

**ISSUE NO. 5**

# How to 'Do' Feminist Theory Through Digital Video: Embodying Praxis in the Undergraduate Feminist Theory Classroom

**Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst**

**Abstract**

In this paper, I describe and analyse a creative service learning assignment that I developed for my third year feminist theory class, titled 'Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video' (DFT-DV). I argue that the assignment's integration of creative approaches to learning (digital video) and service learning (placements with organizations) fosters deep, embodied learning through praxis. After describing the assignment and the literatures that guided the creation of this assignment in more detail, I analyse two student videos alongside anonymous interviews conducted with the first cohort to complete this assignment. Reading these videos with the interviews highlights how digital video production enabled students to engage in deeper learning through praxis through a more sustained reflection on their own subjectivity in relation to their service learning placements, which had the effect of demystifying knowledge production in the feminist theory classroom.

**Introduction**

In the first day of my undergraduate feminist theory course, I tell students that we need theory in order to act responsibly, and likewise, we need action in order to expand and push the limits of theory. This understanding draws upon Paulo Freire's definition of praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to change it' (Freire, [1970] 2000: 51). Praxis is a central concept to the interdisciplinary field of women's and gender studies, yet pedagogical strategies to nourish deep learning through praxis are under-theorized. In this paper, I describe and analyse a creative service learning assignment that I developed for my third year feminist theory class, titled 'Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video' (DFT-DV). Students researched the multiple definitions of a concept in feminist theory through course readings, as well as a service learning placement with a community organization. The participating organizations all engage in educational or facilitation activities for which they have limited resources. To address this need, students created short, non-documentary digital videos about their concepts, and after the class was over, the videos were made available in an online library for use by the organizations and the wider community. I argue that the

assignment's integration of creative approaches to learning (digital video) and service learning (placements with organizations) fosters deep, embodied learning through praxis.

The design of this assignment is guided by research in the fields of digital storytelling, participatory video, video pedagogy, and feminist approaches to service learning. While students did not produce digital stories in this assignment, the importance of developing a clear 'voice' that is articulated through digital storytelling practice was central to this assignment. As scholars of digital storytelling have described, this method enables students to develop more complex theoretical positions that resist passive contemplation of change, through the overlaying of text, voice, sound, and image (Cambre and Fletcher, 2009: 111). Critical approaches to participatory video challenge understandings of video as a straightforward method to gather qualitative data, because the way in which individuals use video can be shaped by mainstream representational practices (Low et al., 2012: 56). These approaches to critical video dovetail well with research on teaching video production to students as a political act. If students learn strategies to analyse the relationship between video production and the structuring of reality, they are better equipped to develop a critical eye and possibly less likely to reproduce representational practices rooted in the status quo and invested in maintaining existing relations of power (Higgins, 1991: 18). Finally, feminist approaches to service learning resist positivist assumptions that community service will automatically form an analysis of social structures and ideologies (Trethewey, 1999: 179). Instructors often incorporate service learning into WGS curricula as an experience for students to reflect upon in order to develop an understanding of praxis. However, Joan W. Scott's pivotal work on experience encourages educators to be critical of the assumptions behind this mode of learning. As she states, an account of an experience taken as fact reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems,' missing opportunities to develop a critical reading of an experience as constructed by discourse and history (Scott, 1992: 25).

I begin this essay with a description of the assignment and the literature that guided its creation. I analyse two student videos alongside anonymous interviews conducted with the first cohort to complete this assignment. Lisa Gunn's 'Being an Ally: A Step Towards Decolonization' and Lynn O'Donnell's 'Transitions' are examples of how service learning placements can become an impetus to reconsider the politics of representation through the necessity to produce a short digital video from the perspective of an ally (to Indigenous and trans\* people). Reading these videos with the interviews highlights how

digital video production enabled students to engage in deeper learning through praxis – through a more sustained reflection on their own subjectivity in relation to their service learning placements – which had the effect of demystifying knowledge production in the feminist theory classroom.

### **The 'Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video' Assignment**

A central learning objective in my feminist theory class is for students to develop a mode of analysis that makes questions of power central to all inquiry (particularly through gender as it intersects with race, class, sexuality) and the ability to produce individual, social, and structural relations of privilege and oppression. The most common complaint I receive from students enrolled in my feminist theory seminar is that while they greatly enjoy engaging with complicated theoretical material (especially since that is linked to overcoming their intimidation at the beginning of the course), they find it difficult to understand how what we do in class is related to so-called 'real life.' This comment is perplexing to me, as I frequently observe the same students using their knowledge of feminist theory in a variety of contexts, from casual discussion of their lives and popular culture before and after class to their engagements with extracurricular campus work that I observe as a faculty advisor to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer/questioning) students and the Women's and Gender Studies Student Society. While it might be tempting to dismiss these comments as anti-intellectual or lacking in maturity, they are revealing of problems that emerge in the way that feminist theory is often taught. This avowed split between 'theory' and 'real life' perplexed me, as it was not self-evident in the materials we read (many of which emerged out of so-called 'real life' and activism in the genres of manifesto, newsletter article or pamphlet), nor in the collaborative learning approaches I employed in the classroom (such as collectively establishing ground rules or designing presentation assignments that relied upon supporting and responding to each other), so I turned to a consideration of how I taught feminist theory.

I learned how to teach feminist theory largely through observation and examples available to me as a former student of feminist theory. The approaches I learned and employed can present students with conflicting messages that reproduce the field as a rarefied or elite pursuit, while simultaneously trying to convince students that theory was central to all dimensions of life. I came to the realization that the opportunities I offered to students to engage with the material, while pedagogically sound and thoughtful, did not provide an opportunity to engage with the material through their 'soul-and-mind-inseparable-from-body' (Frueh, 2006: 13). This engagement is essential

to foster a deep and sustained understanding of praxis and to the relevance of the theories we study to students' everyday lives, both during the course and long after it has finished. It is within this ontological space – privileging mind over soul and body through the prioritization of written and oral intellectual work – that students enjoyed theoretical engagement, yet could not make connections outside of the space of the classroom itself. It is also within this space that students came to see knowledge production as external to their own lives, which prevented them from taking ownership of their educated perspectives and developing a personal voice. Instead they imagined their work as students as the task of accurately representing and describing the voices of other theorists in a manner that would be pleasing to their professors, rather than interpreting and theorizing those voices.

I designed DFT-DV with these concerns in mind, and central to these concerns is the question of praxis. The assignment takes place over the course of an entire semester, and consists of four distinct phases. I will briefly describe each of the four phases of the assignment, and the complete portfolio that describes DFT-DV to students is available at <http://www.doingfeministtheory.ca> (<http://www.doingfeministtheory.ca>). In my descriptions, I emphasize the major outcomes of that phase as they are connected to deepening learning through praxis.

'Research and Concept Exploration' is the first phase of the project. The primary outcomes of this phase are threefold: to select a focal concept, to describe how the concept is used in the work of a university or community organization, and to summarize the definitions of the concept within course texts. Students select their service learning placements with a community or university organization, and they do a time-limited task for that organization (~10 hours). As I noted in the introduction, all of the organizations engage in some type of educational or facilitation activity and have limited resources for use in these activities; the videos that the students create become valuable community and university resources. Once students have selected their placement, they meet with representatives of that organization to negotiate a focal concept that will be beneficial to both the student and the organization, to set clear objectives that the organization and student would like to achieve, and to determine what task(s) the student will do for the organization. Through service to their organization, as well as through a careful review of materials produced by that organization (e.g. brochures, websites), the student determines how the concept is defined and important to that organization. Concurrently, the student is reading ahead in the course to locate ways that feminist theorists have defined their concept. After the

student has completed this phase of the assignment, they hand in a summary of the tasks performed for their organization, as well as a brief description of the concept that they have selected in consultation with their organization.

The second phase of the assignment is titled 'Planning and Writing.' This phase overlaps with both the first and third phases of the assignment, as students begin to write and plan their videos as they are completing their research and revise their scripts and video plans as they are shooting and editing their videos. Students write a script about their concept that will provide a definition of that concept that comes from their own voice, informed by the research conducted in the first phase of the assignment yet distinct from the 'voices' they encountered there (the authors of the texts and the individuals working at their organization). Writing scripts necessitates mid-assignment reflection, as students need to review their notes on their service learning placement and the readings in order to think about how their understanding of their chosen concept has shifted and remained the same. For the first time in this assignment, I ask students to take a clear position on their concept. This is one of the most challenging phases of the assignment. While most students in the course are accustomed to presenting a summary of scholarship on a particular topic and presenting an argument supported by this evidence, they are less familiar with presenting a position that comes from their own perspective and voice. Students may or may not agree with the position presented in the former assignment (which corresponds to a typical term paper format), yet in DFT-DV, they must present their own position, in all its vulnerabilities. Adding to this novelty, I also ask students to begin planning their videos. At this point, I do not expect that they have any technical know-how, but I do ask them to think about what kinds of images and sounds they might use to support their script. A key component of the planning phase of the assignment is that students generate all materials used in their videos, and cannot rely upon Google Image Search or YouTube (for example). Again, this ensures that the student videos are presented from the perspective of the student's own voice.

In the third phase of the project, 'Shooting and Editing,' students created video footage and edited their video. This phase overlapped somewhat with script writing and planning, and emphasized the technical skills required to complete the project. I strongly encouraged students to have completed their script writing and video planning before attending two video workshops that I facilitated for the class. Students were able to sign out inexpensive digital camcorders that I purchased with a grant for this project (Samsung HMX-W300YN at ~\$200 CDN each), though most students chose to use their

own cameras or smartphones. The first year that I piloted this assignment, only one of the students came prepared; thus, in the second year of the assignment, I created the requirement that students submit their script and a list of potential materials for their video for 5% of their grade. The workshops were two hours in length each, and were inspired by the technical segments of digital storytelling workshops. We used iMovie '09 to produce the videos, a decision predetermined by existing computer and software facilities on campus: all computer labs at my university have Apple iMac computers with the iLife '09 suite of software applications that includes iMovie as well as iPhoto (for photo editing) and GarageBand (for audio recording and editing).

The first video production workshop focused on the basics of the software: learning the layout of the iMovie software; how to create a new project; importing video, audio, and photos; editing photos and trimming video clips; and saving the project on an external drive. I facilitated a discussion about expressing ideas visually and through sound, looking at examples of how an image or sound can change the meaning of a script. If students arrived at this session with their script and potential video, photo, and audio materials, they would leave with a basic cut of their video (the material they were asked to arrive with for the second session). The second video production workshop involved learning advanced editing techniques in the first hour such as including credits, titles, and other text; adding transitions between various parts of the video; precise timing of video elements; and how to export the video into a portable format that could be played outside of the iMovie software. I scheduled time during the session for students to give and receive peer feedback, and receive feedback from the instructor. Students who were prepared for this session left with an almost final cut of their video, as well as the necessary skills to be able to complete their video. These sessions were essential to the success of the assignment: while iMovie is relatively simple to use, none of the students had used it before, and while the students in my classes would be able to learn how to use the software on their own, doing so in a group setting lessened student anxiety. The video that the students produced constituted the second half of the service to their placement, as they were required to give their organization a copy for their resource collection.

In the final phase of the assignment, students wrote a reflective summary of the course that focused on the service learning placement, the video, and the primary insight or insights that students had in the course. This reflection is arguably the most important phase of DFT-DV. As Angela Trethewey argues, without a reflexive element that forces students to confront structures of power, assignments that incorporate service learning

run the risk of individualizing systemic oppression as 'failures' or 'misfortunes' of those that an organization serves (1999: 181). In the reflexive phase of *Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video*, students examined their changing understanding of their concept. Since they identified their objectives for their service learning placements at the beginning of the assignment and in conjunction with their organization, they were well-positioned to critically reflect on the tensions and obstacles encountered at the organization, both in terms of structural barriers to the work the organization does and their relationship to the organization and those served by the organization.

When students were working on their paper, they had already made their videos, given a copy of their video to their organization, and screened the videos to the entire class at a celebratory supper. Their reflections on the creative process and service learning placement were thus anchored in a solid sense of their concept, from their own voice, as well as a sense of being a part of one or more communities of learners (formal and informal conversations with class members, as well as those who worked at their service learning placement). The second part of the summary reflection paper concisely summarized their answer to the question, 'What have I learned about feminist theory?' To answer this question, students reviewed their video and related materials, as well as their graded work in the course to determine differences in earlier and later work and to try to analyse how and why their thoughts had travelled in the directions they did. Students focused on a few key insights made in their written and oral work throughout the semester, and used their video and concept as a focal point through which to describe those insights. The concept video was thus a central thread that tied together the students' insights and offered a thematic structure for the paper in its entirety. I did not ask students to do additional research to write their reflection paper; rather, they used their own work as the primary source texts subjected to critical analysis.

### **Analysis of DFT-DV**

When I piloted the course in the fall semester of 2012, students were advised that DFT-DV was not only a part of my teaching agenda, but also my research programme. I told them that once the course was over, the research assistants for the project (Rory Begin and Holly Chute, two former students of feminist theory) would contact them to inquire whether or not they were interested in being interviewed. My hope in having the research assistants interview students was that while students knew I would hear what they said in the interviews, they might be more honest about their criticisms of the assignment if they were talking to other students. Eleven out of the twelve students who were enrolled in the class agreed to be interviewed (one declined due to their

schedule). Students were interviewed for approximately 20 minutes, and the research assistants asked them a series of open-ended questions about the assignment: how did the assignment help them learn about the relationship between theory and practice (praxis); what did they think was different about creating a video compared to writing a term paper; and what did they like and dislike about the assignment overall.

While a full discourse analysis of the interviews is outside of the scope of this paper, what I would like to offer here is a discussion of two themes I identified through a grounded theory analysis of the interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory analysis requires the researcher to read and re-read interview transcripts to locate differences and similarities in interviewee responses, and then critically reflect upon how those themes are positioned in relation to previous research (Charmaz, 2009: 129). This is characteristic of contemporary grounded theory, which takes a constructivist approach to research, understanding knowledge production as shaped by the researcher's framing of an empirical problem, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the structural conditions of the research context (Charmaz, 2009: 130). A constructivist grounded theory approach to reading the interviews works well for my purposes, as I am able to identify themes of commonality and differences among students' responses in relation to my own reflections on teaching the assignment as well as the literature that guided the assignment development.

While I identified several themes that emerged from the interviews (Hurst, forthcoming), in this section I focus on three of the themes (which I titled 'Demystification of Theory,' 'Subjectivity and Interpretation,' and 'Sustained Commitment'), and I use these themes to discuss the interviews and two student videos by Lisa Gunn and Lynn O'Donnell. 'Demystification of Theory' is a theme that captures enhanced student understandings of theory generation and knowledge production, as these were made more visible to students through taking a position as an agent who is active in service and theorizing. This theme describes student ownership of their own perspectives on the world and an increased sense of how and why theory is relevant to their lives. 'Subjectivity and Interpretation' is interconnected with 'Demystification' but focuses more precisely on students developing their own 'voice' and recognizing that their voice exists in relation to a diversity of other 'voices' in the assignment and in feminist theory: the other students, the people who worked in their organization, the professor, and the authors of course texts. Rather than hiding under a mantle of objectivity and expertise, students grappled with the epistemological foundations of



differences in interpretation, and how relations to power shape those differences. Finally, 'Sustained Commitment' describes how the duration of this assignment – spanning from the very beginning to the very end of the course – models a kind of ongoing, focused attention to a shared project. This theme emphasizes the various learning skills students acquired and developed while doing this assignment, especially the kinds of interpersonal and technical skills necessary to work with each other and their organizations on this project. Students had a sense that these skills were ones that they could take with them into other courses, as well as their post-graduate lives. This is only meant to be a brief introduction to these themes. In what follows, I will describe each of the videos and then elaborate on the interview themes in relation to the central goal of DFT-DV – learning through praxis. All of the videos produced in the pilot phase of the assignment were thought-provoking and met the objectives of the assignment; however, I have selected the two videos as examples because they share a common theme of being an ally to a community from the perspective of existing in a position of privilege. This is a theme that frequently emerges within the course, due to the demographics of the student population of my institution in rural Nova Scotia. While typically the students in my classes come from both urban and rural backgrounds and a variety of class situations, are varied in terms of sexual identity, and at least a third of the students are first generation university students, they are predominantly white, non-trans, and non-Indigenous young women. It is not unusual for there to be only one student in the class who identifies as trans, Indigenous, and/or as a person of colour.

### **Assignment Design Frameworks**

To design this assignment, I drew upon four areas of scholarship (digital storytelling, participatory video, video pedagogy, and feminist service learning pedagogy), which address concerns related to praxis, voice, and representation. While DFT-DV is an assignment that is neither digital storytelling nor the outcome of participatory video, it is inspired by the interdisciplinarity; connection between emotional, intellectual and practical experience; focus on process; and critique and analysis of representation present in these visual practices. In particular, the focus in digital storytelling workshops on finding and representing the videographer's voice, and assuming no prior knowledge of video-making, are key lessons that I learned from digital storytelling approaches. The destabilization of representational practices in participatory video methodologies is also extremely important to how I designed this assignment. Because the students and I live in a highly visually-oriented culture, it is important to disrupt image-making during the process of this assignment. One of the reasons why students are required to create all of the material used for their video is so they are able to have

a more complex understanding of the labour involved in creating an image. Participatory video approaches don't assume transparency of images but rather attempt to make images opaque to both participants and researchers. Further, this assignment is also shaped by critical feminist perspectives on service learning pedagogy, which, as discussed in the previous section, do not take for granted that students will automatically deepen their understanding of power and praxis through service to an organization. Instead, critical feminist perspectives on service learning help shape a service learning experience within a broader framework of institutional and structural power relations and positions the student not as a charity worker, but as someone who is drawing upon the resources of a community organization for their own benefit (learning). In this section, I offer a necessarily brief summary of the varied pedagogical approaches present in digital storytelling, participatory video, and service learning.

### **Digital storytelling**

Digital storytelling is a non-expert art process developed by the Centre for Digital Storytelling in San Francisco in the 1990s. Participants with no prior knowledge of video-making engage in an intensive workshop where they produce a short digital video that tells an autobiographical story through a series of activities that include oral storytelling and discussion in a large group; individual, peer-to-peer and facilitator-participant work on scripts; and learning the technical skills for video production. At the end of a digital storytelling workshop, the entire group of participants and facilitators watch and discuss the videos together.

Christopher Fletcher and Carolina Cambre use the term *implicated scholarship* to describe digital storytelling approaches in the classroom, stating that implicated scholarship is 'reflexive and politically conscious' and 'situates the intellectual as a social actor within any social system' (2009: 111-112). Digital storytelling is, according to Fletcher and Cambre, a way of breaking down the false barrier between the classroom and the 'real world.' This barrier is dissolved through making the process of knowledge production more transparent, as students are required to represent their research through textual, visual, and audial methods. As students work in multiple registers, they present ideas that are more complicated and engage with the social realm as active participants rather than as passive observers of social change (Fletcher and Cambre 2009: 111). Importantly, Rina Benmayor observed that students engaged in creative and analytic work through digital storytelling are 'theorizing from the flesh,' an embodied approach to theory that is empowering for students who are marginalized because

students take responsibility for and are able to inhabit the space of their own voice in the classroom (2008: 188-190). When creating digital stories, students are engaged in collegial relationships with their professor and other students, and the ethical and intellectual responsibility for their perspective becomes visible in their videos in a way that is arguably absent from the typical seminar paper, which is read only by the instructor.

### **Participatory video**

Unlike digital storytelling, participatory video exists most often within the realm of research, rather than teaching. Nonetheless, participatory video approaches in the field are connected to digital storytelling approaches in the classroom, as they examine how technology can be used to facilitate deeper theoretical understandings that escape text. Usually framed as a process, rather than a singular event, participatory video is a method that begins with teaching communities how to record and edit video and use video as a means to create a record of critical issues from the perspective of the community and for purposes determined by the community itself. This research method has been used for over 40 years, and it is connected to projects for democratic communications access, like community access television, vocational programmes in video production, media and arts non-profit organizations, and the use of video production by social/activist movements in North America, Latin America, and Africa (Low et al., 2012: 49). Frequently, participatory video is presented as a methodology for locating the 'truth' of a community through empowering that community through video, without a serious reflection on power relations within that community or a solid understanding of what participation means (Low et al., 2012: 50). A common self-presentation of participatory video methods by researchers is that it is a 'manifestation of agency' (Low et al., 2012: 55) for communities, which is a self-presentation that assumes video is a transparent representation of a community (for an example of a counter-presentation, see Wheeler, 2009). Within the DFT-DV project, I explicitly instruct students to produce non-documentary works to avoid this trap, which allows them an opportunity to experiment with the possibilities of non-textual theorizing and representation.

There are connections between participatory video and video production pedagogy that frames videography as a political act. Thinking of video production as inherently political requires students to engage with and learn ways of analyzing how video production is used to *structure*, rather than *document* reality. John M. Higgins argues that this shift in understanding leads to students who are better equipped to develop a

critical approach to video production, and possibly to students who are less inclined to reproduce representational practices that are deeply invested in upholding existing power relations. Higgins argues that through an 'alternative, critical video pedagogy' (1991: 26), students and professors can resist the pull of a so-called objective and unmediated reality. Instead, students and professors nourish an approach that helps reveal how neutrality cloaks power relationships in mainstream media and cultivate an opening for realities that challenge that neutrality through resistant alternatives. If professors and students consider video not as a neutral or transparent medium that can reveal truths about its subjects, but instead as a mediated and constructed art form, they open up opportunities for students to represent their own subjective positions in a way that is liberated from the obligation to present one's point of view objectively.

### **Feminist service learning**

These approaches to theorizing video production in teaching and research contexts share a common desire to challenge mainstream visual representations, as well as the assumption that video can provide an objective account of a particular group or situation. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, this assignment situates service learning pedagogy within Scott's understanding of experience as shaped by discourse and history, rather than by an uncontested fact (1992: 25). This understanding of experience intersects with challenging video practices in digital storytelling and participatory video, because it moves an experience into the field of analysis rather than presuming that initial impressions are accurate. Thus, students do not present a narrative of their experiences of working with an organization, of privilege and oppression, or of creating knowledge through digital video, but instead of an analysis of that narrative. This movement is the reflective basis of Freire's definition of praxis, where an action cannot exist on its own but needs to be reflected upon in order to make that action a responsible one. Significantly, critical feminist perspectives on service learning emphasize that the presentation of service learning must avoid presenting it as 'charity' or 'volunteer' work, placing students at the centre, but rather that service needs to be framed as activism in order to focus on the structural factors that constitute difference and oppression (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 233; Endres and Gould 2009, 431). All of the service learning placements for this assignment are either situated on campus or with a community organization that works on issues related to the campus community, an intentional decision that makes it more difficult for students to distance themselves from their placement and provides an opportunity for students to witness the effects of oppression within a community that they are a part of (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 244). Thus, the service learning component of this

assignment does not present service as a way of making contact with 'the real world,' but instead as the gift of an experience for theoretical reflection and analysis.

**Lisa Gunn, 'Being an Ally: A Step Towards Decolonization' and Lynn O'Donnell, 'Transitions'**



## Lisa Gunn, Being an Ally: A Step Towards Decolonization

from [Doing Feminist Theory](#)



## Lynn O'Donnell, Transitions

from [Doing Feminist Theory](#)

Lisa Gunn selected the service learning placement with the Aboriginal Student Advisor at our University (Molly Peters), who is responsible for providing academic and personal support for Aboriginal students, organizing events on campus, as well as maintaining links with Aboriginal education organizations and regional Aboriginal communities. Gunn assisted the Advisor with office tasks and event planning. For her video, Gunn chose to focus on the concept of 'decolonization,' and situated that concept within the framework of being an ally to Aboriginal people in a way that is informed by feminist and decolonizing thought. Gunn gathered her video footage mainly at the bi-annual Ma'wiomi (a Mi'kmaq word for a gathering or meeting) that happens at our

University, bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal University and Community members to celebrate and acknowledge the Mi'kmaq land that we live on, and the Aboriginal students who attend the University. The video itself incorporates still and moving images of jingle dress and fancy shawl dancers, round dancing, food, drumming, singing, and people talking together in groups. These images frame the video at the beginning and end, and are accompanied by song and drumming, in addition to Gunn's voice. The middle part of the video includes still footage representing our town (Antigonish) and the closest Mi'kmaq community, 20 minutes away (Paq'tnkek), as well as a series of everyday actions settlers can take as allies (through education, acknowledging colonialism, situating one's self, and solidarity).

The video challenges the non-Aboriginal (settler) viewer in two major ways. First, the images and sounds situate Aboriginal people and culture not as historical moments to be treated as objects of curiosity, but as a part of the present and future. Not insignificantly, before the Ma'wioimi, Gunn learned about culturally respectful protocols around taking photographs and filming. Within the context of the Canadian state that refuses to fully acknowledge its history of cultural genocide, the representations of food, song, and dance shared between Aboriginal and settler communities in the video are powerful emblems of resilience and continuity with the past that are firmly located in the present. And secondly, the video addresses the settler viewer directly in a way that is very different from the ways that settlers in Canada are addressed in relation to the topic of Aboriginal people. Of course, while the ways that settlers learn about Aboriginal people vary, what is common amongst both sympathetic and non-sympathetic modes of address is a divestment of responsibility for the history and ongoing legacies of colonialism in Canada. For example, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement in 2009 that Canada has "no history of colonialism" (Ljunggren, 2009) is indicative of a broader national denial of the historical and contemporary effects of colonialism in Canada. Rather than address settler viewers as innocents, Gunn's video implicates her and other settlers in the maintenance of colonial attitudes and offers specific strategies for being an ally to Aboriginal people. Within the broader national context of truth and reconciliation in Canada, this direct address highlights the necessity for settler acknowledgement, responsibility, and action in order for reconciliation to occur. A message that Gunn conveys in her video is that while it is critical for settlers to become more educated about colonialism in Canada, knowing more is just a first step to inform action. The segment of Gunn's video where she addresses settlers directly consists of text on an orange background, marking the acknowledgement of privilege and colonialism as a process that settlers need to take

responsibility for separately, rather than seeking validation and guidance from Aboriginal people.

Lynn O'Donnell completed a service learning placement with the Positive Spaces programme, a community-organized training programme for individuals to learn about LGBTQ people, learn how to address everyday homophobia and heterosexism, and become a visible ally to LGBTQ people (marked by a rainbow triangle sticker that can be located in a visible place, such as in a business's window or an office/residence room door). In her service learning placement, O'Donnell attended and assisted with both Level 1 and Level 2 Positive Spaces training sessions, and assisted with the administration of the programme. In Level 2 of the programme, trainers prepare participants to consider whether or not they are able to commit to being an ally to LGBTQ people through role-playing and discussion activities, and so being an ally is one theme in O'Donnell's video. However, O'Donnell's video responds quite straightforwardly to a dearth of resources on the concept of transgender within the Positive Spaces programme; thus, her video focuses on both being an ally as well as the concept of transgender. Like Lisa Gunn, Lynn O'Donnell's voice in the video is of someone in a position of privilege (this time, non-trans privilege).

O'Donnell's video consists of a series of still images, the overlaying of text, song, and her voice provides the narration for the video. The script of this video addresses the non-trans viewer, answering common questions that arise during Positive Spaces training sessions (e.g., What is transgender? What is gender identity? What is transphobia?), and also anticipating more problematic questions that trans people face on an everyday basis (What is your 'real' name? How do you have sex? Have you had 'the surgery'?). She frames these questions within the context of being an ally to trans people, and a theme that is shared with Gunn's video is that working through these questions is something that people without transgender experience need to do on their own, rather than expecting trans people to lead this unlearning. The still images in 'Transitions' fall into three categories: images that point out the rigidity of binary gender categories (blue and pink baby socks; Barbie and Ken dolls), images that provide illustration for the script (men's/women's bathroom signs; a patient questionnaire; a syringe), and images of growth and abundance (flowers; a lit sparkler in a dish of ice cream; a font that appears to blossom).

O'Donnell uses image effectively to resist the popular, often tragic representations of trans lives (Namaste 2005), while also highlighting how the binary model of gender

limits the lives of trans and non-trans people; using photographs of flowers throughout the video, O'Donnell presents a story about gender that emphasizes the beauty of becoming. The still images are also used to reveal the many ways that we are required to 'show' our assigned sex, as well as the ways that trans people are expected to 'show' personal information to non-trans people through questioning. Through the interplay of words and still image, O'Donnell often lightens the tone of the video; for example, as she discusses the obsession of non-trans people with autobiographical details about trans people, her images and words conjure the idiom, 'It's none of your beeswax.' A final element of note in this video is the choice of song. Coyote Grace's song, 'A Guy Named Joe' plays throughout the video's entirety. This choice is significant because it is a song by an openly trans musician (Joe Stevens) about transition, yet like the messages in O'Donnell's video, the song's lyrics resist the autobiographical imperative and speak of transition as a metaphor for leaving and arriving.

## Thinking through student videos with student interviews

While both Gunn and O'Donnell's videos grapple with complex conceptual material, the presentation of this material is accessible and meaningful within the contexts of our local community as well as the organizations they worked with, suggesting that the process of theory-making was demystified. I argue that these videos are evidence of how a creative service learning assignment provided an environment for learning more deeply through praxis. In the student interviews, students commented on how the assignment allowed them to witness and consider feminist theory as alive and moving, which was different from how they experienced text-based learning approaches as fixed. Lola noted that her experience of doing the assignment was very different from her experience of reading and writing about feminist theory because the latter is 'a pedestal way of learning, and there's no point to it,' because learning in the classroom and living outside of the classroom are experienced as 'disjoint[ed].'<sup>[1]</sup> Dot commented that theory is 'used every day and we practice [it], but we don't realize it,' while Zabrina Cooke said that her learning about theory as something that 'motivates action' was very surprising to her as she was 'really skeptical about...how you apply theory in the real world.' Patricia noted that while it was difficult to 'pinpoint a definition' in class discussions, working with her organization and making a video helped her see how the organization is engaged in 'chang[ing] the theory,' demonstrating *why* it can sometimes be so hard to give a clear definition of a complicated concept. Through their service learning placement, learning more about their organization, and making a video,



students became more aware of how theory is developed and why it is necessary, and they came to see theory as something that informs everyday life.

Dot said that the process was 'more open-minded' because it was about 'interaction' and 'working with people,' which was very different from writing a paper, which she characterized as making students 'shy because it's someone else's work that you're using.' The student descriptions of learning through praxis – through seeing a concept come to life in an organization's work – while doing their assignment is excellent example of Fletcher and Cambre's 'implicated scholarship.' Students destabilized pre-existing boundaries between the university/community and textual/embodyed realms through their experimentation with video production. Students developed more complex and subtle perspectives on feminist theory that were grounded in the social, rather than the individual, and they did so through discovering new creative and intellectual possibilities through video.

'Transitions' and 'Being an Ally: A Step Towards Decolonization' are strong examples of developing a clear voice or perspective in relation to a concept, which fall under the theme I named 'Subjectivity and Interpretation.' One question that frequently emerges out of discussion within my feminist theory class is how to speak or write about experiences beyond one's own in a respectful way. Students are particularly interested in examples of how to do this ethically: how can the concepts and theories within the classroom inform work that happens outside of the classroom? A strategy that we consider is taking responsibility for our own positions and speaking from that position to the best of our abilities. Creating a digital video provided an outlet for students to experiment with what it looks and feels like to take responsibility in this way. Fascinatingly, all of the students who were interviewed indicated that a term paper was decidedly *not* a place where they could express their own informed point of view. Madonna remarked that while a paper is about addressing 'what the professor expects,' creating a video was more complex because she had to think about 'what would be...an effective way of...portraying' her point of view. Katie Fitch said that learning how to present her own thoughts was 'valuable' because 'it's up to the audience...to interpret... where you're going...it's kind of up to you to like point them in that direction.' Patricia also commented on how this assignment allowed her to achieve a more profound and longer-lasting understanding of her material because she was engaged with an organization that was developing and applying theory.

While it is undeniable that all university educators are committed to teaching students how to write papers from their own perspectives, and to take a clear position in their papers, the responses I received from students indicated that they did not view term papers as a space where they could do either of these things. Rather, students discussed term papers as a means to present the ideas of other scholars accurately in a way that their individual professors will like. Michael Coventry's research on digital storytelling pedagogy argues that when a student has to illustrate their ideas in ways that do not rely on text, they are no longer able to use text as a way of hiding their own interpretations (2008: 212). I would add to this argument to say that this is because presenting ideas in a creative way, such as a digital video, is an exercise in praxis. Students work within a medium that is familiar to them as viewers, yet unfamiliar to them as producers; thus, they are somewhat freed from their patterns of presenting knowledge in familiar activities like class discussion and seminar papers. Further, because they have completed and reflected upon a service learning placement, students also feel a responsibility and authority over their concept that stems from their unique position as the only one in the class who have done that work, as well as the creative force behind the video. This is different from other assignments like papers and discussion, where students have the option to rely solely on the arguments of other scholars and avoid expressing their own perspective. In her interview, Lola noted that the assignment moved the class away from having only one point of view (the professor's view) and instead showed students that there are actually twelve 'different views on things' (the number of students in the class). My interview findings support Matthew Oppermann's argument that digital video makes the gap between novice and expert knowledge less significant, and offers a space for students to engage with their subject matter as researchers. Indeed, Dot and Zoe commented that the assignment made them feel like they were doing their own research and developing skills to become critics of the culture they live in.

The final theme in the interviews that I wish to discuss in relation to the two student videos is 'Sustained Commitment.' In earlier research on this assignment, my description of this theme focused only on how the assignment itself represented a sustained commitment that enabled students to develop various technical and interpersonal skills that could be transferred beyond the class because they had the space and time to do so. However, rethinking the themes I identified previously in relation to specific student videos suggests to me that this theme could be broadened beyond the course and its skills development. Gunn and O'Donnell present the concept of 'ally' as a kind of ongoing commitment, rather than as a 'quick fix' solution to

working within our standpoints. Much like the discussion of this theme that I offer here, their videos highlight specific skills – knowing history, reflexivity, or listening. These skills require cultivation and lifelong work.

Some of the students interviewed indicated that through doing this assignment, they came to recognize skills that they possessed and could work on in order to take action on a topic they were concerned about. Patricia said that the service learning component reveal to her that she possessed interpersonal skills that made her an ideal person to work on raising awareness to challenge sexual violence on our campus. Katie Fitch, Leslie, Sunshine and Zoe all offered examples of how the assignment – particularly their service learning placements and video production components – developed their communication skills and made them want to continue to work with their organization. Almost all of the students indicated that they saw the video itself as an example of a skill that they had learned through this assignment, which was something they were very proud of and thought would be useful for them in their life outside of the classroom and beyond university.

### **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, I want to reflect on the connections students developed, which are artefacts of the deep, embodied learning through praxis they engaged in through this assignment. From the students' perspective, the experiences of serving an organization and creating a video helped them arrive at a deeper understanding of their concept because the process was holistic and acknowledged their intellect, emotions, and embodiment in a way that they were not as aware of when doing more conventional coursework. In 'A journey in feminist theory together: The *Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video Project*,' I argue that this holistic learning makes students more receptive but also more vulnerable; this is a strength of the assignment but also produced some ambivalence (Hurst, forthcoming). While it is outside of the scope of the present discussion, in that article I discuss student resistance and frustration about working on an unfamiliar type of assignment, as well as some strategies for helping students cope with this unfamiliarity. In particular, students reported that working with the technical components of the assignment was challenging, as was the service learning component. In response, it was key to create and maintain spaces for students to openly discuss these more difficult embodied, emotional responses (for example, class discussion, workshops on video editing, and office hours).

In the interviews, students claimed that their experience of doing this assignment was one that would remain with them and that the friendships and connections they made with others in the class and in their service learning placements were ones that would also be long-lasting. For Zoe, the assignment was a 'unique opportunity that I'll remember;' for Jane, the assignment, 'made me more critical of my everyday life...it's good;' and finally, for Lola, 'it's a course that people will talk about for... forever.' These types of responses are, I would argue, directly tied to students' revelations through praxis and learning that theory isn't a dead object in a book, but a living entity. The demystification of theory and student authority are also key elements of these responses that indicate how essential it is to allow time for those skills to emerge through experimentation. It reinforces Coventry's claim that educators need to 'create opportunities for students to engage, articulate, apply, and restate, multiple times and in multiple ways, difficult conceptual material' (2008: 206). Combining video and service learning together offers students the milieu within which to re-articulate difficult concepts through an experience of praxis. *Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video* is an assignment that offers this opportunity to students, and deepens their understanding of the material because it unfolds over an extended period of time, engages the student in knowledge production, and allows the student to envision how that knowledge and those skills can be applied in future contexts.

[[1]] All names of interviewees are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewees.

### **Acknowledgment**

This research was supported by the St. Francis Xavier University Service Learning Program through the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation.

### **References**

1. Benmayor, Rina. 2008. 'Digital Storytelling as a Signature Pedagogy for the New Humanities.' *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 7, no. 188: 188-204.
2. Bickford, Donna M. and Nedra Reynolds. 2002. 'Activism and Service-Learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Dissent.' *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 2, no. 1: 229-252.
3. Cambre, Carolina and Christopher Fletcher. 2009. 'Digital Storytelling and Implicated Scholarship in the Classroom.' *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1: 109-130.

4. Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.
5. Clarke, Adele E. 2005. *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.
6. Coventry, Michael. 2008. 'Student application of theory through digital storytelling.' *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 7, no. 188: 205-219.
7. Endres, Danielle and Mary Gould. 2009. "I Am Also In A Position To Use My Whiteness to Help Them Out": The Communication of Whiteness in Service Learning.' *Western Journal of Communication* 73, no. 4: 418-436.
8. Freire, Paulo. [1970] 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman. New York: Continuum.
9. Frueh, Joanna. 2006. *Swooning Beauty: A Memoir of Pleasure*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press.
10. Glaser, Barney S. and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Researchers*. Chicago: Aldine.
11. Gunn, Lisa. 'Being an Ally: A Step Towards Decolonization,' Vimeo video, 3:46, April 24, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/64744862> (<http://vimeo.com/64744862>) .
12. Higgins, John W. 1991. 'Video Pedagogy as Political Activity.' *Journal of Film and Video* 43, no. 3: 18-29.
13. Hurst, Rachel Alpha Johnston. Forthcoming. 'A "journey in feminist theory together": The *Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video* project.' *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*. Available through OnlineFirst, August 2014 at: <http://ahh.sagepub.com/>. (<http://ahh.sagepub.com/>)  
  
Hurst, Rachel Alpha Johnston. 2014. 'Doing Feminist Theory Through Digital Video.' <http://www.doingfeministtheory.ca/> (<http://www.doingfeministtheory.ca/>) . Accessed 6 May 2014.
14. Ljunggren, David. 2009. "Every G20 Nation Wants to Be Canada, Insists PM." *Reuters*, September 25. Accessed 6 May 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/26/columns-us-g20-canada->

**advantages-idUSTRE58P05Z20090926**

(<http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/26/columns-us-g20-canada-advantages-idUSTRE58P05Z20090926>) .

15. Low, Bronwen, Chloë Brushwood Rose, Paula M. Salvio, and Lena Palacios. 2012. '(Re)framing the Scholarship on Participatory Video: From Celebration to Critical Engagement.' In *Handbook of Participatory Video*, edited by E-J Milne, Claudia Mitchell, and Naydene de Lange, 49-64. Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press.
16. Namaste, Viviane. 2005. "Beyond Image Content: Examining Transsexuals' Access to the Media." In *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*, 41-59. Toronto: Women's Press.
17. O'Donnell, Lynn. 'Transitions,' Vimeo video, 3:38, April 24, 2013, **<http://vimeo.com/64744991>** (<http://vimeo.com/64744991>) .
18. Opperman, Matthias. 2008. 'Digital Storytelling and American Studies: Critical Trajectories from the emotional to the epistemological.' *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 7, no. 2: 171-187.
19. Scott, Joan W. 1992. "Experience." In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, 22-40. New York: Routledge.
20. Trethewey, Anna. 1999. 'Critical Organizational Communication, Feminist Research Methods, and Service-Learning: Practice as Pedagogy.' In *Voices of Strong Democracy: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Communication Studies*, edited by David Droge and Bren Ortega Murphy, 177-190. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing and the American Association for Higher Education.
21. Wheeler, Joanna. 2009. "The Life That We Don't Want': Using Participatory Video in Researching Violence.' *IDS Bulletin* 40, no. 3: 10-18.

—CITATION—

Hurst, R. (2014) How to 'do' feminist theory through digital video: Embodying praxis in the undergraduate feminist theory classroom. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No.5. **doi:10.7264/N3M61HJC** (<http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N3M61HJC>)

This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review**

(<http://adareview.fembotcollective.org>) .



([http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/deed.en\\_US](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/deed.en_US))

This work is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License** ([http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/deed.en\\_US](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/deed.en_US)) .

**Footnotes** ( returns to text)

1.

◀ **PEER REVIEWED**

**Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst** (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/rahurst>)

Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst is an associate professor of Women's and Gender Studies at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her research is broadly concerned with the relationships between embodiment, (visual) culture, and power, from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and decolonial thought. Her teaching centres on her areas of expertise, including historical and contemporary feminist theories, embodiment, and cultural studies. Her website can be found at <http://www.rachelhurst.ca/> (<http://www.rachelhurst.ca/>) .



Copyright © 2012-2021. All work on this website is distributed under a Creative Commons license. The default license for the content on *Ada* is a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Unported License**. Individual article copyright terms may differ. Please refer to each article for its license.

Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology  
ISSN 2325-0496