

**Disruptive Practices:
Resisting Violence Through Feminist Community Based Service-Learning**

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This presentation addresses the ways in which feminist-informed community based service-learning experiences can be a vehicle for resisting violence and advancing social justice. The presentation is informed by research from *Take Back the Halls: Ending Violence in Relationships and Schools (TBTH)*, a teen dating violence prevention and community activism program for urban youth as part of a community based service-learning experience for undergraduate students at DePaul University. TBTH is a teen dating violence and community activism program designed to prevent relationship violence among teens. TBTH gives young people the opportunity to examine issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse, as well as the variety of social structures and inequalities that shape violence in different social contexts. It creates a space for high school and college students to talk about issues affecting their lives, generate ways to raise public awareness, speak out against violence, and advocate for change in their schools and communities. Within our TBTH model, high school student participants from urban high schools meet weekly throughout the school year, from October through May. Weekly group meetings are facilitated by specially trained staff and DePaul undergraduate student interns who are taking a service-learning class that includes their participation in facilitating this program with high school students throughout the academic year.

Part of university students' participation in TBTH is an interdisciplinary service-learning seminar - Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) 387: Teen Violence Prevention - in which students critically reflect upon their service in the TBTH program. All students in the course participate in TBTH and have the opportunity to collaboratively explore youth perspectives on violence and consider the ways in which economic, social, political, and cultural contexts influence violence in adolescents' lives. The course is guided by the following objectives: (1) Examining major theoretical and methodological approaches used in studying teen relationships, particularly violence and aggression; (2) Developing a contextualized understanding of teen violence with regard to gender, race, class, sexual identities, and other social identities and structural characteristics; (3) Considering activism and advocacy efforts to end relationship violence; (4) Raising awareness about the personal, social, and systemic complexities related to teen violence; and (5) Providing opportunities for students to critically reflect on their own social locations and to understand how power differentials operate in their relationships with urban high school youth.

Course content is situated within a critical framing of service-learning in conjunction with feminist theory and pedagogy, highlighting the relationship between theory learned in the university classroom and day-to-day practices, and specifically providing students with opportunities to foreground and reflect on intersecting socially structured inequalities that play

out in people's lives across intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. Indeed, feminist principles parallel those of critical community based service-learning. Beyond simply educating students about social problems, our approach emphasizes the following processes: (1) actively encourages service-learners toward purposeful social action aimed at both individual and collective transformation; (2) directs attention to the root causes of social problems, highlighting deep exploration of the systemic bases of intersecting forms of power and oppression; (3) creates a context in which students develop the ability to locate themselves within intersecting axes of privilege and oppression, deepening their understanding of the ways in which their own personal identities and experiences, as well as their structural positionalities, are implicated in the systematic exclusion or oppression of others; (4) develops criteria against which we measure our accountability to the communities with whom we are engaged; (5) restructures classroom hierarchies to engage in collaborative learning in which everyone – faculty members, students, and community members – are alternatively learning from and teaching one another from their own experiences.

Our research over several years suggests that interrogation of these frameworks within the context of students' service learning experiences has the potential to be destabilizing for college students, an experience we believe is necessary in order for the students to identify and challenge foundational aspects of systemic inequalities. Starting from this foundation, four specific themes will be explored in today's presentation. First, a variety of different racial and ethnic identities have been represented among the university student interns in TBTH. These students brought with them diverse and complex degrees of privilege and social disadvantage, as well as different knowledge bases and unequal experiences with relations of power. This necessarily complicates any neat, simplistic, or singular analysis of the ways in which our feminist-informed service-learning project prompted students to understand privilege and social positionality. Notwithstanding these complicating factors, we have found that all students in TBTH actively interrogate, and grapple with, the ways in which their privilege impacts their TBTH work, although in different and uneven ways. Second, many students narrate their reflections about privilege (and oppression) through discourses on interpersonal violence, and through such interrogations and self-reflections, develop a systemic analysis of interpersonal violence as shaped by interlocking systems of inequality. Thus, individualistic explanations for interpersonal violence come to be viewed by many high school and college students as insufficient. Third, building upon our feminist pedagogical foundation, we also have begun to foreground contemplative practices to support students in their learning and in their internship work with TBTH. As mentioned above, this experience often is destabilizing and even "existentially disturbing" for students, and we therefore have begun to examine how college student interns can use embodied approaches to cultivate characteristics of openness, equanimity and compassion as TBTH facilitators and as learners; how contemplative practices can support students as they locate themselves in their work, with particular attention to reflecting upon how patterns of power, privilege, and oppression shape their lives and experiences; and how the incorporation of contemplative practices can animate and strengthen student experiential learning and anti-violence work. Finally, this presentation focuses attention on the ways in which students' new insights translate into a transformational orientation to advance social justice.