

***Feminist Praxis Revisited: Critical Reflections on University–Community Engagement.* Amber Dean, Jennifer L. Johnson, and Susanne Luhmann (Eds.). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. (2019). 192 pages. ISBN (paper) 9781771123778 \$31.99.**

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In *Feminist Praxis Revisited*, a new edited collection from Amber Dean, Jennifer L. Johnson, and Susanne Luhmann, the contributors offer insightful critiques of service-learning (SL) and community engagement within the field of women’s and gender studies (WGS) in Canada. Drawing from Freire (1970), the authors operationalize praxis as putting theories/ideas into action, especially through SL and community engagement. The contributors adeptly problematize several core assumptions of SL by asking questions such as: What does it mean to “learn elsewhere,” and why do educators think it is necessary? And how can WGS promote activism within the neoliberal university context, where community service and job preparation are emphasized? Although all the chapters are set in the Canadian context, readers from any developed nation likely will resonate with the struggles outlined in the book. However, the authors sometimes raise more questions than they answer, offering few practical suggestions for the audience. Nevertheless, *Feminist Praxis Revisited* is a useful resource for critical educators who want to re-evaluate their classroom and community praxis.

Dean, Johnson, and Luhmann have collected a range of contributions for the book, which is no surprise given their wide-ranging research interests, including decolonialism, neo-Marxism, and queer studies. Dean, Johnson, Margot Francis, Lise Gotell, Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, Joanne Muzak, Catherine M. Orr, Ilya Parkins, Sarita Srivastava, and Judith Taylor contributed their writing to the collection. The editors have kept the book succinct, with 11 chapters in approximately 200 pages that strike a balance between substance, insight, and concision. *Feminist Praxis Revisited* is a somewhat unique text in the realm of feminist SL scholarship because of its emphasis on critical reflection regarding theories of SL. Several authors reject Stoecker’s (2016) call for SL to be assessed according to its community impact. Instead, in a significant departure, they emphasize student learning and theory development. For a more practical guide, readers ought to consider *Gender, Identity, Equity, and Violence* (Stahly, 2007), and *Feminist Community Engagement* (Iverson & James, 2014) which covers both theory and application, but it has few chapters on SL.

Feminist Praxis Revisited contains two sections: (1) Feminist Praxis/For Credit/Under Neoliberalism; and (2) Critical Approaches to Praxis/In and Out of the Classroom. The first section opens with Dean’s review of neoliberalism’s depoliticization of community engagement, which will sound familiar to critical scholars. Introducing a theme throughout the book, Dean problematizes the false dichotomy of “the university” and “the community” by arguing that conceptualizing “the university” as detached from “the community” obscures both oppression on campus and the presence of some students who are members of the same underserved communities in which SL seeks to intervene. Dean concludes by suggesting that educators should step back into classrooms to rethink how they frame community engagement “at all levels” (p. 36) to disrupt neoliberal colonial logics.

Srivastava’s chapter comes next and is the best in the book. She successfully complicates theoretical assumptions about the difference between service and activism in SL, and she provides practical suggestions for educators. Critical SL scholarship favors student activism and criticizes service/charity that does not address the systemic roots of inequality. Srivastava is sympathetic to this argument, but she suggests educators ought to reimagine what counts as activism, and her chapter is where the contributions of WGS to SL scholarship are clearest and most persuasive. Srivastava argues “rigid dichotomies” (p. 58) between community and university, classroom and learning site, and service and activism ought to be avoided. Srivastava provides numerous compelling examples of student projects that blur the lines between volunteerism and activism and concludes with suggestions for students, rather than educators, which is a creative rhetorical choice that nevertheless provides insight for instructors: abandon perfection and theoretical consistency; do not take existing theories and knowledge for granted; redefine notions of “success;” and recognize the value of setbacks and challenges to stimulate deeper learning and theorizing.

The second-best chapter arrives in the second section of the book, when Taylor calls for SL in WGS to be more practical for students and community partners. Taylor found that the students in her courses often wanted to unpack, unravel, and problematize experiences and lessons learned in their SL placements, but there was little appetite for problem solving. Taylor calls this a “quick draw” critique where the feminist instinct is to immediately identify flaws in phenomena. She broadens from just one SL course to indict WGS programs broadly, saying “Paranoia not only frames feminist scholarship, it conditions the classroom as well” (p. 198). Taylor concludes by calling on WGS scholars and students to be more empathic and resist the urge to perform paranoid, “quick draw” critique.

Studies of SL frequently acknowledge challenges experienced in a project, but those challenges are typically overcome, creating an overall narrative of success. Such examples are illuminating, but research exploring when SL does not go well deserves more attention. *Feminist Praxis Revisited* provides two chapters dedicated to such studies. Parkins examines the shortcomings of a project that was meant to memorialize the lives of murdered women in Canada and discusses how students’ memorials focused too much on women’s deaths rather than their lives. Parkins argues that relationality is a core concept within SL and identifies an ideological tension between the emotional labor of remembering and relating and the intellectual labor of critical analysis. She concludes that such work ought to be synthesized so that students and instructors emphasize relationality, empathy, and care with community partners while simultaneously incorporating a critical reflection of that relationship and connections to structural oppression. Parkins’s vulnerability in acknowledging her missteps in the course is commendable and provides a model of writing that ought to be more prominent in SL scholarship.

WGS scholars who practice SL and/or community engagement through placements, practica, and standalone assignments will benefit from reading this book. Likewise, educators and scholars interested in theories that support SL ought to read *Feminist Praxis Revisited*, for the text questions core assumptions about what it means for students to learn “elsewhere” and why that learning is believed to be more beneficial than classroom instruction alone.

Despite the book’s successful problematization of who ought to do SL, who it ought to benefit, and where it ought to take place, the text contains some weaknesses. The authors’ desire to reject rigid dichotomies of “the university” and “the community,” “service” and “activism” is warranted, but they risk generating false equivalencies in the process. For example, Francis crafted an empowering course assignment that involves every student collecting their family history. Although an example of critical pedagogy, it would not widely be recognized as SL or community engagement. Collecting one’s family history is not equivalent to, say, working with an organization that fights immigrant family separation. Likewise, the experience of working in a health clinic on campus is not equivalent to working in an HIV/AIDS clinic off campus. The authors are right that educators ought to interrogate the assumptions they make about where SL takes place, but academia, in general, remains a privileged space (despite increasing diversity) that possesses cultural legitimacy (despite its embattled status) and resources (despite neoliberal defunding), which can be leveraged in service to community partners’ goals.

Lest readers become lost in the fog of the authors’ boundary blurring, they ought to recall that Freire’s (1970) praxis was meant to inspire and improve action to benefit the oppressed, the vast majority of whom remain beyond campus. Several contributors to *Feminist Praxis Revisited* seem to suggest that educators ought to turn inward by addressing student learning, theory development, and, as Dean suggests, taking a step back from SL to reassess its impacts. However, the numerous crises facing the contemporary world compel scholars and students to turn *outward* and partner with everyday people to address human suffering. This work will be imperfect, but, as Srivastava demonstrates, all are learners who improve through an emphasis on engagement with the Other, for too much “quick draw” critique risks paralyzing actors.

Ultimately, the book is a stimulating text worthy of readers’ attention. The authors offer an opportunity to reflect on one’s SL courses, and the questions the book raises about practitioners’ assumptions provide insightful heuristics and theoretical lenses for assessing SL and community engagement. Within *Feminist Praxis Revisited*, readers will find theoretical and empirical chapters that could inspire a radical rethinking of their approach to SL.

References

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