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Teaching to Empower

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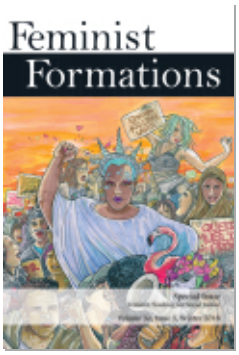

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Teaching to Empower

Carrie N. Baker

This essay offers strategies for balancing teaching about injustices with strategies to empower students by looking to the past, the present, and the future. Learning about past organizing for social justice using primary archival documents offers lessons in perspective, strategy, and inspiration. Learning about present activists and organizations teaches students cutting-edge strategies for social change and opens up possibilities for their future activism. Finally, teaching students the importance of envisioning a better future, especially through the creative arts, can help them clarify their values and develop affirmative, constructive goals. This essay describes specific activities and exercises for doing each of these things to enhance teaching to empower.

Keywords: activism / archives / feminist pedagogy / social justice / teaching strategies

I vividly remember my first women's studies class the spring semester of 1986. It blew my mind. In that class, I discovered language and concepts to explain feelings and experiences I'd had all my life but couldn't articulate or understand. I had often thought something was wrong with me, but in that class I discovered a history and a community. I remember waiting eagerly for each lecture, and finding refuge in the Friday discussion section. But by the end of the semester, I was discouraged. Learning about the history of racism and sexism, homophobia and classism, and all the barriers that still faced women in the world, I felt depressed. What I had learned weighed on me, felt insurmountable, sometimes hopelessly overwhelming. I was a shy student, and rarely went to office hours, but I decided I had to visit my professor. I told her how the class was impacting me. She responded that the knowledge she offered should be empowering, not depressing. I guess it was empowering, in a sense, but it was also *very depressing.*

Today, as a women's studies professor myself, I think often of that conversation in my professor's office over thirty years ago. How can I teach about

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injustice while caring for my students' spirits? Inevitably, learning about sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, settler colonialism, and xenophobia can be excruciating. Students become angry and sad; they become frustrated; some rebel by minimizing the issues, making others all the more mad. Sometimes what we teach in the women's studies classroom will open up past wounds, make students realize past injustices of which they had not been aware. I teach women's rights law, and so students often come to the realization in my classes that they have been victims of sexual harassment or domestic violence, employment discrimination or reproductive injustices. Often I teach about topics that are contemporaneously impacting my students' lives, made worse by the current political climate—racist immigration laws, homophobic and transphobic schools, the destruction of the social safety net. Whether my students are personally touched by the issues that arise in class or not, many are impatient to work for social justice *now*, and frustrated when they feel sidelined while in school or when faced with the enormity of the task before them.

With these considerations in mind, I have developed a number of ways to balance teaching about injustice with giving students hope—and concrete tools—to fight injustice. I do this by looking to the past, the present, and the future. Learning about past organizing for social justice offers lessons in perspective, strategy, and inspiration. Learning about present activists and organizations opens up possibilities for students' future (and present) activism and teaches them cutting-edge strategies for social change. Finally, teaching my students the importance of envisioning a better future, especially through the creative arts, can offer them hope. In this essay, I describe some of the specific activities and exercises I use in my teaching to empower.

The Past: Standing on the Shoulders of Our Foremothers

Teaching about past feminist organizing gives students an understanding that the fight for social justice is a long game, that we are standing on the shoulders of our foremothers, and that history is a rich resource for lessons on resistance strategies. When I teach about difficult issues like sexual harassment, rape, or abortion, I always put these issues in historical context and cover the social movements that have addressed them. While we still have a long way to go on these issues, seeing how far we've come can counterbalance the discouragement students experience when first learning about the depth and breadth of injustice in American society today. History shows students that we are in the middle of long-term battles that have been waged by feminists for centuries. It took seventy-two years to win the Nineteenth Amendment, and another forty-five years to win the Voting Rights Act; sexual harassment was not even named until forty-three years ago and was only made illegal in the 1980s (Baker 2008). To place current rollbacks of voting rights and #MeToo revelations exposing the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault in contemporary

American society in a broader context enables students to understand the historical cycles of injustice and resistance. As Cynthia Enloe (2017) argues in her recent book, *The Big Push*, patriarchy is flexible and adaptable, constantly updating itself to elude feminist progress. After feminists convinced courts to declare sexual harassment a federal civil rights violation in the 1980s, patriarchy promptly devised methods to evade these laws, like forced arbitration requirements and nondisclosure clauses in employment contracts—so Harvey Weinstein and Roger Ails were able to sexually abuse women for decades. Winning legal protection of rights is only half the battle; preserving and realizing those rights through implementation of the law can take decades of ongoing feminist resistance.

To engage students with history, I eliminate the intermediary: I take them to the archives. At Smith College where I teach, we have the Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, where they can see, touch, and feel the past. I also have my students visit the wealth of digital archives at Smith and elsewhere, like Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Duke's Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History & Culture, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Black Feminism Archive, Outhistory.com, CWLU Herstory Project, and many others. I encourage students to immerse themselves in the photographs, newsletters, drafts of manifestos, meeting minutes, and personal letters of past activists to see what challenges they faced, what strategies they used to overcome them, and the results of their campaigns. We learn about wins and losses, and we reflect on the meaning of feminist activism—the way it changes not only the law and society, but the activists themselves. Through these archives, they encounter the energy of the movement, the anger, the depth, the creativity, the humor, and the power.

Particularly powerful are oral histories of feminist activists. Smith's Voices of Feminism Oral History Project has collected the stories of diverse feminists activists, like Charon Asetoyer and Dorothy Allison, Billye Avery and Fran Beal, Brenda Berkman and Katsi Cook, Karen Nussbaum and Suzanne Pharr, Luz Rodriguez and Loretta Ross, Peggy Saika and Barbara Smith, Gloria Steinem and Carmen Vasquez (Sophia Smith Collection, n.d.). All of these important feminist activists tell captivating stories about what inspired them to become activists, how they organized to fight oppression, and the impact their activism had on their communities and themselves. Hearing these women's voices and seeing their faces touches my students deeply, and their wisdom impresses upon them the multileveled importance of their work.

Archival work not only teaches students about the past, but opens up opportunities for reimaging the present. In her book *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, Kate Eichhorn argues that "the creation of archives has become integral to how knowledges are produced and legitimized and how feminist activists, artists, and scholars make their voices audible" (2013, 3). Archives have become a place where young feminists can engage in activism, and build

political alliances across eras and generations. Linking the neoliberal and archival turn, Eichhorn argues,

> If we have become more interested in the archive both as subject of inquiry and creative locus for activism and art during the past two decades, then such interest is owing in part to the archive's ability to restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism—not history itself but rather the ability to understand the conditions of our everyday lives longitudinally and, more important, the conviction that we might, once again, be agents of change in time and history. (6)

So a turn toward the archive is not a turn toward the past, argues Eichhorn, but rather "an essential way of understanding and imagining other ways to live in the present" (9). By providing tools for students to question the present and to reimagine the future, the archive becomes a source of inspiration, resistance, and hope for students.

This principle of "putting history into action" is at the heart of Smith College's Steinem Initiative, which links scholars and students to activists by discovering and reimagining the past ("Putting History into Action" 2015). My colleagues Jennifer Guglielmo and Michelle Joffroy are working with Matahari Women Workers' Center, a Boston-based organization that is part of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, to create a digital timeline of domestic worker organizing in the United States to strengthen Matahari's leadership development and organizing. According to Matahari's executive director Monica Nguyen, "Domestic workers have traditionally been excluded from labor rights and labor history. That's why seeing ourselves and our work reflected in history—picking up where our sisters before us left off—is so important" ("History in Action" 2016). Child welfare activists Sandra Killet, who attended the Initiative's 2015 Gloria and Wilma School for Organizers, noted that in the archives, "hearing the stories, you remember that movements for change are always difficult, but they are possible" ("Putting History into Action" 2015). Historian and archivist Joyce Follet has a Steinem Initiative project focused on creating a reproductive justice organizing timeline by retelling the standard history of reproductive oppression as an inclusive story of reproductive resistance. Student involvement in all of these projects has been an effective way of teaching to empower.

The Present: Theory into Practice

In addition to teaching the history of social justice activism through archival deep dives and immersion in the voices and papers of feminist activists from the past, I focus my classes on the work of current social justice activists. I assign position papers, research reports, blogs, websites, and podcasts of leading social justice organizations and invite feminist activists to my class to teach my

students about current social movement organizing against injustice. Recently in my reproductive justice class, for example, I began the class by showing students the anti-abortion "endangered species" billboard campaign that appeared in cities across the country in 2010 to spur legislative efforts to pass "prenatal nondiscrimination" laws (known as PRENDA laws), which criminalize abortion purportedly motivated by the race or sex of the fetus. SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective in Atlanta led the response to the billboards by developing their own campaign of resistance, Trust Black Women. I assigned SisterSong's report on their multipronged response and their film *We Always Resist: Trust Black Women* (Ross et al. 2011). Finally, I invited Loretta Ross to come to class to explain the political context, how they developed the Trust Black Women campaign, its impact, and what she learned from the experience. Part of the campaign was to convince the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus to oppose the PRENDA law, which they were about to support. Implementing history into action, Ross contacted Smith College archivist Joyce Follet asking for historical documents proving that Martin Luther King Jr. and other black leaders in the early and mid-twentieth century had supported women's reproductive rights. With these documents in hand, Ross was able to secure the Caucus's opposition to the proposed law, thereby defeating it. My students were thrilled to meet Ross, asking her many questions as well as getting her to sign their books and take selfies with them.

The high-quality research produced by many social justice organizations today presents human rights violations in excruciating detail, often including the voices of women targeted, but they also include recommendations for action. Some of the reports I've used in the past are *Cultivating Fear: The Vulnerability of Immigrant Farmworkers in the US to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment* (Human Rights Watch 2012); *The Glass Floor: Sexual Harassment in the Restaurant Industry* (Restaurant Opportunity Center and Forward Together 2014); and *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA* (Amnesty International 2007). I use the Guttmacher Institute Data Center that enables students to create custom tables, graphs, and maps utilizing data on key sexual and reproductive health indicators, which enables them to sort data by region, country, US state or county (Guttmacher Institute, n.d.). I keep my students up to date on developing laws through fact sheets, infographics, and advocacy toolkits from the National LGBTQ Task Force, the National Women's Law Center, the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), and other social justice organizations. For example, NAPAWF has an excellent advocacy toolkit for opposing sex-selective abortion bans, which can teach students about the issue as well as about strategies for social change (National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum 2015).

I also bring activists to class. I've invited an immigration attorney to teach asylum law, the founder of a local organization that supports and organizes incarcerated pregnant people to speak about the challenges of pregnancy and

parenting in prison, and an ACLU Women's Rights Project attorney to speak about sex discrimination in employment. I brought in two plaintiffs from Goodridge v. Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the successful lawsuit that made Massachusetts the first state to legalize same sex marriage back in 2004, to speak about how they got involved in the case and the impact on their lives of participating in that high-profile, controversial litigation (Contrada 2014). I've assigned videos of feminist activists testifying before Congress, like NAPAWF's executive director Miriam Yeung testifying against PRENDA in 2011 (Yeung 2011) and GLAD's Transgender Rights Project director Jennifer Levi testifying about a transgender equal access bill before the Massachusetts legislature (Levi 2013). To hear the voices and see the work of amazing feminists not only informs students about the issues and activist strategies, but offers them role models—enabling them to envision activist futures. Students learn how activists build their base, organize campaigns, raise public awareness, lobby, litigate, and engage in coalition work. We also discuss effective methods of political engagement, including choosing targets wisely and strategically, opposition research, framing issues, and so on. These guest speakers mentor my students, and sometimes hire them for summer internships or volunteer positions in their organizations.

For class assignments, I give my students projects with real world impacts. When Obama proposed the Affordable Care Act contraceptive mandate in 2011, I encouraged my students to submit public comments to the Department of Health and Human Services. I send my students to the websites of feminist organizations to find topics for their research papers. As an alternative to a research paper, I have allowed students to develop and carry out a social justice campaign themselves. One year, a group of students in my Gender, Law, and Policy class created a campaign around a statewide referendum on paid sick leave in Massachusetts. They researched the issue and produced informational materials explaining the proposed law, which they distributed in the campus center and in town, and they filmed a public service announcement, which they circulated on social media. We all celebrated in class when the referendum passed. These assignments not only allow my students to learn about pressing social justice issues, but also to do something about them, all within the context of the class.

My own public scholarship has helped me connect my students to current social justice campaigns. I write and blog for *Ms.* magazine, which puts me in touch with activists around the country (Baker, n.d.). Last fall, for an article on the Trump administration's rollback of civil rights and protections, I interviewed nine leading civil rights activists, including Vanita Gupta, president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and former head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division; Catherine Lhamon, chair of the US Commission on Civil Rights and former head of the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights; and Janai Nelson, associate director of the NAACP Legal

Defense and Educational Fund (Baker 2017). For an article on sexual harassment in the summer 2018 issue, I interviewed farmworker organizer Monica Ramirez of Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Sunu Chandy at the National Women's Law Center, and civil rights attorney Debra Katz (Baker 2018). When I interview these amazing women for my stories, I report back to my students, sharing their insights and strategies, sometimes playing the recorded interviews in class. My interview with ACLU Women's Rights Project attorney Gillian Thomas led to a campus visit. So my public scholarship has facilitated my teaching to empower by balancing the reality of social injustice with the resistance of these smart and powerful women, who energize and inspire my students.

The Future: Envisioning A Better Society

My final teaching to empower strategy is to encourage my students to imagine socially just futures, especially through literature, art, and poetry. What would a society that respects the human rights of all people look like? How can we move beyond our current ways of relating to each other to create Martin Luther King's vision of "the Beloved Community"? According to the King Center, the Beloved Community is a "global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood" (The King Center, n.d.). How do we bring the Beloved Community into being? Based on the critical insight that we can't build movements based only on what we are against, I encourage my students to imagine new possibilities for human society—alternative frames, just social systems, feminist futures. I draw on the long history of activist creative art, as well as history, to teach my students the importance and power of visioning futures. As United States Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith has said, poetry "gives us a vocabulary for those powerful feelings that often defy speech" (Smith and Morgan 2018). Creative work enables us to engage with deep politics.

In my reproductive justice class, throughout the semester, I intersperse the beautiful images from the Repeal Hyde Art Project, whose mission is to create a "colorful, optimistic, and interactive response to Hyde that reflects the self-determination of the people who have overcome barriers and the hope for change" (the Hyde Amendment restricts federal funds for abortion in Medicaid, on reservations and for federal employees, including military personnel). That vision includes disability justice—a world that respects and supports people who choose to carry a pregnancy to term when their future child is likely to have a disability or people with disabilities who choose to bear children and care for them (see Figure 1a). The project imagines reproductive justice as an expansive and affirmative vision for the future, without prisons,

Figure 1 a and b. Images by Megan Smith, Repeal Hyde Art Project (Smith n.d.).

borders or walls, which encompasses prison abolition and immigration justice (see Figure 1b).

Another poster reads, "You deserve to be treated with dignity, kindness, and respect, no matter at what age you choose to parent," which I share with my students when we explore neoliberal teen pregnancy campaigns that stigmatize young mothers and blame them for everything from poverty to failing schools to sexual assault (Smith, n.d.). The Repeal Hyde Art Project envisions economic and environmental justice for families with the statement "You deserve to live and play in a safe and healthy space, regardless of how much money you make," accompanied by a drawing of a child in a swing with her mother beside her (Smith, n.d.). A revolutionary vision of health care is offered by a poster that says "You deserve to have compassionate and respectful health care regardless of your gender identity or expression," which challenges conscious clause laws that allow medical providers to discriminate against transgender patients based on religious or moral beliefs (Smith, n.d.). By offering an expansive definition of reproductive justice that includes so many issues, the Repeal Hyde Art Project provides my students with an intersectional, coalitional vision of social justice.

Fiction and poetry provide another avenue into visioning new worlds. In my Introductory Women and Gender Studies class, I assign the poetry and stories of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, author of *Island of Decolonial Love* (2013a). Her work portrays the violences of colonization, but also contains seeds of hope. In her poem "How to Steal a Canoe" (Simpson 2015) and the companion video (Simpson 2016a), Simpson imagines First Nations people reclaiming their history from colonizers. In her poem "Leaks," she portrays passing Anishinaabekwe culture and connection to the land to her daughter, whom she describes as "the foil of industry prospectors" (Simpson, 2013b). Simpson tells her daughter,

> *for every one of your questions there is a story hidden in the skin of the forest. use them as flint, fodder, love songs, medicine. you are from a place of unflinching power, the holder of our stories, the one who speaks up.* (Simpson 2013b)

Simpson also made this poem into a powerful video (Simpson 2016b). I also use the work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Her collection of short stories *The Thing around Your Neck* (2010) imagines alternative models of human relatedness. Her story, "A Private Experience," for example, contrasts the religious and ethnic violence of men with the connection between two women of different religions and classes that flee into an abandoned shop during a riot (Adichie 2010, 43–56). Adiche portrays their stark differences—those that make the men kill each other—with the connections the two women share—concern about their own safety and that of female relatives. These creative works feed the spirit and the imagination.

Finally, I share with my students methods for envisioning alternative models of human society. We study collaborative processes for visioning, like consciousness raising, speak outs, and collective writing. I dedicate one day of class to practice consciousness raising, which they love. Back in the archives, I have them read manifestos from a range of early feminist groups, including liberal, radical, and socialist feminist groups, statements like the National Organization for Women's *Statement of Purpose* (1966) and *Bill of Rights* ([1967] 2003), the Redstockings *Manifesto* ([1969] 2000), the Young Lords Party *Position Paper on Women* ([1970] 2010), Radicalesbians' *Woman Identified Woman* (1970), The First National Chicana Conference *Workshop Resolutions* (1971), the National Black Feminist Organization's *Statement of Purpose* (1973), and the Combahee River Collective's *Black Feminist Statement* ([1977] 1994). I ask them to compare and contrast the different visions of a just society articulated in these manifestos and statements. I even have them read multiple drafts of the Radicalesbians' *Woman Identified Woman* manifesto, which happen to be in the Sophia Smith Collection (in Ellen Shumsky's papers), and ask them to think about what issues survived into the final draft, which issues were dropped, and why that might be the case. We also think about what within these manifestos has been achieved, and what has not. I then encourage my students to write their own manifestos—expressing their values, hopes and visions for the future. In this way, I hope to teach them the importance of positive politics—not defining themselves only by what they oppose, but by crafting an affirmative vision of the world they hope to call into being. Through this process of visioning, I hope to counterbalance the painful reality of injustice with the possibility of a pathway to empowerment.

Conclusion

I know the material we teach in the study of women and gender can be depressing, especially in the current political climate. I remember the feeling I had back in 1986, six years into the Reagan administration, when my women's studies professor told me that the knowledge I was learning would empower me. The problem was that I had no pathways to that empowerment.

In my teaching, I hope to offer my students pathways to empowerment by engaging them with histories of feminist movement organizing and knowledge about current feminist activists and organizations, as well as encouraging them to envision their own just future. In this political moment, when the Trump regime is dismantling civil rights, rolling back reproductive rights, gutting the social safety net, and violently targeting marginalized populations, all the while passing tax breaks for the rich and dismantling labor unions, we must communicate to our students the importance of the task before them. When we move beyond the current political crisis, their generation will have to rebuild our society—hopefully a better society. As their teachers, we need to give them the tools to do that in a visionary way.

Carrie N. Baker *is professor and director of the Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Her first book,* The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment *(Cambridge University Press, 2008), won the National Women's Studies Association 2008 Sara A. Whaley Book Prize. This book examines how a diverse grassroots social movement created public policy on sexual harassment in the 1970s and 1980s. Baker's recently released second book,* Fighting the US Youth Sex Trade: Gender, Race and Politics *(Cambridge University Press, 2018), tells the story of activism against youth involvement in the sex trade in the United States between 1970 and 2015. Baker writes for* Ms. *magazine, is cochair of the* Ms. *Committee of Scholars, and serves on the editorial board of* Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism.

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