Review Essay  
Critical Reflection on Engaged Praxis  
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Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis

Edited by Susan Van Deventer Iverson and Jennifer Hauver James  
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Editors Susan Van Deventer Iverson and Jennifer Hauver James recently curated a collection of chapters for their Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis, which appears in Dan Butin’s series on Community Engagement in Higher Education. As indicated in the series description, this specific collection is transdisciplinary, and “critically, thoughtfully, and thoroughly examine[s] how to support efforts in higher education such that community engagement…is meaningful, sustainable, and impactful to its multiple constituencies” (p. ii). The book offers unique, necessary, and timely critical lenses. As community engagement (CE) professionals, faculty, and community partners continue to re-vision community engagement to be more democratic, just, and sustainable, this book offers a necessary contribution marrying community engagement and feminist theories. I applaud the inclusion in the book of voices and narratives frequently silenced in mainstream academia, yet also recognize the reliance on theoretical content and university representatives’ voices.

This collection serves as a direct response to calls in recent service-learning, community engagement, civic engagement, and democratic engagement literatures to better address the power differentials perpetuating the very inequalities and societal infrastructures CE purports to overcome (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis offers a provocative and critical examination of those traditions of engagement which we hold dear, yet suggests methods and means to achieve balance and explore potential for more democratic practices.

Building upon Iverson and James’s introduction, each chapter offers innovative theory or examples of practice to burst the boundaries of present CE initiatives. Authors in the collection shed light on how and why CE may be enacted in noncritical ways, thereby reinforcing systemic injustices. Each chapter provides a reflexive narrative of a lived experience that marries theory and practice. Moreover, each author’s articulated methods expand and afford new, thoughtful, and effective modes of knowledge creation in relation to CE practices.

This review essay first discusses the book’s audience and subsequently offers brief overviews of each chapter. The section on content focuses heavily on the first two chapters authored by editors Iverson and James and addresses each chapter within the context of the collection as a whole. I then offer my reflections on the collection.

Audience

Considering the audience of the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, I would recommend this book for any practitioner of CE pedagogies, innovator of CE initiatives, or researcher of CE projects. For those who work in CE, this book offers suggestions to critically approach the ways of doing this work while enhancing the theories that undergird it. If you are involved in CE, regardless of your disciplinary allegiance, Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis will help you thoughtfully consider the work you do, why you do it, and who you do it for. To quote briefly from the editors’ introduction:

With full appreciation and recognition for this disciplinary history [Women’s Studies], we want this volume to pollinate beyond the boundaries of women’s studies, to connect with an audience who may (or may not) be affiliated with women’s studies and may [or may not] be steeped in feminist thinking. (p. 2)

Contents

Following series editor Butin’s preface to the book, Iverson and James offer two chapters contextualizing
the collection. In the first, they provide an introduction situating the book in conversations circulating in CE literature regarding the efficacy, importance, and critical practice of CE as well as explain their selection and recruitment process in building the collection, noting the variety of voices (predominantly institutional representatives) appearing in the book, and providing the reader with an overview of the themes that appear most often within the text. The editors also identify four recurring themes that weave the chapters together vis-à-vis feminist CE praxis. First, the volume, in good stead as a feminist critical collection, “aims to cross boundaries or borders that have framed the work of feminism and community engagement” (p. 5; emphasis in the original). Second, authors advocate for “feminist CE [that] is relational” (p. 5; emphasis in the original), i.e., observation and interaction with others is integral to the successful deployment of feminist CE practices. Third, the processes of reflection, wherein “one examines oneself, her assumptions and preconceptions, and how these affect decisions, experience, and actions” (p. 5), are vital to better understanding and developing feminist perspectives of CE. Finally, feminist CE projects work to disrupt pedagogy; Iverson and James align the collection “with scholars who assert that community engagement must move beyond its charitable orientation to instead cultivate activist-oriented attitudes, knowledge, and skills” (p. 6).

Iverson and James address definitional concerns in Chapter 2, focusing on the terms “feminism,” “community,” “engagement,” and “praxis.” They discuss liberal, radical, multicultural, poststructural, and cyber feminisms, and suggest that despite the variety of feminisms, there exist common “threads across feminist thinking and practice that serve as core tenets of [the] volume” (p. 14). As an elaboration on their themes, and as a synthesis for the core components and signs of effective feminist CE, Iverson and James state that feminist approaches to CE require practitioners to be constantly vigilant, asking critical questions “about the communities in which [they] work and the aims [they] ascribe to the work [they] do” (p. 14). Feminist CE also places significant emphasis on consciousness-raising and activism; aligning with Saltmarsh et al.'s (2009) Democratic Engagement White Paper, this perspective suggests that feminist CE works to move from a mindset of deficit-based relationships focusing on activity and place to an asset-based relationship model focused on process and purpose, one which disrupts the allegiance to apolitical projects and confronts systemic silences.

After offering these indicators of effective feminist CE, Iverson and James then “problematize the term community and stir others to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions [regarding this term]” (p. 17). Advocating a prescribed definition of any term may be seen as problematic in a collection of feminist approaches to CE. The term “community,” then, as a guiding term for the text, finds its primary definition features in subsequent chapters. It remains relatively nebulous, allowing each contributing author to determine their understanding of the term.

“Engagement,” while similarly parsed as “community,” is ultimately offered with more concrete definition. It is through the definitional aspects Iverson and James use for this term that the nature of “praxis” and the importance of the transition between theory and application appear throughout the text. While they recognize the diversity of engagement models, they offer as the pinnacle “transformative citizenship” (Banks, 2008, p. 136) facilitated by a “justice-oriented” faculty (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 242).

Iverson and James suggest that while the book has two primary sections – the first focusing on theory and the second on praxis – all chapters, in some way, reflect the overlap – the interplay – that promotes feminist CE. This note is vital to recognizing the way in which this book works to mediate the requirements of scholarship with the movements pushing feminist CE into more mainstream publishing venues. This collection suggests that feminist pedagogies are a tool to harness CE’s theoretical and practical imperatives while identifying why community-engaged theory can find a productive home in feminist theory and how those theories can be implemented in praxis. This novel work is exhibited by traditionally marginalized voices in academia, particularly female voices from various intersectional contexts. Nevertheless, community voices are largely missing. Iverson and James note this in their introduction, and this is a point I will revisit in my reflection.

Following the introduction to the collection and the theoretical and definitional overview, the two parts of the book correlate with the two sections of the book’s title. Part I: Theoretical Considerations, reflecting the first section of the title – Feminist Community Engagement – both examines and suggests novel feminist theories relevant to CE. Part II: Feminist Applications, reflecting the second section of the title – Achieving Praxis – offers qualitative assessments and narratives (discussions of praxis) aligned with theoretical innovation.

In Chapter 3, Verjee and Butterwick offer a Critical Race Feminist Theory (CRFT), confronting practitioners and readers with the reality of the predominant CE charity model that is more damaging than helpful. They do so by building upon the theoretical work by scholars such as Mitchell (2008) and Stewart and Webster (2011), and utilize a method accepted in feminist scholarship – autobiography.

Mena and Vaccaro’s Chapter 4 reviews the findings
from an ethnography, highlighting the impetus for their project: “much of higher education literature emphasizes traditional forms of CE that focus on the individual growth of those ‘doing’ the service—namely privileged college students” (p. 55). They found that role models were essential for an individual's development of a collectivist, change-oriented approach to CE work and suggest that universities highlight women of color as role models and expand definitions of CE to push boundaries. Their admonition to readers, then, is to challenge institutional infrastructures and determine how to break out of the “do-for” mentality and into one that values “collaborative and justice-based community engagement” (p. 71).

In Chapter 5, Cunningham and Crandall examine cyberfeminism and suggest continued scrutiny as gender, CE, theory, and pedagogy interact and are shaped by and with technology. They reflect on how technology reifies and amplifies power imbalances and suggest that a nuanced cyberfeminism, represented in technofeminism, can counteract this, as “[it]…unveils the mutual shaping of gender and technology” (p. 87) and allows for critical insights into the methods by which we can critically engage with community organizations via curricula. The broader implications of this chapter rest in the authors’ argument that curricula embracing feminist approaches to CE must: (a) require educators and students to work directly with nonprofits, (b) openly acknowledge the “dynamics of gender and technology constructions” (p. 88), and (c) examine expectations about what assigned projects can do for communities.

In the final chapter of the first section, Bisignani argues that a key component—how to incite action-oriented mindsets in students—is missing in CE scholarship. Her chapter serves as a pivot for the collection. Early in the chapter, she offers perhaps one of the most powerful claims regarding praxis; she recalls coming “to understand that by ushering [students] into critical awareness without giving them any tools or methods to create change…(she) was not empowering them to act…(she) risked making them cynical but passive intellects” (p. 94). While Bisignani offers a compelling case to adopt her approach, her call to action relies on the wholesale rejection of both positivist traditions as well as an institution’s interest in “studying” its community. This frees practitioners, who can then subscribe to innovative pedagogical approaches such as hers, which, she acknowledges, requires a great deal of time and investment. In her model, faculty would need to set up effective activist-apprentice partnerships for students in tandem with critical classroom engagement.

Seher’s Chapter 7 draws upon her experience working with Pay it Forward (PIF), a Campus Compact-sponsored program. Her narrative focuses on students’ work on the project, and her approach to assessing and coding is distinctly change-oriented. She observes students remaining committed to “othering” in their reflections, writing that “instead of being reflective of the reciprocity that feminist community engagement tries to build, my students’ writing problematically indicated a reinforcement of power dynamics” (p. 128).

In Chapter 8, Shaaban-Magaña and Miller offer a programmatic perspective of feminist engagement praxis by explicitly discussing, as did Verjee and Butterwick, an attenuation to the material constraints/realities of the work they wished to conduct in the community. They utilized resources available to them in terms of time, space, expertise, and support, while recognizing the constraints of these as well. They beautifully and concisely acknowledge a challenge for critical workers within an institutional infrastructure: “we are mindful of the complexity of language and its capacity to shape and reflect. We embrace strategic, yet admittedly problematic practices within the development and implementation of the program” (p. 145). Consistently considering both the constraints and affordances of their positionality allows them to take ownership of the program while realizing its potential.

In Chapter 9, Clark-Taylor, Mitchell, and Rich offer an overview and discussion of the Roxxy project. The authors—a student, instructor, and site supervisor (community representative)—offer a comprehensive view of the project as a model peer institutions could use to build bridges within communities. While developing and implementing the project, they approached assessment with an awareness that the development of the curriculum and the effects of its implementation needed to be analyzed. The authors are able to offer a comprehensive view of the project as a model similar institutions can utilize to build bridges between institutions and communities.

Noel, in chapter 10, offers models of community-campus partnerships located off campus rather than residing on campus; in doing so, she highlights the importance of physical location for CE projects. Her models offer a profound way of viewing the traditional university-dominated CE narrative. The function of place here, similar to its appearance in Chapter 9, suggests that “hierarchical, paternalistic attitudes towards communities served” can be moderated and re-shaped by “a feminist approach to community engagement that recognizes the dangers of such an attitude” (p. 189). Practitioners working within and fighting against a charity-based view of institutionalized CE will find her recommendations and cases helpful in determining how to base initiatives and projects in community locations.
Reflections

The frankness of the narratives contained in Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis suggests there is much work to be done. In Chapter 11, Iverson and James invite practitioners to enact and embody the critical work called for in the book. Yet despite the strengths of each chapter, the collection perpetuates issues Iverson and James note about Women (and Gender) Studies and feminist theories more generally: namely, they are, quite simply, too theoretical with limited scope to offer recommendation for practice. The book’s goal, perhaps, could have been instead to offer the theoretical context to build local innovations.

This is not to say the methods employed in this book are illegitimate; it is, instead, an opportunity to recognize that divergence itself is one of the book’s strengths. It allows us to question how a feminist lens could be exported across the academy and enter into other academic disciplines and into our work with communities, wherein such theory and methods are not as widely known and/or accepted. As a publication inclusive of the variety of praxes in poststructural feminist theory, this text works to break down barriers within feminism itself, but these theoretical discussions, authored primarily by university folks, do not always mirror the collaboration inherent in CE.

Part of this book’s exceptional work rests on the inclusion of autobiographies, ethnographic narratives, and personal experiences from traditionally marginalized populations. These function as a mode of cracking open the question of what legitimates knowledge, suggesting that the variety of knowledges and critiques included are authentic and important. This tactic rejects traditional, positivist approaches to knowledge. In perhaps the most openly and purposefully critical chapter which aims toward an “antiracist feminist social justice orientation of community-university partnerships” (p. 32), Verjee and Butterwick highlight the opportunity they see in an asset-based approach to CE by sharing their own personal narratives and reflections. The importance of hearing this diversity of voices cannot be overstated.

While Iverson and James note the diversity of authors from higher education institutions (faculty/student/staff), and authors are quick to point toward their representative community partners, the proportionately small representation of partners outside the university fails to adequately represent a reciprocal partnership, even when a reflexive narrator is included. This lack of narrative from the partners’ position perpetuates the notion—which Iverson and James articulate—is what they seek to overturn—that we are stuck in this “doing for” mindset and charity rather than activist approaches to CE. I recognize that most community partners are not invested in publishing opportunities. However, those stories and narratives we tell about partners, if they choose to abstain from authoring, should be unmistakably infused with their voice.

Relatedly, community partners are not always represented in the list of authors named in the table of contents. However, as we attend to democratic community-campus relationships, we need to be attentive to such matters. Seher notes in Chapter 7 that “community collaborators should be intentionally chosen for their ability to expose students to disenfranchised populations, and for their ability to introduce students to activism—rather than solely for their direct link to academic content” (p. 129). Seher’s reflection, while honest and heartening, reinforces a university-dominant practice wherein students’ growth is the priority. This directly contradicts Mena and Vaccaro’s note in Chapter 4 that a student-centric approach reifies a charity model. I draw this connection to note this collection’s acceptance of a variety of perspectives, but also to note the larger point that the lack of community voices became most clear for me at this moment, and the profound silences of these voices throughout the text shook, for me, the premises upon which the book is based.

Among the book’s insightful introductions and thoughtful chapters are snapshots of a movement toward a CE infrastructure grounded in building justice-oriented citizens, who, under the guidance of attentive and vigilant communities of scholars and teachers, recognize the full potential of well-structured CE opportunities across the university curricular and co-curricular experience.

On a more meta-level, throughout the book there remains a dichotomy between theory and practice. Yet fully embracing the potential of a feminist CE that achieves praxis suggests that we break down the duality of practice and theory. But the book’s very structure—from its title, to its division into Parts I and II, and to its contents—perpetuates dichotomy.

Regardless, even if a reader decides not to adopt any models offered in Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis, they can discuss openly the critical analyses offered. Revolting against traditional scholarship, including the notions of “objectivity” and “neutrality,” are what Iverson and James encourage practitioners to enact. Failing to do so implies accepting “dominant notions about who is best suited to conduct service work in the academy… and what counts as knowledge” (p. 201; emphases in the original). Their book project, as one that makes manifest both narratives and autobiographies, is vital in spaces where other nominally more rigorous quantitative and qualitative traditions are prized.

In developing and publishing this book, Iverson and James have extended the rich traditions feminisms
can offer to CE; they have offered us new ways of knowing and doing. I would suggest that *Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis* offers any practitioner ideas and questions to frame program and course development, implementation, and assessment. Utilizing feminist CE theories to engage in praxis can enhance our ability to ensure reciprocity among stakeholders. Moreover, for those practitioners who wish to work *with* not *for*, and who view CE as full of assets and advantages, this book supports new modes of knowledge creation and dissemination.

**References**


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