

CHAPTER 8.

**CRAFTING PARTNERSHIPS:
EXPLORING STUDENT-LED
FEMINIST STRATEGIES FOR
COMMUNITY LITERACY PROJECTS**

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Relationships have served as a cornerstone to feminist research in community-based research and service learning sites, as feminist scholars have argued for co-constructing knowledges in these sites, while being attentive to the reciprocal nature of these relationships within any context of and for learning (Bayer, Grossman, & Dubois, 2015; Parks & Goldblatt, 2000; Novek, 1999). These relationships are especially crucial when feminists attempt to create real and sustained partnerships through mentoring in their community-based literacy site (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). We stress the value of cultivating sustained relationships, as oftentimes discourses surrounding service learning exhibit a level of engagement that is not sustained and/or does not adequately expose the workings of power and privilege in a systematic

way (Deans, 2002). In light of our feminist motivations, we need to continuously create spaces to foreground the value of experience and take seriously the process of cultivating relationships with students in ways that are both ethical and accountable.

Feminist pedagogues in composition and rhetoric have long illustrated that the role of pedagogy is to create conditions to transform social relationships (Ritchie, 1990; Bishop, 1990). To this end, feminist pedagogies reveal a strong commitment to examining how power and privilege factor into multiple elements of writing instruction—from the stances pedagogues assume—to the types of writing assignments and discussions that are implemented and assessed: “Feminist pedagogies connect local, personal experience to larger context of world making . . . within writing studies, activist pedagogical functions are linked to writing and literacy practices broadly conceived, making clear that there is no bracketing the world or politics from the classroom” (Micciche, 2014, p. 129). Our feminist pedagogies and practices in composition and rhetoric continue to evolve, as we find creative ways to move between the local and the global; the theoretical and the practical, all while revealing a relentless commitment to creating spaces with students, as we explore how political motivations materialize both within and beyond the classroom. Various authors in this collection highlight the role of reflection and collaboration in creating sustained partnerships, which closely involve students (See Mathis and Boehm, Chapter 6, for example). The overall impetus is to revise the discourse and to account for the absence of students’ voices, while revising the *processes* through which collaboration happens both inside and outside of the classroom.

Students should always “trouble” our theories about the most effective methods through which to create change, because it is *their* stories that point to gaps, disconnects, and/or limitations (Kumashiro, 2002) in how we conceptualize the most effective ways to cultivate partnerships and relationships to community members within our service learning and/or community-based research sites. Continuing to create spaces where students are active agents in the construction, implementation, and reflection on feminist-based community literacy projects afford us with insight that can greatly enhance the types of relationships that we make in literacy-based sites. “When participants become full collaborators, co-authors, and co researchers, their roles are transformed: they cease to be the ‘subjects’ or participants in our research” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 64). Creating alternative opportunities to co-construct knowledges that emerge from students’ lived experiences privileges student identities and experiences in the construction of knowledge about how to create conditions of and for social change, as we continue our commitments to feminist pedagogues and practices. To this end, our

work calls for a similar initiative as the “learning together,” model, which is explored by Brandt and Kozma in this collection (Chapter 7). This model allows for multiple narratives to equally come together and create a more kaleidoscopic view of how feminist interventions happen.

Our feminist pedagogical intervention draws from our collective experiences in a community-based feminist partnership. Throughout this piece, we argue that as feminists, we must engage in the process of reflection—as a political feminist intervention strategy—to make meaning about our lived-experiences in community-based research sites, as community-based pedagogies stress the value of experiential learning as a tool through which to make meaning (Goldblatt, Livingston, & Julier, 2014, p. 56-57). This process allows us to re-evaluate the role of identity and experience in constructing knowledges, thereby-prioritizing the value of experience-based knowledge claims to “. . .democratize the classroom by drawing on a full range of student and faculty subject positions in the production of knowledge” (Sanchez-Casal and Macdonald, 2002, p.2). This process creates spaces where feminist students feel authorized to use their experiences in these sites, given the complexities involved in the use of narrative to disrupt discourses (Allen and Faigley 1995).

This chapter illustrates how a multi-layered approach to partnerships can help feminists assess community-based efforts through a focus on feminist mentorship and reflexivity. Our chapter foregrounds the voices of four feminist undergraduate students at Nova Southeastern University, as we draw from our work as co-mentors through the Women of Tomorrow Program. The WOT program links professional woman to a local high school, where are afforded the opportunities to create conditions through which young, at-risk high school women feel empowered. The motivation behind this organization is to “change the world, one woman at a time,” and it is “designed to inspire, motivate and empower at-risk young women to live up to their full potential through a unique mentoring program” (<https://womenoftomorrow.org/about/>).

Reflections on our community-engaged partnership created conditions where students’ writing emerged from a unique rhetorical context. The work that feminist students did within our site, and the reflection of that work, stemmed from their commitments to providing feminist interventions into the lives of young women through a pre-existing partnership. I used both my position as a Women of Tomorrow mentor and my role as a university professor to informally mentor a small group of college women to create initiatives intended for empowerment. Thus, it was our hope to recognize the value of bringing together action and reflection in order to make sense of these types of experiences outside of a traditional classroom (Goldblatt, Livingston, and Julier, 2014, p. 58-59; Spigelman, 2004).

All of the students who chose to participate in this project made critical decisions about how they wanted to represent themselves in the research, and all of the students self-selected the types of narratives that they wanted to present. Significantly, the position that students were placed in authorize them to become experts and join an academic conversation (Bacon 2000). In this way, we believe that this chapter calls for a more active and deliberate account of our feminist students and creates alternative discourses about how community-based partnerships happen. Students' representations of their own experiences serve as a point of social action and intervention. Thus, in this chapter we will argue that how we represent the work we do as feminists within community-based research sites should be approached as a methodology that involves inquiry. In *Traces of a Stream* Jackie Jones Royster (1994) argues for the use of "critical imagination," as a new methodology where we engage in inquiry as we use what we know and then stretch and expand our perspectives. She argues that from inquiry, we can continue to expand how we come to know, and speculate on what may, in fact, be possible" ("Critical Imagination," p. 71). Critical imagination thus becomes a significant tool through which we can look more carefully at the gaps, possibilities, and potentials in how we choose to actively represent our work, and students actively speak up and speak back through their epistemological stances. While their representations are in no way intended to be definitive, we suggest that students' accounts of themselves serve as an analytic for engaging in feminist activism.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Women of Tomorrow Mentor and Scholarship Program pairs "at risk" high school girls with local mentors in the community. The intention is to create positive and lasting relationships; to inspire women to re-create their futures. According to the organization, it functions to "expose at risk girls to opportunities otherwise unavailable to them; teaches vital personal and professional skills necessary for life success; helps set and achieve goals; increases their self-esteem; and helps to reduce and prevent engaging in risky behaviors" (Womenoftomorrow.org). The program partners with local public schools. Young women are selected to be in the group based on need and the organization notes that its definition of "at-risk" includes: "low income, abuse, disability, likelihood of dropping out of high school, becoming involved in gangs, drugs, criminal activity, getting pregnant or academic, social, behavioral, medical or other risk factors" ("What we Do," *Mentoring Handbook*, p. 3). The organization is especially aligned with feminist goals and outcomes, as it operates under the assumption that it is powerful for women to be helping women reach their full potential. The program suggests that mentors address issues related to a wide-range of topics. These

range from academic achievement, which highlights study skills and the significance of pursuing an education beyond high school, professional/personal successes including how to carry yourself while giving a speech and how to maintain proper hygiene/health and safety. At the core of the monthly sessions is an insistence to engage in critical thinking, interpersonal communication, and skills for academic and personal success. Our position to the local high school afforded us with the opportunity to build a unique partnership because we were not confined by the institutional constraints of a classroom environment. Unlike service-learning courses where university students' work with community members and are guided by course-work and motivated by a final grade, we were working as a collective with common goals and purposes.

RE-PRESENTING STUDENT VOICES

I served as the faculty member who selected former undergraduate feminist students who I felt would enrich our approach to the WOT program. Feminist undergraduate students at Nova Southeastern University were asked to participate in the process of reflexivity about their relationships to our feminist project. I attempted to address these power differences head on by asking feminist students to self-select how they wanted to engage in the process of research and representation; in the process, we foregrounded the role of reflexivity in the research process. Reflexivity has taken on a variety of forms in service-learning and community-based research and serves as a social justice tool because it allows researchers to actively and carefully explore knowledge construction (Dewey, 2012). To that end, reflexivity is a key component to producing ethical and responsible research (Royster and Kirsch, 2012). I decided against using interviews as a method through which to gauge students' understandings of their role in bringing about change within our site. I felt that the interviews may function to overly formalize and structure some of their responses in ways that may stifle how they have been thinking about their agency in the research process. Also, I felt as if being the interviewer may work to reinforce, or make hyper visible, our varying roles (and the power dynamics that accompanied those roles) in the research process.

Feminist students identified what they saw as key themes that emerged in the construction, implementation, planning, and engagement of this partnership with the local high school. In the following section, I have included student accounts of how they see particular themes reflected throughout their work. All students represented below included their personal, un-edited reflective narratives. This was to maintain the integrity of *student* representation. The themes students discuss overlap in significant ways and raise serious questions about the role of different themes in feminist activism work.

STUDENT NARRATIVES

KIM—THEME #1: GETTING THE MOST OF MENTORING BY ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS

When one wants to introduce themselves as a mentor to an individual's life, it is important to take note that he/she enters in an unknown territory, and that it could be difficult to explore or make a clear path if he/she is not seen as welcoming. As a person participating in the WOT program, I believe that establishing genuine relationships with high school students could provide greater success within their lives. My purpose in the WOT program is to be able to educate the young ladies in the best possible manner allowing them to think about the type of life they want to engage in and the possible decisions they are entitled to. With this in mind it is important for the students to make choices for themselves instead of what others may think, including me, since in the end it is wanted for them to feel a sense of control in their lives.

Even if a mentor may have good intentions, sometimes it is not easy to become vulnerable to a person with unknown intentions. As a person who once needed guidance, I could empathize with those who may have reluctance of expressing certain discomforts of their lives which may have left vast feelings such as disappoint, fear, anger, regret or hate. Feeling exposed is a difficult matter especially if it is in front of a person who may judge or could care less of the individual. Which is why it is important when one is trying to help an individual, to establish a relationship where the person can have the sense of security that he/she is being helped to make decisions of his/her life that is beneficial.

From what I have experienced throughout my life and the WOT program I could understand how establishing relationships as a mentor is important in the outcome of an individual. As a young child, I always thought of how I was perceived in this world and what I perceived myself as. I lived a content life, however, there were aspects of it that bothered me such as developing negative body image which almost resulted to an eating disorder, certain types of harassment, discrimination and prejudice, especially from those who were supposed to be close to me. Although I am very close to my parents and always spoke to them with no discomfort, I seldom spoke about the problems that personally hurt me as I didn't want them to feel that they did not do a great job as parents. The only one I shared my bottled feelings at that time was my younger sister, however, I tried not to as there was no need to drag her into my problems.

When I was in high school reaching towards senior year, I had a self-awareness of the expectations many had, and questioned who exactly was

living my life. I knew that I wanted to attend college, yet as a first-generation student I did not know what steps to take at all. I wasn't sure what college or university I wanted to attend and started to doubt in my intelligence and decisions. Confused, I turned to my former Spanish AP teacher whom I trusted. Her advice was important to me since I knew she really cared about my well-being and was always willing to listen with genuine interest. She was able to see my vulnerability without force and managed to compliment me as a person. At that time, all I needed was some guidance from someone who saw great potential within me, someone who knew that I had worth within me. I was compliant with her advice and up to this day I attend a university which I love and also got to meet amazing people throughout who also saw the same potential within me.

I barely thought of other people like me who also sought aid from others like my former Spanish AP teacher, however, when I went for the first time to the WOT meeting I envisioned myself, except they were multiple strong energetic young girls with minds of their own. I didn't know from what backgrounds each may have come from, but I knew each were there for personal reasons. Unfortunately, at the beginning it was hard to gain their attention, which didn't surprise me as it was my first time there and knew it would take time, yet as I observed, I got the sense that all of them wanted a better future for themselves such as attending college. Throughout the event I wanted the high school students to know that they are worthy individuals, that they can seek the change they want if they saw value within themselves. As I shared my personal struggles I wanted them to understand that change is gradual and must be persistent; that being imperfect is alright, but also not to let those imperfections be the reason one cannot seek improvement. As other mentors from the WOT program spoke about their struggles and improvements I could see the interests forming from the young ladies. They saw people they could relate to and trust, which was important as it allowed them to actually reflect upon their situations and the possible choices they have to approach them. When I saw their willingness to be compliant as we tried to provide them with guidance, I realized the importance of forming relationships as a mentor and that how this should be implemented within all mentorship or other aiding program.

As the WOT program progresses, hopefully I will have some success in empowering some, if not, most of the young girls as they reevaluate their lives. Although I wish to form connection with them, I do hope I do it in a manner that they are comfortable with. It is not my intentions to make them feel forced to become beings that they don't want to be or make them feel insignificant. Yet I believe through experience, that establishing genuine relationships between the mentor and student can lead into a positive outcome for the students.

ASHLEY—THEME #2: FEMINISM IN MENTORSHIP

I have played sports all my life. I have been an athlete from dancing, to lifting weights, to playing football. Throughout these vast sporting experiences, I never failed to hear “you throw like a girl,” “you run like a girl,” or even “this is a boy sport.” Some young people may have been discouraged by statements as stupid as this. I treated these “insults” as compliments and fueled myself to be the best me that I could be. I always knew that no matter what I was doing, I was going to give it everything I had and make it something I could be proud of. Entering college was the means of a new beginning for myself and many others. I set out to explore who I am as both as a student and as an individual. I finally discovered who I had been all along, a feminist. Unearthing the true name to my personal beliefs left me searching for more definite foundations of this cause. Luckily, I was able to explore feminism further through one of my college courses. After countless hours delving into to countless articles, studies, and passages and conducting a couple surveys, and a few interviews I was able to produce not one but three different term papers on the subject. After conducting educational and personal research I was then confident that I was indeed a feminist. Sadly, when I mention feminism I usually get scoffed at . . . even by women. This saddens me the most because if women don’t even believe in feminism, how will we ever get the world to believe. I believe that the reason for this is that no one ever taught these women what feminism really stands for: what feminism really is. Feminism is not just a bunch of women advocating for female supremacism. Feminism is a fight to make right everything that is so, so, wrong in this world. Feminism is fighting for expression, fighting for equality, fighting for every person who has ever been told that his or her voice doesn’t matter. Feminism is for men and women, people of all measures of the gender scale, people of all ages, people of all races, and people of all religions. Feminism is so much more than I will ever be and feminism is bigger than most people can fathom. Being in a college atmosphere that fosters personal growth, I found feminism. I don’t know how I went so long without knowing about feminism and this knowledge has changed my life. Feminism has proved to me that I can be more than just a girl from a small town that no one can find on a map. This is why I think it is very important to work with young girls in the name of feminism.

Working with Women of Tomorrow gives me the opportunity to spread feminism on a level that may be more important than any other. I rejoice in the opportunity to get to know the students of this program, to see a little bit of myself in their eyes, and maybe help them to understand that they aren’t limited to the perceptions of others. The young girls who are involved in this program are going to be a huge part of the future of the world. We have already seen big

steps in creating equal rights for the gay community, the black community, and yes even the female community. We have been fortunate enough to witness so much change, but there is still so much to do. These women could be part of the generation that finally breaks through the glass ceiling. They could be a part of the generation with the first female president. They could be responsible for making giant leaps in creating true equality. I feel that it is my social responsibility to form genuine relationships with the girls I mentor; it is important to instill in them the ideas of true feminism. With these relationships comes support, encouragement, and trust. These elements are the basis of a strong foundation to personal growth. It is of the utmost importance that these young women see the potential that exists in each and every one of them. The potential to make a difference for the generations that are to follow them. Women fought so long and so hard in the women's suffrage movement and still, so many women don't exercise their right to vote. Giving these girls the opportunity to have access to a feminist influence also gives them an environment that fosters self-exploration. Much like the environment that initiated my own self-actualization. This kind of mentoring gives me the opportunity to teach the feminist principles I have come to know and create a group of colleagues to stand up for what is right.

I hope I never see a world without feminism. This makes my mission as a mentor even more important. It is imperative that the young women involved in Women of Tomorrow mentoring program learn and understand how much of a difference they can make. It is essential that they exercise their right to vote, their right to live as productive and self-aware members of their communities and all of the communities that they will come to be a part of.

MUSTARI—THEME #3: PROVIDING ACCESS: BLAZING A PATH FOR OTHERS THROUGH MENTORSHIP

“Access” and “excess” are two things that, despite their phonetic similarities, are conceptually different. Notwithstanding, both things can also be intertwined, and I believe both play a distinct role in mentorship. One can argue that a mentor is the most successful and efficient in being able to guide and nurture the growth of another individual when the mentor him or herself has access to knowledge or opportunities that can be then passed down to his or her mentee. Other times, when an individual has an excess of something in his or her life, that surplus can also be shared with others who lack it. Both themes of access and excess have played a critical role in my motivations and commitment to become a mentor for the Women of Tomorrow (WOT) program. Interestingly, it was actually my own initial *lack* of access and the *lack* of excess in my life that cemented my drive to mentor others in the future.

As immigrants, my family moved to America with little to flourish on. Both my parents, who both were unable to pursue a college education in our home country due to the lack of financial access, instilled the importance of education in all of my siblings and I. We were told that in order to get access to the rest of the world and its many untouched opportunities, we had to excel in scholarship and service. However, the problem was, we didn't know *how*. We lived in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood and attended underprivileged schools. Our neighborhood and schools lacked sufficient access to federal assistance programs that were critically necessary to help nurture the academic and personal growth of its residents and its students, respectively. At my home, my family struggled on multiple fronts; there was a lack of access to financial stability, for the time for recreational activities, and for simple necessities and desires. While I don't believe an excess is necessary to leave a sustainable life, it did make me wonder what life was like for those who *did* have the freedom to access the opportunities the world had for them, and for those who *did* have an excess to be able to live somewhat in comfort or afford luxuries. At the same time, I wanted someone to connect with on an emotional level, someone who could share my personal struggles with or someone who encouraged me to strive for my happiness and success further down the road. It was then when I began to seek advice from those who *did* have the access and the knowledge to share with me their wisdom on how I could find my own window for success and growth.

I was drawn to the WOT for this very reason. Many of the public-school girls who participate in the WOT program in order to seek scholarship and mentorship come from difficult backgrounds or underprivileged that have resulted in them being at-risk for academic failure, future pregnancies, low self-esteem, or future unemployment. Another factor that they all share in common is the lack of access to a program or mentors who could otherwise show them their potential for success and growth. Learning about these girls made me immediately reflect on my own childhood and my own desperation for 'access', for 'excess', and for a mentor. It made me realize that I was finally in a position in life where I could become the very person I once needed for myself as a child. As a college student, I finally had access to a plethora of opportunities, had an 'excess' of knowledge to share, and had the personal experience to potentially mentor another. Most of all, I wanted the WOT girls to know that their current position in life was not permanent like I once thought it was for myself, but they had untapped potentials that was waiting to be ignited so they too could go on to become successful.

That's exactly the mindset I walked into my first WOT meeting with, and the reception was outstanding. The room was full of high school girls who were bustling with energy and radiating with potential. Many of them seem enthusi-

astic and engaged and willing to ask questions. I, in addition to my other peer mentors, indulged in the girl's curiosities, aspirations, and unique personalities in order to create an atmosphere where we could learn to comfortably trust each other and form a friendship that went beyond just mentor and mentee. Through each session both the mentors and mentee empowered each other to not only embrace our flaws and learn to love who we are, but to also work towards eliminating insecurities, negative influences, and personal restraints that were keeping us back to becoming who or where we wanted to be. I wanted to focus on making them comfortable with themselves first and showing them that you don't need to completely change who you are or disregard your past in order to change, but that change must first come from accepting who you currently are. I also wanted to show them that change cannot be forced but it is something that need to come from within, and that if they personally wanted to work towards improving themselves for the better, that I and the other WOT mentors were here to help them along each step of the way.

The girls seemed extremely receptive to learn about and from our personal hardships and experiences with body positivity, relationships, and healthy lifestyles. Most importantly, they seem especially keen about learning how to pursue a post-secondary education or successful careers, but didn't know where to begin or where to go in order to find information, similar to I once had. As a first-generation college student, I shared my experience with breaking out of my shell and overcoming socioeconomic hardships in order to try to reach for my own goals. Using me as role model, many of them turned to me for advice for not only applications for schools and scholarships, but also about their own insecurities of succeeding in the world. Overall, it was a two-way street, and I had just as much to learn from and about the girls and my fellow mentors as they did from me.

However, I soon learned that being a mentor requires more patience, diligence, and dedication that I had previously assumed. Although the beginning of the school year started off with a lot of promise, much of that energy depleted, and the number of girls who participated in our program painfully dwindled with each consecutive meeting for reasons that were unknown to us. Sometimes it was difficult to maintain the relationships we had formed with the girls, to keep them engaged, or to get them to trust us with their personal thoughts. Other times, it was tough to make them look past their own insecurities and socioeconomic restraints to show them their untapped potentials. I began to see that mentorship and change is also a slow process with many challenges along the way. Nevertheless, the experience of being able to help another, while also personally growing as an individual due to what you have learned from others, is the most rewarding experience. My journey as both a mentor and a mentee

is one that is still ongoing, and is one where I am still learning from every day.

While I once lacked the access to many opportunities as a child, I am finally in a position where I am able to share my ‘excess’ of experiences and opportunities with others, and I am able to provide others with the chance to ‘access’ these opportunities for themselves. I also understand now that there are both ups and downs of becoming a mentor or being a mentee, and that patience and commitment is needed on both ends for positive change to happen. As I continue my involvement WOT, I hope that somewhere down the line my experiences will be able to help another person find their own personal success and happiness and that they too will go onto continuing the cycle of empowerment. I have always told myself to “be who you needed when you were younger,” and while I’m still trying to grow into that kind of a person for myself today, I hope that through WOT that I can also become that person for someone else.

MORGAN—THEME #4: THE DIVIDE OF ACCESS AND POWER: A FIGHT FOR BALANCE IN MENTORSHIP

Working with the WOT program, I have found that these opportunities, academic and nonacademic, are greatly valued by mentees purely because this information would not have been available to them without it. This complicates how we look at our resources and how we divide limited access between those who really need it and those who could benefit from it. While all students might benefit from preventative programs, the major goal is to provide such programs to individuals who have no other means of accessing this information. Taking this into consideration, WOT provided a great place for me to develop more community outreach and involvement. This especially affected how I view the things that I do as a student. I am extremely privileged with access to benefiting factors of education, like professors and free educational workshops, that these students do not have as high schoolers and I did not have as a high schooler. The experience of limited access made me realize how difficult it is to develop as a student and pushed to be involved in the WOT program.

This same objective of limited access can be applied to finding the mentors for preventative programs. Many students and community members have the ability to share knowledge with mentees; however, such members do not have access to the correct programs to provide these services. Outlets, such as WOT, require an individual to have the correct resources to find their way into the system. Programs that require a certain extent of knowledge are often thought of as off limits for students, those of which who might not feel confident being deemed a mentor when they are still learning themselves.

Access and goals of inspiration where my major motivators when asked to be

involved with the WOT program. Being an individual who did not have access to the aspects that the WOT program provides, I know first-hand how this can complicate a student's capacity for success. Success being defined as achieving the goals said students have set for themselves, be it a degree or to practice sex safely. To have the capability to give this knowledge, it would be an injustice not to give the access to students in a similar situation.

When working first-hand with the students in the WOT program, my critical role as a peer becomes more clear. As students are faced daily with the constraints placed on them when working with individuals in a power position, to be introduced to knowledge with a peer figure makes the students feel more comfortable. As power can create fear, relatability can make a safe space for questions and further explanation. This places a huge amount of importance on the fact the academic dynamic of school is challenged during WOT meetings. Students are welcomed to ask questions that a teacher might deem inappropriate for school, such as questions about their bodies or questions about the complexities of relationships. Mentorship is not only engaging students in academic based learning, but also applying life experience to allow for growth from personal sources.

Access is a defining factor in the mentoring process. As a student, mentee, it limits your chances of gaining knowledge important to your goals. As a mentor, it defines your credibility and chances of providing knowledge. Acknowledgement of these factors can be an exceptional motivator for both mentors and mentees to take advantage of these limited opportunities. The question then arises, how do we then create access for all parties?

CONCLUSION

This chapter intends to allow feminist-students agency over the representation of their narratives as they enrich discourses surrounding the most effective methods to create feminist partnerships. All feminist co-mentors noted the significance of drawing from their personal experiences as a way to connect to individual students and/or to connect to the overall expectations of the program. Similarly, all students discussed the role of emotions in creating multiple relationships to the high school girls and illustrated just how powerful it is to be mindful of their relationships to power and privilege in the mentoring process.

Students are represented throughout discourses that highlight the effects of our feminist collaborations within community-based research sites. In these spaces, students are provided with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of what it was like to engage in the community. (See *Michigan Journal of Community Service; Undergraduate Journal of Service Learning and Community-Based*

Research.) These processes of self-representation disrupt more traditional, and linear accounts of how students experience service-learning, and positions community literacy as “a search for alternative discourse” (Higgins et.al). As a result, these discourses become less monolithic, and provide spaces where students can negotiate multiple identities. “Thus, participants’ identity is formed through their narratives, and can be considered a gradual formation of ‘becoming’” (Gomez, Allen, & Black, 2007).

Conflicts arise when we attempt to make meaning from the types of representations that are created about collaborative partnerships in any stage of the research process: “The question, then, becomes, how to interpret the experiences of research participants when their analytical framework, their values, and their view of the world differ sharply from ours” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 48). Not only do institutional contexts affect students’ abilities to perform in ways that are meaningful and grounded in their individual experiences, but the discourses that always already define students constrain their representations and add another layer to how students choose to represent themselves. Identities are never static and always shift based on the demands of the rhetorical contexts that produce these identities (Harding, 2004; Hallman, 2013). Further, these constraints factor into the overall process of interpretation. Even as we attempt to assuage the multiple risks of misrepresenting others (Alcoff, 1991), thereby reifying how different institutional structures and academic discourses position the student-teacher relationships, we still have a long way to go. In other words, when our goals, and outcomes are at odds with students, as a result of the politics of representation, we may lose valuable insight. Our research is always already implicated (Reynolds, 1993). Creating spaces *with* co-mentors must, then, be a continuous process that feminist scholars are committed to as we form new relationships to our research and our communities: “Representation, of ourselves as well as [others] can never be innocent—whether that representation involves writing an essay . . . or teaching a class. Nevertheless, without representation we cannot engage in discourse, nor can we create spaces that, potentially at least, enable others—as well as ourselves—to speak” (Ede and Lunsford p. 176.).

Significantly, students noted that it was a struggle to create their narratives. They indicated that they were unsure how to effectively address the themes, and weren’t certain how to incorporate their personal experiences alongside of the particular themes. Even as students identified what they saw as key themes in the work that should be done within feminist-based activist sites, the constraints of the discourse factored into their overall processes. Morgan, in particular, discussed the nature of the writing process and the difficulties that she experienced as a result of the constraints of the real (or imagined) genre. Through informal

conversations and writings, the majority of students expressed their uncertainty in presenting an argumentative piece for a scholarly audience and creating a more personal account of their understandings of what constitutes an effective partnership. This ambiguity was reflected through their formal discussion of what they completed, or the uncertainty they expressed when submitting their work. Regardless, co-mentors felt authorized to discuss what they saw as significant themes yet had some difficulty in actually re-presenting those themes for the chapter. These conflicts point to larger issues to consider: who is and who is not authorized to participate within academic discourses? Further, to what extent are these narratives shaped by the audiences that read them? And, how do their narratives resist and/or replicate larger patterns regarding young women's roles in community-based partnerships? (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013). In her project, *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research*, (1999) Gesa Kirsch exposes the effects of misrepresenting others and asks, "whose words, whose reality—am I representing in my work?" (p. xi). Kirsch reminds us of the power of subjectivity within the re-construction of *our* (mis)representations, illustrating just how important it is to make visible how subjectivity affects the work that we do. She argues that our goals should be tied to making explicit how *our* political and personal commitments shape how we make meaning. "The goal of situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives is not to overcome these limits—an impossible task—but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, and the research reports we write" (p. 14).

We are interested in exposing how the work we have undergone, and the work that we hope to accomplish has emerged as a reciprocal process, whereas feminist theory and activism, personal and political motivations, and reflection have served as an overarching motivation for us to continue to sustain our work. In their article "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry" Higgins et al. indicate that "community literacy was . . . *a search for alternative discourse*,' a way for people to acknowledge each other's multiple forms of expertise through talk and text and to draw on their differences as a resources for addressing shared problems" (Peck, Flower, & Higgins, qtd. p. 205 *emphasis is ours*). Throughout their narratives, co-mentors offered ways to continue to engage in feminist research and in ways to cultivate partnerships. It is our hope that this piece captures the energy of student-led initiatives beyond the classroom that reveal the value of community-action and reflection, as we work to create new theories of forming partnerships that take seriously the role of our feminist student leaders.

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