

# Writing from Our Lives

## *A Vehicle for Change*

By Michele Birch-Conery

*Quand je discute avec mes collègues qui enseignent la sociologie de la condition féminine, nous sommes toujours très enthousiasmées et heureuses de constater le processus évolutif observé dans nos salles de classe dans le contexte d'une communauté réceptive au changement. Dans le présent article, j'explique mon approche vis-à-vis de l'enseignement féministe en partageant le travail fait par certaines de mes étudiantes. Notre communauté évolue grâce à la contribution d'un grand nombre de personnes jusque-là silencieuses.*

In my doctoral dissertation, I spoke about "homelessness in the language"<sup>1</sup> as a way of creating a metaphor for my deep silence and alienation as a woman writer. For a long time, I had been attempting to articulate the differences I experienced reading male and female texts. I called the former experience "double reading" which meant, reading male texts from the dominant cultural perspectives while, at the same time, "unreading" them, or searching them for what was missing. With female texts, especially those which were overtly feminist, I found myself experiencing cultural identification at last. These reading experiences were thoroughly autobiographical in that I began accessing the realities of my life and, consequently, creating texts that expressed them. Such experiences have been usefully defined by Patrocínio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn in their "Introduction to *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*."

Schweickart identifies the "unreading" process, or the way one pries a text apart to make room for other perspectives as, "the dialectic of emancipatory struggle."<sup>2</sup> Texts by women, on the other hand, may send one onto multiple tracks of thought, simultaneously. In such texts, one becomes engaged with the speakers in such a way that one unfolds the hidden truths about oneself and one's place in the culture. Schweickart calls this activity "the dialectic of conversation."

When I establish a feminist classroom I begin, as I do in all my classes, with the intention of creating a democratic learning environment, one where the students will engage in conversations with the texts before them as well as with those within their heads. The texts in the culture around them should provide occasions for reflection, even enquiry and spontaneous discussion.

Soon, however, we find ourselves in a labyrinth of gender-biased language, and we must quickly learn the two dialectics if we are to manoeuvre here. As well, our classroom goes beyond

the democratic as we learn to listen to each other in the contexts of our multi-ethnic differences. We soon recognize that we have created and will maintain a space that is post-colonial.

The content of *Women's Studies 100: Perspectives on Women*, consists of 13 units designed by Dr. Anita Clair Fellman, copyrighted 1985 at Simon Fraser University, for Distance Education. Within these 13 units, the students begin with a dialectic of emancipation as they learn to ask the questions that will uncover the gender-based problems encountered in all disciplines of knowledge. Historical and anthropological questions about male and female roles are then established. Strong emphasis is placed on our relationship to work. This course stresses that the construction of gender is rooted in social conditions. As sub-topics, the students will address the role of housewives, (domestic violence arises as an issue here), and growing up female.

At the heart of the course are the issues of sexual politics: gender-biased language, pornography, rape and images of women in the media and popular culture. From here, the students think about strategies for survival and change and about the diversity among feminists. This is followed with considerations about the political actions they might take to effect cultural change.

I design written assignments that allow a wide range of choices. Within these, I shape questions that will encourage "Miscellaneous Reflections." This means that the student is to write from a space where she is free to speak from personal experience and cultural observation. Ideally, she will ground these reflections in the course content and more specifically, in particular articles. In this way, theory and practice converge, and the student begins to understand not only that the personal is political but vice-versa — the political is personal. She begins to forge a rhetoric for feminist discourse, which is distinct from what some of my colleagues fear from this assignment: 1) that it will issue in painful confessions that turn the classrooms into a therapeutic environment and/or 2) that the students will use this as an excuse to be lazy and so avoid scholarly writing. However, since the students are encouraged to choose (from among a series of short essay topics), only two in this mode, the urge to avoid scholarly exploration is diverted. Further, they need not respond to these questions at all, but may choose questions that keep them within a rhetoric of scholarly enquiry familiar to them.

But how are these "Miscellaneous Reflections" worded to ensure the successful completion of the assignment? Questions relating to the excerpts from the student essays quoted here are:

- 1) Describe your experiences as a student in the high school and university systems. In doing so, explain the ways in which you felt included and excluded, real and unreal, as a woman learning about your life, and the lives of others.
- 2) Using the essay "Pink Lullabies," write an essay about gender roles and the experience of growing up female.

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**The students find their own voice and thus, when they move back into more formal writing, they ask questions with more confidence and vigour.**

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What happens when students respond to this assignment? Everyone, without exception, wrote at least one personally reflective essay. One student, who wished to remain unnamed, quarrels with the traditional female roles exacted of her in high school and college, in the 1960's. She has not yet reached the dialectic of emancipation she needs to critique the structures she so abhors, but she does name the experiences she didn't understand. She identifies the preserves of males and females in high school and academia and notes that, in her time, women were streamed into Home Economics and Secretarial courses, while the males studied Maths and Science. Intellectual women or those who were "smart enough" were encouraged to study such subjects as "English and History." She acknowledges that she was "fascinated" by history as she writes:

*When we studied a different time period, I always wanted to research what was happening to women of the time. I found little reference material on women available in the library. Even such well known persons as Queen Victoria or Marie Antoinette were recorded from the perspective of the accomplishments of the males in their lives and not from the perspective of these women's gifts. Interestingly, I could find material about women's fashions or the hairstyles of the era. But there was little personal biographical information available. It was as if they had been nothing more than ornaments for the men of this period.*

Despite these discouraging facts, she attempted a history report on pioneer women of Vancouver Island. She was inventive enough to interview 5 pioneer women, and her scholarly independence was admirable. She enjoyed her project but, not surprisingly, it was rejected. She describes the experience of her research enthusiastically, but its rejection is disheartening.

*I loved hearing about the hardships they had faced, the inventions they had created. They were influential in establishing and shaping early Canada. My paper was rejected*

*because of a lack of recorded evidence to support it. I became disillusioned with academic work and did not feel included in what was happening. Teachers and professors discouraged significant or different thinking.*

Now, 30 years later, she has found a class where she can think "significantly" and "differently." Even so, she does not express much hope about the condition of academia. She concludes:

*I wish I could say that today, 30 years later, I find the academic fields more enlightened and open to women and their creativity in its various forms. I do see some progress. However, I have continued to experience the academic world as one dominated by male models of learning which have changed very little in significant areas.*

In the "Women and Work" unit, many students wrote reflections about their work histories and their role as "Superwoman" or "Supermom." Once again, the statistics claimed in the course articles rang true with their experiences, so that they wrote responses.

The "Growing Up Female" unit elicited responses of a more introspective nature. As a result, many of us found ourselves re-examining our values. The central question became—are we who we think we are, or are we presenting ourselves as who the culture wants us to be? If so, are we adopting a double identity that is, essentially, false?

One essay, by a 3rd year student taking the course as an elective focuses, initially, on Susan Taylor's essay, "Pink Lullabies," in *Fireworks: The Best of Fireweed*: ed. Makeda Silvera; Toronto: The Women's Press, 31-38. Nadine begins by taking a picture of her bedroom, which is almost identical to the one photographed in "Pink Lullabies." It is the room of a young girl "all pink and lacy and delicate." It is laden with ballet slippers, lace gloves, straw hats, and mirrors which reflect all this, as well as Princess Diana memorabilia. Nadine is now astonished by something to which she had given little thought.

*If a person were to see my room for the first time, he or she would assume that it is a room designed for me in my childhood. The irony of this is that I designed it myself as a political person. Pink has never been my favorite color. I did take ballet lessons for a few years, but I quit because I found it "s-o-o boring." Standing still and pointing my toes wasn't my idea of a good time.*

*Yet, if you looked around you would think all I ever aspired to be was a prima ballerina. The abundance of Royal Wedding memorabilia is also puzzling. I have always admired strong people who strive to make a difference in the world. While Princess Diana is a spokesperson for many charitable organizations, her privileged status removes her from the list of people I choose to emulate.*

*By deliberately choosing a delicate room, was I attempting to reassure myself that I was still feminine, even though I preferred politics to home economics, and I despised dresses?*

Nadine then explores the cultural expectations that would have influenced her. She adopted this disguise to fool her girl-

friends, who had different interests. She thought they would "mock" her or consider her "abnormal." Above all, she wanted to fit in.

Nadine expands her essay to include general cultural considerations. Her discourse moves from the conversational to the emancipatory, well-illustrated by the confident, conclusive tone of her final paragraph. After a discussion of the cultural messages young women receive by way of the media, particularly the noxious teen magazines, she concludes:

*It is this mixed message that is the most serious obstacle in the road to growing up female. If one were to believe society's definitions of the ultimate woman as one who is surrounded by a delicate pink aura, one would never find the need or the strength to grow beyond a fragile, air-brushed, well-groomed model on the pages of a magazine. If we truly want to make the road to womanhood an easier one for girls to travel, we must help them to see that softness and pinkness are only one aspect of femininity, and that strength, pride and self-determination are necessary to become a woman.*

The strongest and boldest writing emerged around the issues of violence against women. The students showed a candor that seemed to come from the belief that they could no longer be silent about these issues. Thus they articulated their concerns and experiences with clarity.

I was particularly pleased with the strength of expression of Christine, the Native student who, above all, wanted to be named for what she wrote. In several contexts she wrote about her experience of childhood sexual abuse and later, the battery she experienced in her first marriage. In her first account of the sexual abuse, she movingly described her primary coping mechanism. She threw herself into achieving excellence at school and became an exemplary student. This was "balm" to her "shattered self-esteem" as well as an escape from her stepfather. Completing grade 12 with University Entrance status also assured her permanent escape from her primary disabling home conditions.



Dawna Gallagher

Christine's account of the abuse is straight forward, insightful and soundly self-affirming. In the second paragraph of her essay she writes:

*First, and most importantly, is the fact that I was (in addition to my struggle for identity as a teenaged Native girl), surviving a nightmare of constant sexual abuse in my home. This was in the late 50's, early 60's, when to talk of such things was strictly taboo. Yet, I always knew, without anyone ever telling me, that what was happening was as wrong as it was horrible. But as a female, I still felt that I was second-class, that my body had less rights than my step-father's, and so I could only suffer the abuse as best I could, in complete silence.*

But the silence is broken now, the crippling secret made public by Christine's choice. She will be empowered in ways she may not yet have experienced. This emancipation was achieved by the way she permitted herself to measure her personal issues against the cultural facts raised in the readings on Sexual Politics.

So far, I have noticed several benefits from these exercises in personal writing. The students find their own voice and thus, when they move back into more formal, scholarly writing, they present problems, ask questions and uncover facts with more confidence and vigour. I find that they begin a cultural watch that soon engages them in dialectics. They also discover interview techniques to be a useful tool for research as they explore issues that have generally been silenced. One student, for instance, explored the topic of "Male Violence Against Women" in her final project. In 36 pages, she displayed rhetorical versatility as she grounded her explorations in solid research on the topic, while also making use of relevant newspaper clippings and a series of interviews to exemplify her points. In an "Afterward" she freely used the pronoun "I" to further reflect on topics her study raised but which remained unsolved in the context of her paper.

I do not worry about scholarly laxity or confessional self-indulgence when I encourage women to find their voice and language. To become conscious, to then find a language for that consciousness and act for change is to join in the feminist work of our time. Our youngest student, just out of high school, for instance, came out of herself, when she gave a presentation on teenage pregnancy. She then informed us that she had joined a task force to study the need for a daycare centre at the Port Alberni High School. We applauded her as we applauded every class member who delivered an oral presentation that night. It was a coming out of ourselves party. This was change. This was feminist teaching.

<sup>1</sup> Michele Birch-Conery, "Persephone in the Underworld: A Polyphonic Study of Various Texts Arising from within and Without," diss., University of Iowa, 1990. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Patrocínio A. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn, introduction, *Gender and Reading: Essays on Reading, Texts, and Contexts* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins U P, 1986) xiv.



Carole Conde & Karl Beveridge



## NWSA Journal

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EDITOR: MaryJo Wagner, The Ohio State University

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# How does a union fit in?

## UFCW Canada taking on the challenges

TODAY UNIONS FACE NEW CHALLENGES AT the bargaining table. UFCW members—women and men—tell us that they are finding it stressful to try to balance work, home, and union responsibilities.

We need new strategies to encourage employers to cooperate with workers and their unions. Good workplace policies help create a productive, stable work environment in which our members' responsibilities at home can be recognized and accommodated.

There are three basic ways our union can respond to the challenges of coping with family, work, and union responsibilities:

- Legislation
- Negotiation
- Education

Within the union, we should consider ways to make our own policies more "family-friendly." One possibility is to make provision for childcare or babysitting reimbursement for union courses and meetings. We might also consider family leave policies for union staff and officers, and flexible hours for staff.

On the political and legislative fronts, we need to set our priorities and then focus on programmes and policies that will help the family. It is important to participate in government consultations to ensure that our concerns are effectively placed before government. We must also participate in community and social coalitions pressing for reforms. At election time, we can ask candidates and the parties they represent to make their responses public on priority issues. We should join campaigns to lobby politicians on family

issues organized by labour councils or provincial federations of labour.

We need to determine our priorities for "bargaining for the family." Once the key issues are defined, we can negotiate improved family provisions into our Collective Agreements. Many provisions which benefit family life are low-cost. Others may appear expensive, such as the creation of family leave or referral and information services, but can result in greater work satisfaction, reduced stress and lower absenteeism.

Putting family issues proposals on the table in collective bargaining could yield model language on contributions toward community childcare, anti-discrimination clauses to protect non-traditional family groupings, seniority provisions to prevent breaks in service for members temporarily out of the workforce to attend to family responsibilities, homecare for injured workers, prorating benefits for part-time workers, and new benefits for extended-family members.

Another part of the union's initiative should be education. We can develop and promote programmes to raise awareness, to increase participation in the union, and encourage discussion about family roles. "How-to" courses on bargaining for the family, union counselling courses, and seminars on dealing with stress are all programmes our union can work on.

Addressing work and family concerns is an issue for UFCW Canada, and indeed, for all Canadians. Today, men and women must work together to challenge the old ways of doing things and develop solutions that meet the conditions of today and tomorrow.

The union movement brings people

together and provides a forum for this kind of effort. Individual women and men, unions, employers, voluntary organizations and all levels of government must become partners for change.

## What is a family?

Today only one in six families fits the pattern of a husband with a paid job and a wife at home. Blended families, same-sex partners, shared custody arrangements, single parents, common-law relationships—all these have altered the definition of a "family." Differing notions of "family" mean different interpretations of entitlement to bereavement leave, sick leave, family health benefits and pensions.

*Excerpted from Balancing Work and Family Responsibilities (a Joint Change Agent Project of the Ontario Women's Directorate and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union), 1991.*