Navigating Academia: Two Women Professors Collaborate for Social Justice

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe how two women professors began and sustained a multi-year, collaborative research project. There has been little investigation into collaborative research in the academy, particularly about women working together. This paper is grounded in research collaboration over time and supported by related literature regarding women in academia and collaboration. First, we tell personal stories that describe how our values and contexts of gender, place, family, and age influenced how we navigate academia. Then, we describe our collaboration process and negotiation of a theoretical framework that led to an on-going social justice research agenda. Finally, the paper describes six lessons learned and future directions and ideas for our continued collaborative research.

Introduction

As two women in the academy struggling to find our way, we believe that a description of our collaboration and the ensuing development of our long-term research agenda has implications for other women who might be facing similar challenges. Higher education is known for its highly competitive, individualistic structure, driven by a hierarchical, tenure-track system with little place for mentoring, collaboration, or establishing collegial relationships. Gibson (2006) draws from research that reports on women in academic environments. In her article on mentoring women faculty she says that the culture of academia has been described as less than hospitable to women as they attempt to navigate the various aspects of their work and personal lives. There is often no one to assist women in networking and learning about the organizational system. Work-life programs in academia lag behind those in business and industry. The difficulty that women experience in balancing work-life concerns may contribute to their lower rate of success in academia than that of men. In this less than hospitable culture, how *do* women find a way to build relationships and successfully navigate the system? In this paper we describe four key aspects of our experience in attempting to answer the question: our recognition of how values and contexts of gender, place, family, and age underlie our collaborative process, our choice of a theoretical framework, our development of an agenda for social justice research, and lessons we have learned.

Values and Context

We both began teaching at a mid-size, private, urban university in 2001. Susan taught educational leadership in the College of Education while Diana taught organizational communication and general studies courses in University College. We first met in a grant-sponsored faculty development session in 2003. The session was intended to create connections

between faculty members across colleges to conduct peer observations to improve teaching. The session organizers had decided on the pairings and gave little guidance on the process for peer observation and follow-up. Fortunately, dissatisfaction over this process brought us together and we began to talk about the kind of faculty development *we would personally value*.

As a member of the College of Education, I (Susan) wanted to strategize with colleagues to improve my teaching. I (Diana), as a faculty member teaching organizational communication, wanted to connect my courses with the university's mission of social justice. We both were concerned about the changing environment under a new administration. The new president's emphasis on enrollment and raising the admission criteria seemed to threaten the university's foundational mission for educating those students who had been historically denied access to higher learning. In this context we came to focus on our own values and struggles we have had navigating our way in academia. We share our stories here.

Diana's Story

I am a member of the Bad River Band of the Chippewa nation in Wisconsin and grew up living in developing countries all over the world. My father was a community development agent for the U.S. Agency for International Development in the Middle East and Africa. I grew up valuing other cultures and alternative perspectives, but, also, as a result, I have lived with a sense of "otherness" in most contexts. Overseas I was an American and in then back in the States I had little in common with my peers beyond my citizenship and language. As a sociology undergraduate student in the late '60s and '70s, my sense of social change was very much in tune with the social movements of the times. Race, gender, the politics of war, and a growing concern for ecology were vital issues in my early campus life. My first M.A thesis in Mass Communications focused on the diverse models of cultural values around the globe.

Except for several years as a Montessori teacher, I have been involved with higher education campuses most of my life. Before becoming a professor, I worked as an artist, writer, change facilitator, and research and teaching assistant, all on campuses. It was not until my two children were in college that I completed my Ph.D. in education. I developed a collaborative model for communities going through fundamental educational change and worked as a consultant for systemic change in schools.

Although I was familiar with campus life, I never found the process of becoming an academic painless. In *Sleepless in Academia,* Sandra Acker and Carmen Armenti (2004) make a plea not to let academic women's concerns fall through the cracks in view of many improvements in the profession. The authors ". . . admit that academic women are not the wretched of the earth," but extremely privileged (p. 18). Yet, "if these women experience their lives as threaded with misery" then the researchers ask ". . . what hope is there for other women who have not had their advantages?" (p. 18). I would hesitate to say my life was 'threaded with misery," but it was threaded with anxiety and frustration and lack of support from the system as I pursued my career. I had weighed my choices as a young mother and tried to keep up my professional interests, but I dedicated myself totally to my children in their developmental years. The consequence was that I started my academic career as a middle-aged woman in a tenure-track position.

The literature teaches us that new professors often start their careers with high levels of enthusiasm and optimism, only to become highly stressed and dissatisfied with their careers (Sorcinelli, 1992; Boice, 2000 cited in Solem & Foote, 2006)). Nontraditional faculty such as women and ethnic minorities seem in particular to experience high rates of stress and more obstacles on the tenure track (Garcia, 2000; Cooper & Stevens, 2002 cited in Solem & Foote,

2006). For me, the shift from an educational program focused on social change in a large public university to an organizational communication program at a small private college was a difficult fit. The academic system is not geared to supporting its members' strengths as much as evaluating how well they fit their model. There was a joke about the "real professors" in my first department being bearded and bald—not a good fit for a new female assistant professor, even an aging one. I want to feel that the unique qualities I bring to my job make me an asset. Like Angela Jaime in *A Room without a View from within the Ivory Tower* (2003), I do not feel my experiences in academia have been unbearable.

> Experiences of Native people in a system created by the non-Native . . . have an underlying intent to weed out or fail those who do not look like them or are not from their culture. . . . In an attempt to understand my own struggles, however, I do hope that the comfort that you are not the only one struggling to survive in a world built against you helps in some small way. I encourage and seek out the advice and guidance of the ones who walk the same paths or who have gone before me; without them I would not be here today (p. 262).

My concerns about diversity and social justice have fueled my teaching, and although I am still seeking a fit, I have found a research collaborator who helps make my job more joyful than painful. I believe that diversity is an asset and social justice is worth struggling for. I see differences as a positive and change as a proactive process when it moves the mission of social justice forward and fights inequities on any front.

Susan's Story

  Personal issues. Key points in my story are issues of gender, place, family, and age. I am Jewish American and grew up in a small Midwestern town with liberal parents who instilled values of fairness, hard work, and study as the path to a successful life. As an undergraduate in the '60s, I attended a large, public university during times of unrest and activism over civil rights and the Viet Nam war. I attended meetings of radical student groups and yet attended events

sponsored by my conservative sorority. I was grappling with issues of gender, power, and privilege. Married when I was 20 without my college degree, I found work as a secretary in many unfulfilling jobs to support my husband through medical school. In the late 60s, occupations for women were limited – teaching and nursing required college degrees; secretarial positions did not. Returning to university when I was 24 to earn both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees, I began to find myself. Later, my career in special education taught me more about power and privilege – who had power, who did not. I learned firsthand that people with disabilities are marginalized in schools and society and this realization prompted my work as a social justice educator.

Issues in academia. I was 53 when I graduated with a Ph.D. and began my position as a tenure-track assistant professor. Spending several years in public schools as a practitioner and administrator somewhat prepared me to teach in higher education. Recently conducted research for my dissertation was the only experience preparing me for research and scholarly endeavors. There was no one in my department who offered to mentor me. In fact, the chair asked me to coordinate one of the program areas. As a newcomer who wanted to please, I felt I had no choice but to accept the offer. For two years, I coordinated the program, taught three courses a semester, and did not engage in any scholarly work.

When our new president came, he asked small groups of faculty to meet with him. In my group session with him, he stated that junior faculty should not have administrative appointments. In our small group of three women and two men, all of the women had administrative appointments, the men did not. I can still remember the president's words at that time: "You can be the best coordinator in the world, but it will not get you tenure." I stepped down from the coordinator's position immediately. With less administrative responsibilities, I

began to write manuscripts from my dissertation, conduct new research with my research collaborator, present papers at conferences, and engage in all aspects of work to increase my scholarship.

The same issue surfaced three years later. I was untenured and the chair of our department stepped down and asked me to accept the position. His words: "There is no one else to do it; you **have to take the position**." The dean said, "The chair position can only count for merit – don't you think you should accept it since you are in a tenure track position?" I had a difficult decision to make and many questions. If I turned down the chair's position, how would that look for impending tenure? I imagined the myriad of people voting on my tenure thinking: She is not collegial; she doesn't want to help her department; she can't do the job – and then of course, why should she get tenure? There was no one at the university that I trusted to counsel me about this issue. I sought help from family and friends, but ultimately the decision was mine. I accepted the chair position and found myself downplaying any congratulatory comments. Reflecting on the workload in over a year of chairing a department, teaching, conducting research, presenting papers at conferences, I realize that there are times when I am "sleepless in academia" (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 1). I hardly have any leisure time to pursue activities with family and friends and my own personal interests. As a woman in academia, I realize that I am not alone. Acker and Armenti (2004) point out that after thirty years or more of feminist writing and resistance, problems for women in academia still persist. Women in their research focus on "obstacles that might have been thought to be settled matters by now, including home/work conflicts, anxiety about being evaluated, fatigue and stress" (p. 4). Women in their research found ways and means of coping and resisting – unfortunately by working harder and sleeping

less. I have found that several enjoyable years of research collaboration has counteracted the negative aspects of those persistence problems for women in academia.

<div align="center">Beginnings of Research Collaboration</div>

The day we met, we agreed it was critical for us to make the connection between our values, the values of the institution, and how we enacted those beliefs as educators. As junior faculty our teaching was one way to work for change and social justice in a very concrete manner, and voice our support for the social justice mission of our institution. We talked about collaborating on a research agenda that would satisfy tenure-track expectations, but also fulfill a deeper quest for job satisfaction. Surprisingly, the university gave us little support for genuine collaboration. After reviewing the literature on collaboration, we discovered that our experience was not unique. Kezar (1998) reports similar frustrations in her article, *Moving from I to We: Reorganizing for Collaboration in Higher Education.* She describes problems that are systemic and historical.

> These frustrations might be expressed at any community college, research or comprehensive university, or liberal arts college in the country. They represent the struggles of people who want to work collaboratively but who are locked into institutional structures and cultures that reify and reinforce individualistic work. The departmental silos and bureaucratic, hierarchical administrative structures in higher education represent an institutional and academic history that goes back a hundred years and reflect norms that reach far beyond the campus borders (p. 3).

Although our motivation to collaborate was partially driven by the demands of a tenure-track system for promotion, we anticipated that collaboration could be fun. Drawing again from the literature on collaboration, we found that Clark and Watson (1998) in research with women collaborators said, "All of the women we interviewed would agree that a good collaboration is an exhilarating experience" (p. 66). Their research participants talked about the types of collaboration noting that some were more instrumental than creative. Some collaborators merely

divided up the work efficiently while peer collaboration was found to be exciting and synergistic. Not only was the process more creative but with collaboration, the outcome improved. "The quality of the work may be increased because of complimentary expertise, integration of multiple perspectives, intellectual exchange, and cross-editing" (Gelman & Gibbelman, 1999).

As women faculty collaborating on research, we discovered what other academic women have experienced in collaboration. The role of gender in collaboration has not been researched extensively; however, Clark and Watson (1998) cited research that suggests women approach collaborative research differently from men. Certainly, our experience echoes their claim that "women academics relate to their research in a very personal, even passionate way" (Clark & Watson, 1968, p. 64). Our collaborative research efforts emerged from dissatisfaction over our personal experiences with faculty development; however, our excitement in learning what works for students in teaching for social justice over the past four years has fueled our research agenda. Initially, we set out to discover what pedagogical tools worked well to help our students understand issues of social justice in their workplaces and communities. As we searched for pedagogical tools, we began to develop a common theoretical framework for our research. The next section details the three approaches we used to construct our framework.

Constructing a Common Theoretical Framework

To construct a theoretical framework for our research, we talked about what we knew from previous work, best practices in our disciplines, and what we felt passionate about. We ultimately drew from three approaches to ground our research: constructivism, critical thinking, and systems theory. We were most interested in classroom teaching for social justice and envisioned an educational system that supports what Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson (1994) call "a social justice classroom" (p. 4); a laboratory for creating a more just

society. They believe educators should "confront" rather than perpetuate race, class, gender and other inequities in our society that help shape children's lives. Their eight components of the equitable, socially just classroom are: 1) grounded in the lives of students, 2) critical, 3) multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice, 4) participatory and experiential, 5) hopeful, joyful, kind and visionary, 6) activist, 7) academically rigorous, and 8) culturally sensitive (p. 4). We can weave these eight interlocking components of a social justice classroom into our framework of constructivism, critical thinking, and systems theory. Some of the components have fueled our motivation to continue the research. Specific examples are pointed out in the next section.

Constructivism supports the first disposition that claims learning is enhanced when it is grounded in the lives of students and the fourth disposition that calls for the classroom to be part of the learner's participation in real experience, i.e., participatory and experiential. The second disposition of the socially just classroom is "critical," which means that the curriculum should "equip students to talk back to the world" (Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson, 1994, p. 4). Paul and Elder (2002) agree that to become critical thinkers, learners must develop their abilities to monitor egocentric and sociocentric tendencies, and to examine critically their point of view and conformity to the thinking of their social group.

The fifth component of the socially just classroom: hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary, admonishes us to design "activities where candidates learn to trust and care for each other and experiences that prefigure the kind of democratic and just society we envision and thus contribute to building that society" (Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson, 1994, p. 4). Bela Banathy, a father of social systems design of education, suggests that the design of educational systems should include learner decisions in the design (Banathy, 1996).

We also found that we learned about ourselves in working to develop a theoretical framework. We had questions about ourselves as women researchers. What do we draw from our backgrounds and current contexts as we make our way in the academy? Can we draw on feminist and critical frameworks to inform our work? Are these frameworks the same for both of us or are they very different? And do our different backgrounds as Native American and Jewish American inform our worldviews and ultimate perspectives of our work? These are questions we asked each other and tried to answer. We found the questions changed as we continued to learn about ourselves as women and researchers. We agree with the participant in Clark and Watson's study (1998) of women's experience of academic collaboration who said, "I guess I've learned a lot about myself that I wasn't aware of in terms of my way of thinking. . . . So that's a real benefit for me. And that's far beyond the particular thing that we're working on" (p. 69).

Developing an Agenda for Social Justice Research

Our study initially began in the summer of 2003 with research questions focusing on how candidates in a leader preparation program and candidates in a bachelor of general studies program were understanding issues of social justice in their school communities and in their workplaces. Particularly, our questions were: What were candidates' definitions of social justice? Did those definitions fit with practices in their schools and workplaces? How could they take responsibility for changing those practices?

We have been refining our research agenda over the past three years and using our methodology in various departmental programs: critical skills and organizational communication in an accelerated adult undergraduate program, and in teacher and leader preparation programs. After a few years of classroom research, we are now studying how other professors in higher

education who are known to be social justice activists make meaning of their lives in their universities.

Lessons Learned

When we started working on this paper, we realized there were six main lessons we learned that we could share with researchers who are either beginning or extending a collaborative research process.

1. Know the challenges. Collaboration definitely is more time consuming than working alone. In our case, we work at two different universities on opposite ends of a large city and we do not live in close proximity. It has been challenging for us to have extended meetings when our university obligations and homes are far apart. We set our calendars ahead to make time each month to work on current projects together.

2. Keep an open mind. We had to negotiate basic values about social justice, balance of first authorship, direction for the research, voice in writing, as well as our perspective as researchers. Often our own thinking was evolving around our basic values in trying to decide what social justice meant to us. For example, how should we think of ourselves as researchers? Are we critical feminist researchers? Are we social justice activists? When discussing the difficulties of collaboration, Clark and Watson's research participants (1998) said: You have to be "willing to critique and be critiqued. And not take it personally" (p. 68).

3. Get organized. Create a formal research agenda, plot a timeline, and follow through with your plans. At the end of each of our research meetings, we review what was accomplished and what our next steps will be, given grant, presentation, and publication opportunities. Although not living in close proximity, we make time to

meet on a regular basis. We have developed an inventory for tracking the progress of our newest project so we can see what we have completed and what still needs to be done.

4. Go public. We look for public places and spaces, internally and externally to present and publish our work. We presented at a university library retreat and faculty research forum. We have submitted proposals and presented papers at annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). For example, we have presented in Special Interest Group paper sessions for Critical Educators for Social Justice, Critical Examination of Race, Class, and Gender, and Teaching in Educational Administration. We have also presented papers at the annual fall conferences of Research on Women and Education (RWE). We have published in several peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings appear in ERIC.

5. Treasure a strong relationship. Treasure your research relationship as you would any meaningful friendship. Collaboration requires a commitment to talk and meet regularly, find time and places to work, and add play into the work. We don't consider our differences of opinion as conflict, but rather as opportunities to dialog and grow. Clark and Watson (1998) quote a participant talking about the benefits of collaboration, "It's not only that [the enrichment of ideas], it's a good relationship. I mean, we've become very good friends" (p. 65). Creamer's research (2004) on collaborators' attitudes about differences of opinion supports the "contribution of social and relational dynamics to knowledge production" (p. 568).

> Relational dynamics that are influential to negotiating of differences include a nonhierarchical relationship, a shared worldview, respect for each other's intellectual expertise without unquestioned deference, and deep-seated familiarity

with each other's thinking that arises from an intense exchange of ideas over a prolonged period of time (p. 569).

6. Keep a journal. As you go through a reflection process when selecting a research topic and collaborating with a colleague, track your thinking and discussion in a journal. When you have someone you would like to begin to collaborate with, we recommend that you both begin by each listing research topics you genuinely care about. Is there one topic that you both are passionate about? Be sure to dialogue and journal the reasons for caring deeply about the topic. Identify both the positives and negatives involved in pursuing the topic. Consider the advantages and disadvantages in sharing a research agenda over time. If you were to pursue a collaborative research agenda, what would you do first? Prioritize and list the next steps that would be logical to begin your collaborative project.

<div align="center">Commonalities and Benefits</div>

Writing this paper and reflecting on our backgrounds, our commonalities have become apparent to us. We are both "Boomers," married young, still married to the same spouse after many decades, and we each have grown daughters and sons of similar ages. Unlike many younger academics, we came to higher education in our 50s after other careers and found we could navigate the system more efficiently when working together. Our scholarly output has improved and there have been other benefits. We talk at length about teaching, visit each other's classrooms, and share experiences and innovations that worked or didn't work in our courses. We have both been able to pursue our individual research interests and we share that work (proposals, manuscripts, and presentations) with each other for constructive and helpful feedback. Like the women academics in Acker and Armenti's research (2004) who found either one-to-one mentoring or groups of colleagues or networks that gave them support, we support

each other professionally and personally. Over the four years we have worked together, we have supported each other in job related and personal trials and tribulations, through success and difficulties with colleagues, family, and friends. One of the greatest benefits we also found is how much fun we have when working together. Our serious work is now punctuated by great conversation and laughter and celebrations of food and music.

<div style="text-align:center">Future Directions and Ideas</div>

Earlier in the paper we mentioned our newest research project. Recently we were awarded a research grant to conduct a qualitative study investigating the work lives of professors who are known for teaching for social justice. We seek to identify professors in teacher and leader preparation programs in a Midwestern urban city who actively apply classroom teaching strategies that promote and support social justice practices in schools. We want to study how these professors prepare candidates to teach and lead for social justice. Additionally, we want to study how these professors carry over social justice teaching into their scholarship and service. As we progress through interviews, classroom observations, document review, and reflection, we are learning and are inspired to change our teaching focus and look for service opportunities that create space for personal and institutional justice activism.

Through collaborative research, we have found we are meeting and exceeding our universities' expectations for research, teaching and service. Because of the collaborative process, we are motivated to develop new projects and seek out new venues to share the results of our work. Whatever the research topic, we believe that the collaborative process can enhance a professional relationship that involves a synergy of thinking, acting and doing.

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