

## THE BENEFITS OF TEACHING #METOO IN THE CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION HISTORY

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**Abstract.** *This essay acknowledges the importance of examining the #metoo movement in global, cross-cultural, international contexts as scholars. Yet it also argues for teaching the social media (SM) movement in a grounded historical context as growing out of other moments of women's liberation movement history in which women came together to tell their story, sharing their personal experiences that led to political action, particularly when teaching the hashtag movement in introductory women and gender studies courses. The author shares her efforts to do so online at a south-eastern technical university in the United States in the Spring of 2019. Not as part of evaluations but as part of a teaching unit within the course, she asked her nearly 50 students, both male and female, to compare and contrast the SM movement to consciousness-raising groups in which women had met face-to-face to share their experiences in an earlier time in movement history. All 300 student posts and reflections posted in the week under examination were scrutinized by the instructor, and their thoughts and conclusions analyzed. In this article, a sample of four is explored.*

**Key words:** *Consciousness-raising, online teaching, women and gender studies, women's liberation history, context of #metoo, social change.*

### 1. BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

In the spring of 2019, I was teaching Introduction to Women and Gender Studies at a university in the US, taking a historical approach.<sup>1</sup> I understand the value of seeing at this point in time where the movement itself went globally once it occurred, which other scholars are pursuing with commendable efforts.<sup>2</sup> Yet I think it important to provide

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss teaching there more fully in another article, published both in print and online in 2019. Either or both forms of these articles will lend context to understanding this one. See Weinbaum 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Collins, who reported that by early Nov, after the initial tweet went out on October 17, 2017, it had been retweeted 23 million times from 85 countries. See also an outstanding special issue on global

historical contexts when we teach introductory women and gender studies courses. Even though there are differences among women's studies programmes and methods of instruction among colleagues in the same department, increasing numbers of younger feminists complain about the poor quality of the information taught. For instance, Ianka Mitchell-Conway wrote recently in *Rain and Thunder: A Radical Feminist Journal of Discussion and Activism*, that trying to study the movement's history can be fraught with difficulties since "Concepts such as consciousness raising have been completely lost. Many do not understand how feminist knowledge is refined and honed outside social media..." She goes on to say that: "The information and communication gap between generations has become increasingly wide". Without working with those more experienced, she bemoans, activists run the risk of repeating mistakes. Without a solid understanding of feminist history," she adds, "there can be no solid feminist theory" (2019, 7–8). And we do need theory *to figure out how to act effectively to bring about social change*, not just to talk impressively with colleagues to get tenure, or to create future intelligent-sounding women and gender studies professionals.

## 2. COVERAGE OF #METOO ON NPR LEAVING OUT MOVEMENT HISTORY

I noticed this schism between current reality and the movement history when listening to media coverage on NPR of the #metoo movement by Meghna Chakrabarti. She was interviewing two women on her show *On Point*. They talked about women sharing their experience online as if sharing experience among women had never been done before, as if the women sharing at that point in time were the first ones who had ever thought of doing so.<sup>3</sup> Then Meghna pulled out of the women as if they were two poles, should the women do this at the destruction of the men, just because the process might be personally cathartic for the women? The idea that sharing stories might lead to general consciousness of gender dynamics being raised in society that could result in overall political changes being demanded of the culture, by expressions of such discontent, was never introduced in this liberal show<sup>4</sup>. The two poles expressed in the media were therapy for the women (with good results) and shaming of the men (which was bad for males and could ruin their lives and careers). Although some careers were ruined because the accused were either removed or resigned, some lives were taken by the exposed men themselves (Pollack 2019, 86), and some of the men involved, like Harvey Weinstein, went to prison, the women seemed unconscious of the fact that none of those speaking would even be on such a show if it had not been for the considerable sharing of women's stories leading to a great deal of raising of consciousness, leading to a groundswell of political action

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perspectives on the #MeToo movement (Ibarra). The issue contains pieces on the movement in Spain and France (Ibarra and Berumen 2019), Sweden (Pollack 2019), Russia and Japan (Kasianenko 2019), South Korea (Lee 2019), Brazil (Palva 2019), and Mexico (Nicolas-Gavilan, Baptista-Lucio, Padillia-Lavin 2019), for example. Kwasniewska-Mikula has contributed a study of the movement in Polish theater education (2020); Souffrant is studying the movement in Canada (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Searches online easily discover links that tend to promote her as the voice of a new generation, but to this generation, her voice can be infuriating, because she often sounds so shallow and uninformed. See for example <https://www.wbur.org/news/2017/12/27/me-too-massachusetts>

<sup>4</sup> For how this speak out and the debate that ensued led to actual legislation that changed society and culture in Sweden for example see Pollack (2019, 182). She narrates how the social media movement led to petitions presented to legislation that led to legal reforms (2019, 187).

before their time, that such speaking out had created the very seats they were in, leading to the pedestals from which they were speaking.

### 3. THE NEED TO TEACH ABOUT THE SECOND WAVE

When at a conference in San Francisco at a plenary on envisioning Post-Patriarchy shortly thereafter (Grossman and Keller 2019), I brought up this myopic shortsightedness to Starhawk, one of the closing speakers. She said that younger feminists do not know about the second wave – code, consciousness-raising as a way of sharing stories to create a theory about what actions to take next – which although many other activities were going on, is what many of us most emphatically did, as we shared experience to gain insights to make decisions about actions, altering the society irrevocably around us in our wake. This was Starhawk's response to my words, it is as if the women in the broadcast had never heard about the second wave and what had gone on in the feminist movement before they were born, including the challenge of the male dominance of media in which women had only been allowed to be researchers and did not have their own voices as anchors or reporters.<sup>5</sup> Starhawk pointed out that women coming of age today were not being taught by women of the second wave, so how could they know, and that the same thing had happened with the Anita Hill<sup>6</sup> hearings. Massive speaking out about sexual assault occurred, without acknowledgement that speaks out about rape and sexual assault had been going on in the women's movement for over twenty years before Anita Hill, not to take away from the fact that Hill herself was very brave. But what actions she took did not occur in a vacuum; as with #metoo, the way had been paved for what she did.<sup>7</sup> She was the crest of a very large wave.

So, for sure when I got a chance to design an intro course myself shortly after this conversation, I took a deliberately historical approach. Students learned about the movement, consciousness-raising (cr) groups, how they led to political action, and in this context, we looked at #metoo. As a student described the course in an article which was later published in a feminist journal,

An Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course in which I was a student in the Spring of 2019 at Virginia Tech covered an extensive list of topics which included discussions regarding differences between sex and gender; motivating factors behind the desire for male-to-female physical transitions, and the impact of these transitions on pre-existing feminist movements ("Welcome to Intro to WGS," 2019). These discussions helped me critically analyze, reflect on, and unravel my personal thoughts and beliefs, and in turn, nurture a more intimate relationship with myself and my understanding of womanhood... The course took place in an online setting and was heavily based on virtual discussions between students, facilitated by the professor. Every week, the professor posted two discussion prompts and students were required to post five responses to each. Only six out of the forty-four students in the classroom were male, and eleven out of forty-four students were minorities or students of color.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the book and television series, *Good Girls Rebel*.

<sup>6</sup> In 1991, Anita Hill accused U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment and became an international figure for offering congressional testimony against him.

<sup>7</sup> For my own coverage of the conference, see "CIIS-Women's Spirituality Department's First Biannual Conference".

#### 4. READINGS AND QUESTIONS ASKED

In Week Three the Discussion was based around two articles highlighting: Consciousness Raising Past and Present. The class read “A New Era of Consciousness Raising Tools of the Movement: Democracy, Community and Consciousness Raising” by Janet Freedman which was provided in a 7-page pdf; “#metoo and modern consciousness-raising” (the conversation.com October 19, 2017) by Tracy L M Kennedy; and they read online “The Personal is Political: Feminist Blogging and Personal Consciousness Raising” Issue 5.2 *The Scholar and the Feminist Online*. Published by the Barnard Center for Research on Women.

The assignment was to make an initial post of 250 words by Thursday. Specifically, the assignment read, “After reading these three short pieces, discuss and evaluate the similarities and differences between online and face-to-face consciousness-raising. Do you think that the me-too movement had its roots in the cr movement of the seventies knowingly or spontaneously? Why or why not? Declare which form of cr you would be willing to participate in for the course and why.” This was due by 5 pm. Then by Friday, they had to reply in two threads of two others, 200 words, by 5 pm. And by Sunday, to two posts in their own threads, of 100 words, by 11:59 pm. The same question was then posed to the class as part of the midterm exam.’

#### 5. SAMPLE POSTS IN THE WEEK’S DISCUSSION

Here is one of the earlier initial posts, which crystalized the key responses: the two activities were similar in that both involved sharing stories, face-to-face was more limited to the small number of women attending, even if qualitatively having a more powerful impact, and online sharing had a larger impact of reaching out to hundreds of thousands of women; therefore use of the internet was more effective. In the student’s own words, quantity trumped quality:

At first, I was not sure what consciousness-raising was. I think I had some idea of what it was about, but I was completely wrong. Consciousness-raising is about telling the stories that women are too afraid or too worried about. It is about letting the rest of the world’s women know, that they are not alone in their struggles and that sadly, many other women go through the same problems. Face-to-face cr and online cr are similar in that they give women the platform to speak and share. However, face-to-face is limited to the number of women that are present, whereas online gives an outstanding amount of room for hundreds of thousands of women. I believe that cr is more effective over the internet. As for the #metoo movement, I think it was spontaneously present in the 60s-70s. At first, as we have seen, the women came together to try and make a point at the Miss America pageant, about how men were sexualizing women. However, inadvertently, these women also came together and discussed the horrendous things that they have experienced because of their gender. I wonder how the sexual assault rate and harassment rates were during that time, compared to now? I wonder if these women talked about what other protests they could hold besides the Miss America pageant? Moreover, after reading the three articles and contemplating, I would much rather participate in online cr, rather than in person. Yes, in-person gives a more powerful impact, because the women are physically telling their stories, and you can hear the emotion in their voices, but online allows us to reach out to a broader set of individuals. I don’t think that we should limit our abilities. We all use technology on a day to day basis, and social media platforms are more popular than ever. If we are to do some type of cr work, online would be the best method.

This student did allow in her discussion of quality that the original protests of the women's movement had the capacity to move beyond single issue focus, because of the powerful way the women were sharing. The quantitative power of the #metoo movement, on the other hand, seemed to have stayed single focus and failed to become a general critique of society leading to actions and demands<sup>8</sup>. This was her implication, which in the response threads, became a major theme.

As Cameron, a Pakistani-American and hence one of the minority students, as well as one of the few men in the course, responded:

I was totally in the same position when I began to read the three pieces we were assigned. I was not fully aware of what consciousness-raising was to its entirety. I was very glad to become aware of the term. I think it is so important that women are able to tell their stories and experiences to raise awareness for the women's liberation movement. It is important that women who are too afraid to tell their story have others telling it for them. This is a very important aspect of seeking change. I agree that face-to-face cr and online cr are similar in the sense that they give women the platform to speak and share about their experiences. I think that the online platform allows women to reach many more people but might not be as effective due to not having a face-to-face conversation. I would still choose virtual cr because of the magnitude of people that could see the message, therefore possibly sparking a major domino effect of support. I would agree that overall cr over the internet is more effective solely because of how prevalent social media and the internet is today. My mind was also changed after reading the three articles. I originally thought that online cr would be less effective since there was no interaction physically. I think it is great that you mentioned using social media to promote the movement and use its limitless bounds.

This exchange demonstrates that because the students were reading about the movement historically, perhaps they saw the #metoo movement as spreading consciousness of the women's liberation movement that had already been achieved, not as actually creating the awareness. The awareness had qualitatively been created before, and the #metoo movement merely spread awareness of the movement more widely among the masses.

From there the discussion quickly moved to the creation of some sort of ideal hybrid situation. The students began imagining face-to-face groups where stories were shared in-depth and knowledge was actually created, and *then* taken to various social media platforms to broadcast the revelations, including that men suffered from harassment too. Cameron asked:

What social media platform do you think would be the most effective? Twitter seems like it could be useful to create hashtags, but women can't necessarily share their stories. Maybe Facebook would be a better option? Again though, I am still completely for the face to face interaction. Perhaps social media could be used for women to share their stories and then somehow bring those women together. I think it would also be amazing to see men involved as well because I know women are not the only ones to experiences things such as sexual harassment. Let me know what you think.

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<sup>8</sup> Curiously when a #metoo virtual group occurred within an industry, in face action groups might have occurred as a result of the online groups. As could be seen in an animation made by women in the animation industry aired on a Samantha B show, the women then drew up petitions and demand letters requiring changes such as bans of individuals and different standards and practices within their professional organization. So more dialectical non-binary relationships are possible between the virtual and face-to-face reality, which did not come up in the discussions.

Interestingly enough, although I would like to feel satisfied that I was imparting students with a sense of history, in some cases, students were reading history backwards. Instead of seeing the #metoo movement as a modern cr, they read cr as previous forms of #metoo. This student although saying that face-to-face had the possibility of being more bonding than online sharing, raised some of the issues that appear in online pedagogy literature – that for some, like the more introverted or those with female conditioning, sharing online is easier than sharing face-to-face (Weinbaum 2016). Thus, the concluding logic of this argument seemed to operate in reverse:

I also didn't know for sure what consciousness-raising was until reading through these pieces. I agree with you that cr can be more effective over the internet because it gives an opportunity for people all over the world to communicate with one another. *I believe that the #metoo movement occurred spontaneously during the 60s-70s as well.* And I wonder the same thing about that question you mentioned, how were the sexual assault/harassment rates compared to now? I can imagine they were a lot worse because those rates are still very high today, specifically towards women. Like you mentioned, *face-to-face cr can give a more powerful impact due to the emotion in their voices and also due to the long-lasting relationships and bonds that can be formed between the women telling their stories.* However, I also would rather participate in online cr because then you are not limited to only those individuals who live nearby, but rather you can reach out to a more diverse community. *I believe that communicating online gives women the opportunity to express themselves without restraint. Although the purpose of cr is to express your personal experiences without judgment, sometimes women are still afraid or embarrassed to speak up about traumatizing encounters, and I believe the internet can ease these fears.*

This student, although initially trying to agree with the others that face-to-face had the quality but online the quantity added the thought that for some, the quality might also be better in online forums due to the need for anonymity and privacy. This student also added the positive factor of increased diversity in the consciousness-raising factor, in that the online outreach could involve women from all around the world, out of your own neighbourhood, and thus increase sharing from more diverse perspectives. This would then enrich feminist theory, and improve its efficacy, as more diversity would be in the data bank to draw from when strategizing to take steps towards social actions.

Thus although there is much more data to analyze, from a cursory examination I can conclude that for most, cr in small groups was seen to have the advantage of more intensity and the ability to move beyond single-issue focus, and hence better quality, but the internet factor of #metoo triumphed in quantity; for some, the anonymity of the internet allowed deeper sharing of trauma, and the mega-outreach beyond one's locality allowed for more diversity. In either case, the students seemed to have benefited from examining the movement in the trajectory of women's liberation history taught by a second waver in that new questions were raised about the past that had not occurred to them before, and new ideas about political strategy in the present were generated, moving beyond exclusive use of the social media.

## CONCLUSION

My initial claim was that this form of teaching that relied on second-wave feminism and the history of the movement was necessary to impart a deeper understanding of the present moment. In addition, I found this method contributed to a better understanding of feminist theory among students in a variety of ways. First and foremost, before students came to class, they had no understanding of feminist theory. They understand feminism as a fight for equal rights, within this society, not as a critique of culture. Second, they did not understand feminism as radical, as going to the root or the core, to bring about necessary change. After this approach, they did. Some went on to work on grassroots projects, such as writing for feminist publications and organizing domestic abuse shelters, in short, became active in the movement themselves.

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## **KORISNOST PREDAVANJA #METOO U KONTEKSTU ŽENSKE OSLOBODILAČKE ISTORIJE**

*Ovaj rad raspravlja važnost istraživanja #metoo pokreta u globalnom, kulturalnom i međunarodnom kontekstu. Osim toga, rad zagovara i predavanje društvenih pokreta u istorijsko utemeljenom kontekstu ženskih oslobodilačkih pokreta u kojima su se žene udruživale u deljenju svoje priče i ličnih iskustava koji su onda doveli do političkog delovanja. Ovo je posebno značajno kada se predaje pokret utemeljen na hashtagu u uvodnim rodnim i ženskim studijama. Autorka deli svoje napore u predavanjima online na jugoistočnom tehničkom univerzitetu u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama u proleće 2019. Kao deo nastavne jedinice studija, a ne evaluacije programa, autorka je pitala oko 50 studenata, žena i muškaraca, da uporede društvene pokrete s grupama za podizanje svesti u kojima su se žene lično nalazile i delile svoja iskustva ranije u istoriji ženskog pokreta. Svih 300 studentskih postova i personalnih refleksija postavljenih tokom ispitne nedelje analizirani su s posebnim osvrtom na zaključke i lična razmišljanja. U ovom članku, studentska razmišljanja raspravljaju se na temelju četiri studentska izveštaja.*

*Ključne reči: podizanje svesti, online nastava, ženske i rodne studije, ženska oslobodilačka istorija, #metoo kontekst, društvena promena.*