

THE PLEASURES AND PERILS OF TEACHING ACTIVISM TO STUDENTS: USING THE BODY TO TRANSFORMING THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM

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OVERVIEW OF MINI-WORKSHOP

- Why does activism matter?
- Why should we incorporate activism into a formal syllabus?
- Can we teach activism, and if so, how do we do this? (Sample assignments)
- Three examples:
 - Menstrual activism (Psychology of Gender course)
 - Vagina activism (Critical Perspectives on Sexuality course)
 - Body hair assignment (Extra credit in many of my courses)
- Assessing hazards and pleasures of teaching activism

WHY DOES ACTIVISM MATTER?

- Activism helps people to understand that they can take an active role in social change (Naples & Bojar, 2013)
- It has many positive consequences:
 - It helps people to have better interpersonal relationships (Rudman & Phelan, 2007) and less hostile attitudes toward feminism and women in general (Anderson, 2014)
 - It leads to structural change like policies that combat violence against women (Weldon & Htun, 2013) and enactment of equal rights legislation (Soule & Olzak, 2004).
- It can challenge previously held belief systems
 - For example, most people claim that they have complete control over their bodies (Gill, 2007) so challenging these beliefs is crucial!

TAKING WOMEN'S STUDIES COURSES

- Studies have shown that students benefit greatly from taking women's studies courses, reporting:
 - a more progressive gender role orientation
 - less prejudice toward women
 - more agency and control over their lives
 - more support for affirmative action
 - greater involvement in the women's movement
 - more activism
 - willingness to adopt new roles and behaviors
- more identification with feminism compared to students who did not take such courses
(Bryant, 2003; Harris, Melaas, & Rodacker, 1999; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999; Stake, 2007; Stake et al., 1994).

ACTIVISM IN WOMEN'S STUDIES COURSES

- The feminist classroom serves as an ideal space for challenging power (Maher, 1999), confronting racist and sexist institutions (Enns & Sinacore, 2004), and helping students develop a critical consciousness that links up with their personal experiences (Stake & Hoffman, 2000).
 - Still, feminist professors often shy away from integrating experiential forms of activism directly into the course curricula and far too rarely use consciousness-raising exercises and assignments (Enns & Sinacore, 2004) even though students benefit most from experiential assignments that prioritize reflection and “applied feminism” rather than cataloguing facts, engaging in passive learning, and working on less “hands on” assignments (Copp & Kleinman, 2008).
- Activism is a crucial part of a women and gender studies education!
 - A discipline cannot have activist foundations without activist practice being part of the core curriculum.

ACTIVISM IN OTHER COURSES (PSYCHOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY, ETC.)

- Many social science fields say they care about social justice but too often fail to provide much of that content in the curriculum (Enns & Sinacore, 2004).
 - “Engaged scholarship” is crucial for service learning and community-based research, and helps students get out of their student bubble (Peterson, 2009).
 - Students’ social justice learning was predicted by service-learning, introduction to sociology courses, and practices that encouraged reflection, discussion about diversity, and diverse peer interactions (Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007)
- One study found that *critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy praxis* constituted the three pillars of social justice teaching (Brown, 2004)

DOING AN ACTIVIST PROJECT WITH STUDENTS

- In the assignment, frame the importance of both activism and the target of the activism. *GET BUY IN.*
 - In my menstrual activism project, I explain the important work that activists have done in the past and then encourage students to imagine that it doesn't take a lot to create an impact. I also give examples of this!
- Whether teaching in person or online, frame activism as an important tool to combat disengagement.
 - I write in my syllabus for my online class: "One of the key criticisms of online courses is that such courses can create passive educational experiences where people do not connect with each other in the same way. This assignment is designed to challenge such stereotypes and to show the possibilities inherent to this mode of educational exchange."

THE INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE ASSIGNMENT

- Be sure to have multiple (clear) steps for student success to help mitigate their anxiety:
 - 1) Strategize about a priority area; 2) Devise an activist intervention; 3) Do the activist intervention and record results; 4) Write a paper about this assignment that includes X, Y, Z; 5) Present the project in a short in-class presentation.
- I strongly advise asking students to record (audio, video) what they're doing.
 - Aside from being inspiring to classmates and interesting for their presentations to each other, it helps to document any difficulties they have with administrators, the public, or each other.
- Be clear about encouraging them to be brave and creative, but also caution them against doing things that are frankly illegal.
 - Walking that line is important!

THE ROLE OF MENTORING

- Remember that many students do not know what activism is!
 - Explain this in clear language and remind them that activism does not need to only be organized protest.
- Group dynamics can be tricky, so make sure you keep an eye on how things are going interpersonally with the group.
 - Encourage them to work out disagreements before coming to talk with you.
- I always have students give me a one paragraph description of their idea long before they get started with the project.
 - This allows for good mentoring and helping them to hone in on the pros and cons of different approaches. Ultimately, though, it's their decision.

MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM ASSIGNMENT

- Students asked to devise an activist intervention to combat negativity surrounding menstruation
 - They were placed in groups and developed the topics they cared most about
 - They documented their efforts with photos, wrote a paper, and gave a talk about it in class and (in one semester) at a local conference.
 - The course (Psychology of Gender) is upper-division 300-level with mostly under age 30, roughly 25% male and 75% female, with vastly diverse sexual identity, race, and class backgrounds
- Topics have ranged from: the dangers of menstrual products, the menstrual stain, shaming of women who menstruate, artistic interventions to make menstruation public, educating younger girls about reusable products, challenging men to be less afraid of menstrual products (and beyond...)





POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE REACTIONS

- Positive reactions

- Some reacted with positive attention and expressed gratitude that the students had raised awareness about these issues
- Some praised them for their “bravery” and “courage”
- Many women appreciated the free supplies
- Many students learned from the assignment and felt surprised by the reactions from others
 - Most enjoyed sense of “fighting back” and resisting norms of silence and shame
 - They directly confronted their own (and other women’s) lack of agency and ability to “out” themselves as menstruating

- Negative reactions

- Most groups encountered negativity ranging from moderate to severe
- Verbal harassment and expressions of anger
- “Police presence” during some campus interventions
- Avoidance and shame
 - People in cars turned their heads or put on sunglasses
- A university administrator removed posters near cafeteria for “disrupting students’ appetites”
- State legislator called university president and said students were behaving “indecently” and were “scantily clad” and “talking about masturbation”

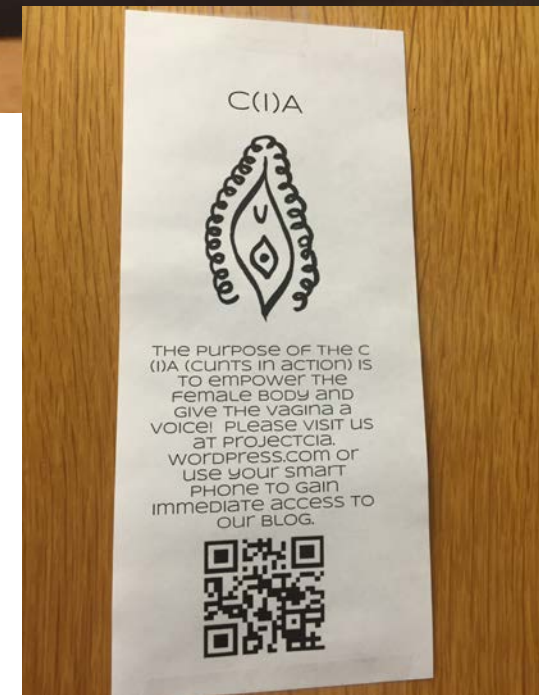
VAGINA ACTIVISM PROJECT

- Similar to the menstrual activism project, students designed an intervention, engaged in activism, wrote a paper, and gave a brief presentation in class.
 - Different framing: “Negativity directed toward women and their bodies (and all things “feminine”) affects not only individuals but the culture at large. A vast amount of hostility and negativity is directed toward “the vagina” within many spheres of American culture: the media (e.g., increasingly narrow constructions of “appropriate vaginas”), institutions (medical, educational, legal, and so on), the family, interpersonal dynamics, intrapsychic experiences of the body, and even within progressive and queer movements. Activism is one way that people can intervene about oppression, expose and challenge this sort of sexism, and elaborate a different view of the world.”
- This was assigned in my 300-level “Critical Perspectives on Sexuality” course.
- This particular assignment is especially provocative for the men in class—hetero and gay—who may not be aware of how they hold (or perpetuate) negative attitudes toward women’s genitals.

VAGINA ACTIVISM PROJECT IDEAS

- Students have come up with a range of interesting ideas. A sampling:
 - A student went undercover at Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery offices in Phoenix, AZ to get a consultation about her vagina. She reported what the doctor said she would need and showed the class the drawings from the surgeon. They also contacted the surgeon's office with accurate information about women's vaginas and vulvas.
 - Another group made "Clap your Clit" stickers and handed them out at a popular "First Friday" event in downtown Phoenix.
 - YouTube videos on the different words for vagina, with a critical eye toward the use of the word "pussy."
 - One group, inspired by a movie they saw, designed a website and blog called "Cunts in Action" (CIA) and asked people to draw vulvas (most were terribly inaccurate).
 - A group implemented "Practice Safe Vagina" information all over local pharmacy aisles (tampons/pads) and on campus, along with a corresponding Facebook page.

VAGINA ACTIVISM



BODY HAIR EXTRA CREDIT ASSIGNMENT

- Since 2007, I have done an extra credit assignment where students are asked to engage in “non-normative” body hair behavior for 10 weeks, keep a log about their experiences, and write a short response paper at the end of the semester.
 - Women are asked to grow body hair (legs, underarms, pubic hair) while men are asked to shave their body hair.
 - I do this in many of my courses (Abject Bodies and the Politics of Trash; Hate Speech, Manifestos, and Radical Writings; Race, Class, and Gender; Women and Health, etc.)
- Nearly every semester I assign this, most students participate, though responses differ dramatically.
 - Negative responses include: feeling gross, self-consciousness, policing by families, friends, coworkers, partners, changing how they dress or how they move at the gym, having different kinds of sex, fearing others’ judgment (among others)
 - Positive responses include: feeling more empowered or knowledgeable about their bodies, better assessing their romantic partners, seeing how their bodies are policed more vividly, feeling more agency, better understanding “the personal is political” and the importance of feminist politics, seeing the limits to the rhetoric of agency/choice.

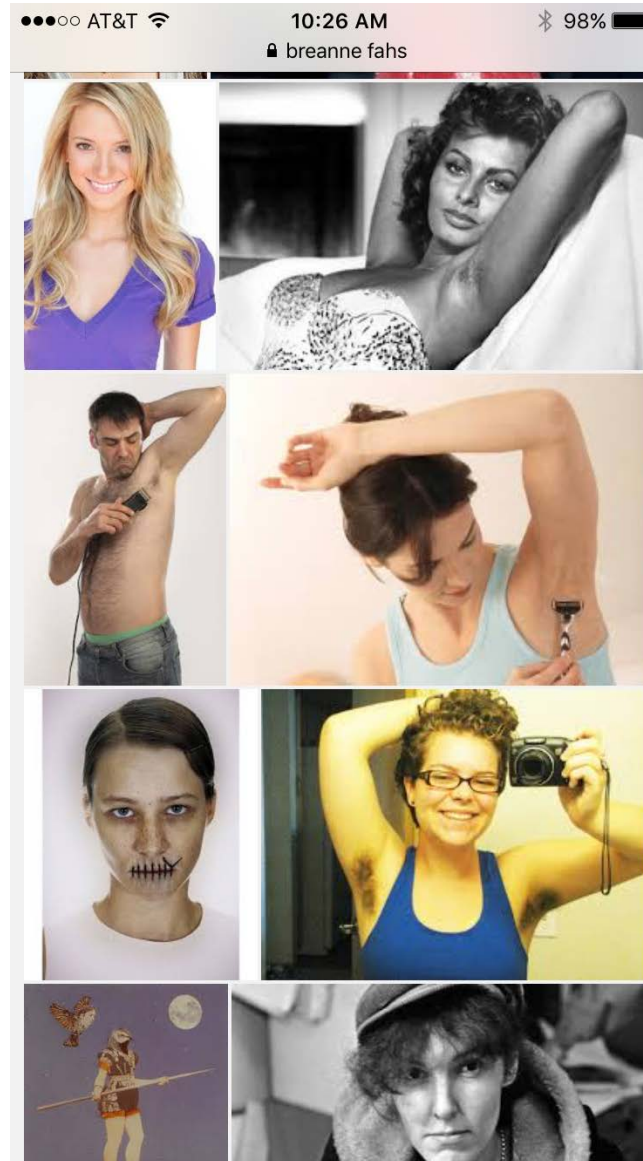




OUTCOMES OF THE BODY HAIR ASSIGNMENT

- Institutional
 - I have received overwhelming support from my institution for this project (even at a public university in a very conservative state).
- Professional
 - I have published numerous articles on various aspects of this assignment.
 - I earned a reputation for this assignment as something that in part defines my career and professional identity (unwittingly), including an award from APA for teaching the psychology of gender.
- Media
 - In 2014, the assignment went viral on mostly conservative websites and blogs, which resulted in a firestorm of articles, interview requests, hate mail (& some fan mail), and serious threats.
 - Personal and reputational risks were intense in this case, though like most viral things, it died down
- Personal
 - I am all the more convinced of the importance of *doing* non-normative body behavior rather than merely talking with students about it.
 - I feel rattled by the media reaction (and a bit more paranoid about the media in general) but undeterred from carrying on.

MY NEW IDENTITY ONLINE LOOKS LIKE THIS...



MANAGING REPUTATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RISK

- As faculty, we have to stand by the value of activism and insist on its utility no matter what the outcomes
 - We know that activism has positive results for those who engage in it, including better interpersonal relationships and fewer antifeminist attitudes (Rudman & Phelan, 2007; Anderson, 2014)
 - It also builds community for students (helps them get away from the online-only model of disconnectedness and disengagement)
- Reputational risk is real but also quite manageable
 - If you are careful to work with students in the planning stages of the activism, you can avoid most of the biggest hazards and problems of teaching activism.
 - Remember that students need to learn about reputational and institutional risk too! They need to see their institutions react to activist work (this is part of the pedagogy).
- Don't have shady boundaries with students in general
 - This helps manage the risks you're already taking.

THE VALUE OF THE SCHOLAR/ACTIVIST

- Scholar/activist links *must* extend beyond the faculty and also be nurtured in students
 - They should leave college with a sense that they can (and should?) engage in activism, work toward tangible change, speak up, work in groups to accomplish goals, and fight for things they care about.
- The single most important quality we can help nurture in our students is bravery.
 - Intelligence, commitment, perseverance, good writing, and critical thinking are all relatively useless (from a social justice perspective) without bravery as a complementary force
 - Both YOU and THE STUDENTS will be proud of their bravery. I have felt moved by student activist work more than nearly all of the work they have done in simple paper assignments.
- Grade-anxious students learn that grades are not the only thing that matters
 - ...particularly when you're reasonable about grading, give them clear instructions about each step, work with them to finalize their ideas, and support their work no matter what happens.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

- I'm currently doing an activist project in my *online* WST 100 course (introduction to women and gender studies)
 - Translating activism to online courses has been a challenge, but also more easily mimics how activism typically works (large extended networks spread across the country or the world, like New View!)
- Eventually, something disastrous will likely happen
 - All we can do is build an archive of doing activist assignments, managing risks however we can, and having clear communication with students.
- Translating the activism assignments into work beyond their university life is a challenge
 - How can they apply this work to their post-graduation lives? Their work lives?

THANK YOU!

- For more information about my work, please visit:
www.breannefahs.com
- For full text articles about the menstrual activism assignment, see *The Moral Panics of Sexuality* (2013, Palgrave) and *Out for Blood* (2016, SUNY).
- For full text articles about the body hair assignment, see:
 - **Fahs, B.** (2014). Perilous patches and pitstaches: Imagined versus lived experiences of women's body hair growth. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 38(2), 167-180.
 - **Fahs, B.** (2012). Breaking body hair boundaries: Classroom exercises for challenging social constructions of the body and sexuality. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(4), 482-506.
 - **Fahs, B.** (2011). Dreaded "Otherness": Heteronormative patrolling in women's body hair rebellions. *Gender & Society*, 25(4), 451-472.