

Fourteen

Feminist Webs: a case study of the personal, professional and political in youth work¹

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This chapter presents a case study of critical reflective practice: the Feminist Webs project. Its aims are twofold: to present an account of the interconnections between a political perspective – feminism – and a professional practice – youth work; and to go beyond a micro-account of reflective practice by locating that professional practice in a wider social, historical and political context. In a youth work context, feminist ideas have primarily influenced work with girls, as well as informing an approach to work with young men that challenges sexism and sees boys as people first rather than as a social problem to be tackled. The account given here of the relationship between youth work as a profession and feminism as a politics is situated, partial, not innocent, as is the way with all reflective practice. Nor is it linear. The chapter begins with an exploration of the web metaphor employed by the Feminist Webs project. Secondly, the nature of the intergenerational professional reflection captured in this web is presented through a Question and Answer (Q&A) format, which is itself available on the Feminist Webs website (www.feministwebs.com). Thirdly, and in a more conventional argument, the implications of the



Feminist Webs project for other professionals and for discussions of reflective practice are explored.

The web

Before the internet made the web an everyday cliché of communication it was used by women peace campaigners associated with Greenham Common as a metaphor for the threads of association and activism that would be able to subvert the linear hierarchical power of the military. 'It's not just the web, it's the way that we spin it; it's not just the world, it's the women that's in it; that's what gets results', as the song went. The more threads, the stronger the web. Women, after all, are spinsters. This metaphor has re-emerged to communicate the practice of an intergenerational project aiming to revive the connection between feminism and youth work.

The project

Feminist Webs is an intergenerational enterprise to design and produce an online 'women and girls work space' that will act as both an archive and a resource for practitioners, volunteers and young women involved in youth and community work with young women. Our bias is toward work that encourages participation and is from a feminist, 'rights-based' perspective.

Young people have been working alongside older women who have been active in feminism and in youth work to come up with a set of exercises we have also made into a pocket-sized poster/leaflet that youth workers can use in sessions.

Go to the [*feminist webbers*](#) page for mini-biographies of the people involved in creating the project to date.

Young people have helped to design the site and booklet, and create new activities and resources. If our second-stage funding is successful the young people will be trained in oral history and will act as roving reporters to collate older women's stories and advice and archive material to create the online archive section.

Other groups and people involved include both academics and practitioners who have contributed to the content of the resource section and who also provide materials/loan materials to be uploaded onto the site. Partners and supporters include: ICA:UK, Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Manchester, The Young Women's Health Project, The Women's Resource Centre, Stockport Young Women's Forum, Lancashire Youth Service, The Young Advocate for the North West and the North West Regional Youth Work Unit.

The Feminist Webs project is a place of connection and debate between practitioners and academics, girls, young women, recent graduates, middle-aged women, older women.

Source: Taken from www.feministwebs.com

Some of the girls and young women involved in the project come from established Young Women's Forums across the North West, which have their roots in the earlier moment of feminist organising. Young Women's Forums were established as a form of positive action, giving young women a voice in youth work dominated by fears of and for young men. Participants also come from lesbian and bisexual youth projects, now able, in contrast to the situation in the 1970s and 1980s, to organise openly and attract public and charitable funding. A third route to involvement has been through mainstream participation initiatives such as the UK Youth Parliament. Some participants made contact with the project directly through their involvement with other feminist political networks and others who have become involved through family and friendship networks.

Feminist Webs are:

- about forwardness
- about interconnectedness
- full of spaces
- and also lines that are the connections and the stories they hold people together like a net
- points of understanding across generations
- a way of representing what feminism is and making links with other social justice movements
- sticky: they hold people together
- but people can also get stuck in them

not unusual

not innocent: ask the fly!

(Feminist Webs Oral History Residential, November 2008)

The threads of this web are made by using new communication media including Web 2.0 and Twitter as well as older forms of organising recognisable to previous generations. They are interpersonal, organisational and political. Youth work methods, such as small group work and residential, reappear in contemporary virtual form. Links from the website can take the reader to detailed designs for group work sessions, international feminist websites such as The F-Word and announcements of public actions such as 'Reclaim the Night' marches and a march organised by Mothers against Violence, challenging gun and knife crime. Contemporary feminist youth work speaks a different language from the language of the 'five outcomes' and of *Every Child and Young Person Matters*, while undoubtedly affirming the intrinsic worth of young women and contributing to the desired 'outcomes' of policy. The threads of the web are personal, political and professional.

Speaking about feminism enables practitioners to resist the bureaucratised languages that characterise current initiatives. This attests to the sources of inspiration for the Feminist Webs project outside of the policy mainstream in an attempt to recover and archive something that was being lost. The artefacts and papers from the Girls Work Movement, the cartoons of Jackie Fleming, the poems and music now stored in the archive (both physical and virtual) are the sparks for storytelling and focused conversations which weave the threads of the web. The places where the threads join are shared events and shared actions, new memories and new stories to be told in future.

Imagine the conversations provoked from this archive item found in [Box 7](#) of the physical archive. **[[what is this?]].**



A Q&A session about Feminist Webs

Question: Can you explain something about the relationship between feminism and youth work?

Answer: There has been a long tendency for youth work to be dominated by the concerns that society has by and about boys, and for girls to be seen as the solution to the problems boys are thought to be. Good youth work has always tried to challenge this and instead to start from where young people are and from a sense of their potential, whether the young people are male or female, whatever their class or community background. It does not do this 'starting from strengths' by taking a gender-blind or 'colour-blind' approach, however. This is how the current National Occupational Standards for Youth Work explain this:

It respects and values individual differences by supporting and strengthening young people's belief in themselves and their capacity to grow and change via a supportive group environment.

It is underpinned by the principles of equity, diversity and interdependence.

It recognises, respects and is actively responsive to the wider network of peers, communities, families and cultures that are important to young people, and through these networks seeks to help young people achieve stronger relationships and collective identities, through the promotion of inclusivity.

In other words, good youth work cannot deny the ways in which significant social divisions, such as those associated with class and racism as well as gender, have an impact. At the same time, good youth workers do not assume they know the meanings of these divisions to young people ahead of focused conversations with them.

Question: So feminist youth work is just good youth work then?

Answer: That's what some of its practitioners would argue, as would practitioners of Muslim youth work, and Christian youth work, and Jewish youth work, and cooperative humanist youth work of course! Feminism and youth work can find common cause in a variety of ways though. This is how the definition of youth work just mentioned begins:

222 Critical practice with children and young people

Young people choose to be involved, not least because they want to relax, meet friends, make new relationships, to have fun and to find support.

The work starts from where young people are in relation to their own values, views and principles as well as their own personal and social space.

It seeks to go beyond where young people start, to widen their horizons, promote participation and invite social commitment, in particular by encouraging them to be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them.

It treats young people with respect, valuing each individual and their differences, and promoting the acceptance and understanding of others, while challenging oppressive behaviour and ideas.

Feminist practice in youth work is all about enabling young people to be critical and creative in response to the world around them. Feminists have historically been concerned to make visible and challenge the violence and oppression that can limit women's opportunities and all good youth workers seek to contest the limits that are placed on young people reaching and fulfilling their potential.

Question: Why did feminism and youth work have such a strong connection in the late 1970s and early 1980s? And why are young women interested in it again now?

Answer: The memories of the 'Girls Work Movement' are exhilarating. The notion that 'the personal is political' led to a transformation in understandings of what is a suitable agenda for politics and therefore open to change. And youth work as social education always started from the everyday personal concerns and happenings of life. Alongside other movements, the Women's Liberation Movement made the body political and the site of potential democratic transformation. Violent and abusive marriages ceased to be seen as a matter of 'bad luck'. Decision making about childbearing and childrearing was possible and could be supported by public resources in health services and nurseries. The cultural representations of women, including the representations of women as sex, were open to re-invention and change. Seeking sexual pleasure was not something women were to be denigrated for. Women imagined themselves in

places and positions they had previously been denied: making the films and the music; riding and repairing the motorbikes and racing cars; flying the planes; raising hopes and expectations for excitement and adventure beyond the limitations of the private and domestic sphere. Women also demanded recognition of the work and the value of the work involved in mothering and investigated the persistent sources of women's poverty. This transformation of the sphere of the 'personal' into a site of political struggle is a lasting achievement of that movement. This is how the connection with youth work, which also starts from young people's personal everyday concerns, came to be made.

Feminist campaigns now – such as Object – are focusing their attention on the ways in which misogynist, sexualised representations of women are controlling women's opportunities in the workplace, in leisure spaces and in the public domain, while the issue of the 'Beauty Myth' and body image has become a significant concern to many young women. Resistance to both public violence in war and street violence, and to interpersonal domestic violence and rape is once again a focus of younger feminists' attention.

Youth workers and feminists (often the same people) in 1970s and 1980s were asking questions about what the life of adult women might be like in the context of equality of the sexes and this led to questioning the 'femininities' on offer to girls growing up and to offering them the wherewithal to challenge the limitations placed on them because of their gender by adults such as teachers, parents and other relatives, including cousins and brothers. The Girls Work Movement flowered only briefly. As the wider political movement all but disappeared in the 1990s, its remnants and traces could be found in continued 'separate provision' for girls and young women, but this largely ceased to be feminist space. It became seen either as a space for 'culturally sensitive' work with Muslim girls, 'the ultimate separatist cage', or a feminised space for various kinds of pampering or arts and crafts, with political passion and vision seemingly lost. It was this state of affairs that led the young women who initiated 'Feminist Webs' to ask the question: 'Done Hair and Nails? Now What?', the title of the first resource pack produced by the project.

Question: Are there any difficulties about the connections between political agendas and professionalism for feminist youth workers?

Answer: Of course and it is for this reason that many youth workers who promote 'Work with Girls and Young Women' have chosen not to identify their work as feminist. They see it as raising issues of political indoctrination, in a similar way to the ways in which the term 'Christian youth work' raises fears of evangelisation. When youth work

is understood as an educational process raising critical questions these fears can be addressed. There are many advantages to the use of the 'F' word. It challenges ways of drawing professional boundaries that rely on more apparently neutral terms such as 'gender', 'inclusion' or 'mainstreaming'. It is the very unsettling nature of the F word that rapidly enables a context of critical conversation to occur.

Feminism is a strong word, associated with being critical and discontented with received ideas of what it means to be a woman or a man. As a political term, it contains the possibility, and perhaps the necessity, of forging links with other rights-based social movements. It is also a word that provokes fear, misunderstanding, and has in itself been misrepresented in order to diffuse its power: it has been read as 'man-hating', 'lesbian', 'white and middle class'. It is certainly true that it puts people's backs up, particularly the backs of people who believe there isn't a problem in the realm of sexual equality. For feminists working together in Feminist Webs, the word is also an affirmation of commitment to women, to women's space and women-centred practice. But this too raises problems: there is no consensus about the value of this practice among feminists, many of whom now work alongside pro-feminist men.

Question: But are there also problems about 'professionalising' a politics? Doesn't the issue become that people only engage with feminist agendas when they are paid to do it?

Answer: Yes, and it can clearly be argued that the movement fell apart in the 1980s when it was mainstreamed, became part of managerial agendas and ceased to be grounded in a political movement. The presence of the term 'feminism' is immensely valuable to the movement of ideas and practice across generations. It is itself an 'equaliser' as it challenges preconceived ideas of managerialism, authority and communication. It draws on collective storytelling; it opens up questions of pedagogy and learning which can revive understandings of the role of the educator and of the learning implicit in practice. Feminist learning cannot be one way, between the older 'expert' and the younger 'novice'. And many youth work traditions are anti-managerialist!

Question: That isn't the only story about how and why the movement fell apart though. What about the question of how feminism itself as a politics and set of practices addresses difference between women and the complicated impact of power differentials on the agendas of the movement?

Answer: Well, that story has been well rehearsed in many places and is incredibly important to the older women involved in the

intergenerational oral histories project. For the younger women the issues seem less conflict ridden and it seems to be taken as read that there will be diversity of perspectives and visions about the future for women. In the poet June Jordan's words, 'When we get the monsters off our backs we may all want to run in very different directions'. Involvement with youth work means that the projects do cross class boundaries as well as engaging with young women who are marginalised from mainstream education for many reasons. There are young graduates involved in Feminist Webs as well as young women who were excluded from school; the archive is seeking oral histories from all the threads of activism that critiqued as well as engaged with the 1980s movement. There are overlaps with lesbian histories, with Black women's activisms and with disability politics.

A key shift is that instead of seeing these differences as sources of antagonism and hostility it is more possible now to seek out alliances and recognise the complexity of identities. So, for example, young feminist women are working with pro-feminist men.

Question: You imply that because, youth work is an educational practice, this prevents the Feminist Webs project becoming uncritical indoctrination in feminist politics. How?

Answer: Feminist youth workers are informal educators. But there are a number of ways of understanding the educator role. All are present in the Feminist Webs project and sometimes they are in tension with each other. For example, education is thought to be about transmitting information. This starts with the idea that young women in particular are in the dark about important information, such as the fact that for every £1 a man earns, a woman earns 87.5p for doing the same job or that women own only 1% of the world's property. This ignorance denies girls choice, freedom and opportunity. The resources created through Feminist Webs will give girls knowledge. They will then be able to make well-informed decisions on the basis of having facts on women's inequality at their fingertips. The educator is an illuminator, shedding light in the darkness of ignorance and disbelief.

Another model of education sees learning as emancipatory. The ignorance we have of our own situation is a ruse of power, both a consequence of sexual inequality and a condition for it. Challenging this ignorance, therefore, involves challenging the power relationships that produce it. Feminist educational processes then become a process of critical pedagogy delving below the level of apparently discrete facts about disadvantage to find hidden connections and a systemic account of women's oppression. In this approach the role of the youth

worker as educator is to support and encourage young women to make a courageous leap into a new and fuller knowledge of their own situation. During the Feminist Webs project young women have found affirmation of their courage in challenging the status quo in stories from the earlier experience of older women. Older more experienced women can say: you are not the first people and you will not be the last to feel anger, shock, hopelessness and fear in response to the facts about your situation as women. Nor will you be the last to feel exhilarated in the process of challenging these 'facts' that are social and not eternal and can be changed.

Here the role that the youth worker as educator takes is that of the scientist or grand theorist, enabling previously unenlightened girls to recognise the underlying truth of their situation. Or the youth worker is imagined as a heroic seeker after truth and justice who is passing on alternative counter-hegemonic knowledge which enables the uncovering of a system of oppression – patriarchy – which lays women low at every turn. The educator invites participants in projects both into a more truthful worldview and into a community and set of identities that enable resistance. These may be 'big' identities, such as 'campaigner' or 'activist' or 'cultural practitioner' or 'lesbian', but they may also be apparently uniquely personal stories, of finding a way to channel anger or of overcoming a lengthy and suicidal period of depression. The stories that are being recovered and passed on through the oral history project can be thought of both as the links in a chain that is a chain of a political movement over time and also as community building in themselves. 'This is what it might mean ... to advocate feminism.' It is not only stories that are passed on but also traditions of activism: the banner-making which dates back certainly as far as the suffrage movement; 'Reclaim the Night' marches; as well as re-inventing old methods – such as the postcard campaign – for a new period of internet activism. Emancipatory pedagogies have the great strength of recognising that education in women's rights are caught up in the power struggle and that for young women to be invited into such work requires an ethical stance of care on the part of the youth worker who supports the coming-to-voice and power-to-name in young women.

Lastly, there is a powerful model of youth work that sees education and knowledge as *contested* and dialogic, rooted in conversation. This model focuses on the gaps, risks, realisations and struggles and the ambivalence involved in change. In this case, it becomes important for the intergenerational work *not* to position older feminists simply as 'experts'. It becomes possible to explore the 'blind spots' and areas of

misunderstanding between groups of women, including between older and younger women, as potentially fruitful sources of knowledge. So, for example, discussions of 'race' and racism, discussions of relations with men, discussions of sexuality and other 'differences that matter' have historically been the site of both painful division *and* of growth and development for feminist analysis. This is once again potentially the case when, in the current 'equalities and diversities' agenda a structural divide and rule is occurring with the different 'diversities' put in a position to compete for the same pots of funding. It should not surprise us therefore to hear discourses on all sides which claim that 'the other' group is prioritised: racism over sexism, or, alternatively, sexism over racism, disability over racism, everything over disability, sexuality over racism and no mention of class and so on in a terrible regress. Recognising the situatedness of knowing and the particular, historical movements into and out of positions of relative power and relative powerlessness potentially opens up a different set of conversations. One woman remembered wearing a badge that said 'We don't want the crumbs, we want the whole bloody bakery', and the image of groups fighting over the crumbs potentially reshapes the rivalrous conversations away from 'either/or' towards 'both/and' thinking.

If Feminist Webs really is a space for 'moving beyond the comfort zone', a place where older and younger women can challenge one another, then difficult questions cannot be avoided. If the role of the youth worker as educator is to create a space in which all voices can be heard, questioning, facilitating and creating their own terms for conversation, then dialogues across all kinds of division and the delineation of genuine conflicts of ideas and perspective becomes possible.

Conclusion: The implications of the Feminist Webs project for other professionals working with young people and for conceptualisations of reflective practice

Cross-generational conversations of the kind documented here could be engaged throughout the children and young people's workforce. It need not be an investigation of gender that forms the basis of critical enquiry in reflective practice. The important issue would be the potential for intergenerational learning in relation to a shared agenda.

During the period of the 'mainstreaming' of feminist ideas it was argued that commitment to gender equality should become

professionally mandatory and be delivered through performance management. However, youth work which embraced an explicitly feminist approach to work with girls and young women was not in fact well protected by the ritual writing of well-intentioned commitments to anti-oppressive practice. Such statements were systematically and fiercely fought for and won and just as systematically ignored. The re-emergence of feminist activism revives the debates about whether it is possible to inscribe – for example, a commitment to feminism – as a professional requirement. The experience of Feminist Webs implicitly involves a critique of technicist models of reflective practice that seek compliance to a set of standards or norms.

However, contemporary professional practice requires an engagement with such matters as quality standards and multidisciplinary practice in ways that were unknown to an earlier generation. It may be that the opportunities for shared reflective learning in multidisciplinary teams will create new spaces for networks and webs. If this is to be so, the models of practice-based learning which are available in those teams matter enormously. So what, if anything, can we take into a model of professional learning from Feminist Webs and what models of professional learning might be most consonant with it?

The model of cross-generational learning that Feminist Webs embodies is not individual but shared and collective. Many models of ‘reflection’ are intensely individualised and promote problem solving. The experience of Feminist Webs reinforces the idea that reflection can move beyond this, as has been suggested by writers in critical management studies who suggest that ‘critical reflection’ is concerned with questioning assumptions, focused on the social not the individual, paying particular attention to the analysis of power relationships and concerned with democracy.

The experience of Feminist Webs suggests that the situated knowledges of professionals might be understood in terms of a bigger picture. ‘Professional identities’ are formed in ways that are always interacting with the other aspects of biographies, both personal and political. While models of collective learning which draw on ideas of ‘communities of practice’ may assist with understanding political learning that can occur in organisations, some critical management theorists also point to ‘group relations conferences’ as sources for understanding the conscious and unconscious processes at work in organisations and networks which release energy for change, or undermine it, or both (Reynolds and Vince, 2004).

Recent feminist theoretical work on the epistemological significance of emotion in organisations and networks might also offer a resource for understanding something more about the pains and joys of change (Ahmed, 2004; Davidson et al, 2005).

Emancipatory values are central to youth work and informal social education but the Feminist Webs project suggests that these values can be expressed through open educational processes rather than imposed managerially. Focused conversations with groups and other well-established youth work/group facilitation tools have been used as a facilitating method throughout the Feminist Webs project.

The model of learning in Feminist Webs, while it is collective, is not (yet) institutionalised. The model of learning through communities of practice that operate at the edge of and across the boundaries of institutions potentially offers a fruitful basis for understanding this. Wenger's components of learning in 'communities of practice' – *meaning, practice, community and identity* – can be used to analyse this (1998).

Meanings – of what it means to be a woman as well as of what it means to espouse feminism – are investigated and exchanged.

Practice – that opens up the historical resources of informal social education that is youth work, of which 'girls' work' is one strand.

Community – that affirms through the public production of memories and the sharing of stories that such efforts are worthwhile and of value and that we can grow in competence in negotiating an unequal world as a result of them.

Identity (what Wenger calls 'learning as becoming') – so that the learning that occurs through involvement in Feminist Webs has the potential to shape, affirm and change our sense of who we are in the context of being a woman, within the feminist communities reflected in Feminist Webs and in our roles as women in a range of communities.

Cross-generational work suggests something about a willingness to engage in learning over time and between times which is entirely absent from most models of reflective practice which might most typically have an 'organisational year' (or much shorter period) as the

time frame. Models of experiential learning that have mostly informed 'reflective practice' have tended to value immediacy and relevance (experience, observation, reflection, action) in ways that undervalue the abstraction, the distance required for criticality and the power of theorisation and conceptualising. However, it has been the shared and changing conceptualising and acting of 'feminism' over time and across age groups that facilitates learning. It is thought provoking to wonder what it might mean to allow a longer time frame for the passing on of professional knowledge and understanding. This would clearly pose problems in a policy context that insists on perpetual change and new initiatives.

Developing a space for professional learning outside the established and legitimated framework enables creativity. The 'outsider's eye' enables practitioners who do not take their agenda directly from public policy to see new things, for example, that the phrase 'young people' in public policy very often has a gendered reference which is not investigated. The development of trust and open dialogue over time within the cross-generational context is also suggestive for the use of 'critical friends' in professional learning which enables dialogues across difference and the opening up of power relationships to exploration and change, so that critical reflection involves not only the backward look but also the forward projection: the model of 'making histories' and 'feminist futures'.

Finally, there is a lasting sense of the limitations of professionally based understandings in all of this. "Without inspiration and passion and a big heart for the work, it will not happen", says Marie Brookfield, one of the older activists recorded in the archive. There can only be a 'critical feminist youth work' because there is a wider feminist movement made up of women and girls and their male allies who wear the t-shirt 'this is what a feminist looks like' and who chant confidently 'we're here, we're queer and we're not going shopping'.

Note

¹ This chapter was written by Janet Batsleer based on discussion with Alison Ronan and Amelia Lee.

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