intervention on behalf of women and girls in the American education system becomes increasingly necessary as gender gaps within and beyond the academic sphere persist and even widen.

One might naturally look to feminist models of girls’ empowerment to address the problem of gender inequities in schools by targeting female-bodied individuals with specific, gender-based interventions. By themselves, however, gendered interventions have the capacity to marginalize female students by re-inscribing them within the very system of difference that feminism seeks to undo. Targeting girls specifically as an “at-risk” group does not allow for an appreciation of the wide range of sexed bodies and gendered identifications that exist within all youth of various backgrounds. As gender theory has indicated, the group called “women” is constantly in flux, filled to the brim with every race, socioeconomic background, and sexual/gender identity. As a result, there is renewed interest in the influence of different and intersecting identities in the search for educational equality; in order to fully consider policies aimed at underrepresented groups, educators and academics must collaborate to find a solution that is both inclusive and effective. A crucial component that has often been left out of curricula, especially as budgets shrink and testing increases in importance, is the opportunity for enrichment activities, especially service-learning. These experiences have the potential to supplement curricula and integrate meaningful youth development exercises into the schooling process. More importantly, service-learning has the capability to mediate the essential disparity between gender theory and gender disparities in practice by giving agency to girls without perpetuating their outsider status through single-sex methodologies. Service-learning occupies a middle ground in the conflict between identity and education that allows for the appreciation of subjectivity alongside meaningful prescriptive reforms. The integration of enrichment programs into school curricula has a proven history of success in several crucial areas of youth development, especially independence, collaboration, positive self-image, and community awareness.

Gender Theory and the Problem of Identity

Given the role of schools in the propagation of norms, it is important to look at the theories behind prescriptions for women in American schools, the silent arena wherein youth are groomed for integration into a deeply ideological and stratified society. It

is true that “the trying on of dominant forms is played out within student cultures and exists at the expense of marginal or less conventional sex-gender identities,” and as a result, identity work must be done in order to address the gender achievement gap (Kehily 2004, 214). This, unfortunately, is not a simple task. When looking to produce change, one must acknowledge that systems of power are “broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities” that operate together to diffuse and perpetuate power throughout an ever-changing society (Foucault 1990, 33). Given the number of stakeholders in the American education system, a phenomenon that is the result of many years of competing, collaborating, new, and old powers, Foucault’s argument becomes especially relevant, even when examined irrespective of gender. A school is not an autonomous entity; it has a history and a culture. Surely, a complex conglomeration of competing interests governs relationships between students and administrators, as well as between groups of students. There is a multitude of interested parties – parents, students, teachers, academics, administrators, government agencies, nonprofits, community organizations, activists, curriculum developers, etc. Equally important are the power relations inherent in student interactions; for instance, the sociologist C.J. Pascoe tacitly employs Foucault to unearth the competing identities, alliances, and sensibilities of young people, especially with regard to issues of gender and sexuality (Pascoe 2007, 25-50). These processes, according to Foucault, are deployed over time, and our present state is a result of the shifting of powers that have oscillated between various alliances for decades.

Clearly, gender is not free from inscription into a complicated scheme of power relations, thereby complicating any discussion of gender within normative educational models. Gender, in fact, is essential to, and perhaps constitutive of, Western hegemonic concepts of knowledge production and dissemination. The tradition of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan present the vision of the unified male ‘Self’ whose creation is dependent on the existence of an ‘Other’, a vehicle of meaning by which the phallic subject can find expression (Lacan 2006, 77-81). Luce Irigaray, a philosopher whose work has informed much of feminist/queer poststructuralist thought, critiques this phallogocentric tradition by contending that it represents the feminine as the perpetual Other, even at the level of language (Irigaray 1985, 34-86). The foundational processes of human interaction, therefore, are informed at their core by a structure of gendered difference. The philosopher Judith Butler, whose work has been essential to questioning the very existence of gender as an interpretational mode, complicates this discussion by theorizing that the production of gender can be analyzed as such – an illusory product of power relations. In sum, Butler argues that “if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender...” (Butler 2006, 192). The implications of this are immense, for if gender is a performance that is set in motion by the power that culture holds over its bodies, there are no stable categories of gender. Butler makes this explicit; if all this is the truth, “the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory function” stemming from “masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality”

(Butler 2006, 192-193). It follows that the relationship between female bodies and conceptions of “women” are wholly based upon hegemonic discourses of power. Butler untethers sex, gender, and self-expression and calls for an embrace of their separation. The instability and mutability of the categories of gender, therefore, require a more nuanced approach in practice, though Butler’s analysis does not preclude activism. It certainly does problematize the ease of proposing prescriptive reforms for girls, because of the difficulty of discussing the essentialist notion of “woman.” Activism must be combined with an understanding of the unsteadiness of gender categories, as well as the specificity and uniqueness of underserved groups.

One possible method in the wake of this has been advocacy for post-gender education in which children are treated as if gender did not exist. On the other hand, a Foucaultian model could necessitate and legitimate a gender-cognizant approach: “Because gender is a set of relations that are constantly changing and are constantly affected by other structuring processes in social relations, the gender-free strategy has to appear somewhat simplistic” (Houston 1994, 130). Carol Gilligan’s work, epitomized by her iconic *In a Different Voice*, presents a similar conclusion, especially given the historical context of her theoretical intervention wherein the unique experiences of women were often overlooked in many disciplines, especially in the field of human development (Schneir 1993, 428). The contribution of feminism and its effort to carve out a space for women is certainly a historically-consecrated phenomenon with regard to education: “Schools have benefitted directly from education feminism’s unique historical trajectory. This is largely because its political reforms were explicitly directed toward education” (Dillabough 2006, 51). Still, paying attention to gender can have adverse effects; grouping girls together and working to support their supposedly inherent needs can be essentialist and perhaps detrimental in the long run. Moreover, there is no single narrative of “womanhood,” and no female-bodied person can be wholly reduced to biological gender. With this tricky road to traverse, education needs a new methodology that is able to incorporate the historical inequalities that exist between genders without relegating either gender to a separate sphere.

Community Service: Expanding the Classroom

The search for a mediator between the gender issues I have outlined and tangible gender inequities in education must begin with service, for it is clear that the extension of learning beyond the classroom has immense implications for identity formation. Service-learning refers to an educational model wherein academic disciplines are combined with real-life application through community service. By allowing students to utilize academic skills in order to benefit the community, youth have the opportunity to put their learning into practice in meaningful ways that enable self-reflection and self-determination. This is an essential first step toward understanding how women and girls can harness and assert their own subjectivities. For example, extensive work in new forms of youth development have shown that “theory and research both suggest that community service can support adolescents’ development as they go through [the] process of identity development” (McIntosh, Metz, Youniss 2005, 331). A three-year longitudinal study conducted in a high school near Boston, one of many such investigations, “illustrate the

growing importance of community service and leisure activities as predictors of identity development over the high school years in [the] sample,” which is “consistent with other research showing positive developmental benefits associated with participation in community service” (McIntosh, Metz, Youniss 2005, 340). At its core, “service-learning is inherently a unifying agent” that allows youth to mentor other students, thereby developing self-esteem and a sense of personal accomplishment (Furco 1996, 66-67). Giving students the opportunity to hold positions of leadership within the development of enrichment activities proves to them that they are each “seen as a resource who has something to offer,” thereby giving them practice in essential skills that will benefit them later in life (Furco 1996, 67). Gaining experience in leadership and other essential life skills has a wide array of important implications for young people. Certainly, “taking initiative, becoming motivated to act, and following through on a service project all require leadership within oneself” that affords young people the chance to find personal and developmental meaning in their academic studies (Hollinger 1996, 165). Furthermore, service-learning encourages students to engage in a process of reflection and evaluation, and a cornerstone of service-learning is the final step of the project, wherein participants look back at their work and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. This produces a very valuable effect: “Reflection and evaluation reinforce the maintenance of a positive environment that supports volunteers expressing their inherent power, developing their individual strengths, and appreciating their diversity. We facilitate a process of doing with youth, not for them” (Ebbighausen and Batson 1996, 173). Youth thus become agents in control of a personally relevant and enriching project that allows them to understand their own selves as unique subjects unhampered by masculinist norms. It is with this combination of personal fulfillment and addressing a community need that girls can be best served in public schools.

Service Learning and Positive Identity Formation

Service-learning is thus an integral component of curricula that seek to achieve gender equity without hampering any genders along the way. The key to an equitable solution is enabling girls (and, by extension, perhaps, boys) to understand the constructed nature of gender while encouraging collectivity and cooperation in schools (Currie, Kelly, Pomerantz 2009, 202-203). In so doing, educators can both acknowledge gender and reject its constraints. Put concisely, “as a social, not individual, accomplishment, the gendered, racialized, and classed nature of Subjecthood remains in view” while “[inviting] interrogations of the conditions under which we ‘do gender’” (Currie, Kelly, Pomerantz 2009, 203). Service-learning acknowledges that youth are capable of understanding and analyzing the sources of power that structure their lives, a skill that is foundational to marginalized youth who would otherwise be denied this deconstructive tool. The Association for Experiential Education makes the link clear: “The social justice work that has been fundamental to women’s studies curriculums is considered an excellent addition to a curriculum utilizing experiential education” (Warren and Rheingold 1996, 119). It is the common interest in a shared, community-based goal that allows girls to find those skills that might otherwise be denied to them, for fear of traditionally masculine characteristics encroaching on their femininity. Girls can be assertive leaders in

a supportive, open environment founded upon shared passions or interests among many different students and community members. Ultimately, there is a focus on “three developmental concepts relevant to identity development: agency, social relatedness, and moral-political awareness” (Yates and Youniss 1996, 87). Service-learning benefits both genders while allowing girls to engage in activities that support positive identity development. The process of forming an idea, following through with it, and completing a reflection and follow-up activity is a clear example of agency that allows young people to imagine themselves as actors in an interconnected world.

By inviting young people to think critically about the conditions of their respective communities, girls can understand their own subjectivity as gendered, sexed, raced, and classed individuals in a collective, productive context that encourages the deconstruction of identity as a stratifying phenomenon. One can see that “youth who are marginalized by virtue of their identity find themselves disconnected from key institutions and social systems,” thereby precluding girls from taking a role in the dismantling of their own oppression (Delgado and Staples 2008, 20). This disconnect, however, can be repaired. Put succinctly, “addressing these forces through consciousness raising and social action is critical to engaging and sustaining marginalized youth,” though this end need not be accomplished through the explicit taking on of gender inequality, since that approach has the capacity to deepen divides (Delgado and Staples 2008, 20). In order to satisfy both gender theory and educational practice, one cannot divide boys and girls and have them look at boys’ issues and girls’ issues as separate entities. Instead, children can learn to adopt a critical eye for their environment, with all its successes and inequities, and move forward together to make a difference. In this way, service-learning can certainly be utilized as a means to address the gender gap that has characterized the American public education system in such a way that theorists and practitioners have their needs met. By offering girls and boys an opportunity to work together in the common aspiration for self-esteem, competency, and high-quality relationships, schools can create an environment that fosters learning for both genders without denying the subjectivity of either. Nontraditional education models also satisfy the critiques of the institution of gender brought forth by academics. The assertion that gender is both a performance and a manifestation of power relations can, in fact, be reconciled with applied education principles through enrichment activities. These experiences are, in a sense, blind to gender insofar as they allow for the productive coexistence of both genders in educational contexts, but they also allow for an individualistic, personal approach to youth development that cultivates a multiplicity of identities.

A Way Forward

Of course, the feasibility of this project is unsteady, as schools become increasingly beholden to standards and test scores in pursuit of funding. Policy makers, educators, and academics need to work together to ensure the inclusion of these transformative experiences in public schools if substantive change is to take place. Still, the recognition of the essential place of identity in the reformulation of education in the United States paves the way for new ways of thinking about the role of knowledge in an intersectional world. Wide-ranging reform involving all those

who structure knowledge production and youth development can provide an impetus for the elimination of gender disparities. My intervention is by no means an exhaustive one. The consideration of transnational and queer critiques must take place in order to complete what is certainly a complicated and rewarding topic.

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