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Views of Girls, Views of Change: The Role of Theory in Helping Us Understand Gender Literacy and Gender Equity

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- This paper draws on two sources to theorize gender literacy. First, it
- examines several influential theories of social change embedded in
- community literacy scholarship. Next, it uses two of these theories
- to analyze qualitative data from an after-school program. In this
- program, university students mentored Latina middle-school students
- to promote both gender literacy and academic literacy. Based on this
- analysis, it argues that (1) only a collaborative, negotiated approach
- can promote effective social change, (2) that such efforts must include
- reflexive work by researchers to produce viable negotiations, and (3)
- that this approach highlights the intersection between pragmatic and
- ethical concerns that underlies effective social change.

Prelude: View of Girls

This article is the result of collaboration among colleagues in the composition program of a reasonably typical university English department. Gwen, a composition scholar with interests in community literacy and ethics, first had the idea of the outreach program for middle-school girls that is the subject of this article. Hilary is a graduate student in technical communication and Frances is her dissertation director, a rhetorical scholar with research interests in feminist theory. She is also the Director of Women's Studies at our large, very urban university.



Together we developed a research focus on literacy and gender. We wanted to find out how girls discover and deal with the fact that social and family expectations for them differ from expectations for their brothers and male schoolmates. Because we thought that girls develop this “gender literacy” implicitly long before they can articulate it, we devised an after-school curriculum for a local social service center to investigate girls’ educational and career plans. We hoped that as the girls conducted research and developed a video about “careers for girls,” they would voice some implicit insights we assumed they were developing.

As the instructor assigned to teach an English Education class from which we would draw tutor-mentors for the middle-school girls, Frances was aware that all might not go as planned. She had taught technical communication classes that required students to work for clients at local non-profit organizations, and was aware that many aspects of a client-based project could go awry. She was not shocked when, despite early reassurances, our client produced only a small number of middle-school girls. Frances adjusted the curriculum when record snowfalls closed the university and the social services center on separate occasions, and when the boiler failed. When our spring breaks came in successive weeks, she scaled back the video project. She nodded sagely when the tutor-mentors expressed frustration at being unable to develop a consistent relationship with the girls given all these interruptions, and pointed out that the curriculum was “not really the point;” the *interaction*, however limited, was.

What she did not expect was that the process of reflecting on the semester to write this article would cause her to question her own motivations for the project. We present here a discussion of how research in literate practices can help us better theorize change; what Frances came to question was both the nature of “change” and its necessity. She entered this project believing that many girls were discouraged from pursuing higher education and careers—and that the situation *needed to change*. By the end, she found herself a bit embarrassed by the missionary-like



zeal that entered into her discussions with her students, informing their perspectives, and fueling their ambitions to coax the girls into aiming “high” in educational and career terms.

In fact, we did not need to coax. Our middle-school girls were already aiming high, though without much sense of how to reach their ambitious goals. It seemed, then, that there may have been little need for change—perhaps all the girls needed was *information*. Yet we could not accept that hypothesis given the research showing that girls of all ethnic and class backgrounds are still systematically encouraged away from their ambitious goals. Nevertheless, the experience of watching “our” girls participating in a strong community center with its own mentors and its network of parents, siblings, and school friends brought into question any outside determination of what their goals should be.

A few weeks after the end of the pilot program, Frances visited a public high school for teenage mothers located not far from our campus. Her goal was to ask the principal to host a mentoring program that would expand on our just-ended pilot. The school, in central Detroit and less than three miles from downtown, is surrounded by empty lots of overgrown weeds. Its’ students have worked with their teachers and community volunteers to take advantage of the location—smack dab in the middle of Detroit. They have a working farm with a barn the girls built, horses, vegetable gardens, an orchard, chickens, and, new on that day, a pot-bellied pig with two piglets. The principal was interested in our program and was certain she could make it run—she had a lot of flexibility, she said. And then she added the statement that brought us back to the need for change. “They’re just girls,” she said. “Nobody really cares what we do here.”

The change we need is not individual. We don’t need to change what individual girls may decide to do with their lives, nor do we need to change their communities, their families, or their traditions. The change we need is systemic: we need to change the setting of their



opportunities so that entire school systems care—as institutions—about what we make possible for girls. Temporarily discouraged, Frances was brought around by this moment and this realization, and by the process of reflecting on (and arguing about) the views of change that literacy scholarship has advanced, revised, and maintains as both theoretical and practical options. As the literacy expert, Gwen now takes us through a review of the literature on “change” and its role in literacy scholarship that focuses on the knowledge that inheres in communities.

Views of Change in Community Literacy Scholarship

In this section, we analyze four texts representing key strands of thinking in community literacy scholarship to consider ethical and epistemological assumptions about change embedded in each. Crucial insight into the field’s ideas about the nature, means, ethics, and significance of change emerges from assumptions they make visible: (1) that social problems are best solved by supporting learners in college and community to succeed within the existing socioeconomic order, (2) that social problems are best addressed by persuading college students that the socioeconomic order needs a comprehensive overhaul, (3) that social problems are best solved by projects developed collaboratively among community and college participants, and (4) that social problems are best addressed by such collaborative projects when they employ systematic qualitative research methods that incorporate a reflexive component.

In *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles highlights recent calls for greater accountability and “demands for ‘real-world’ connections” from universities by taxpayers, employers, and students (19). Her introduction’s title, “Service-Learning: Help for Higher Education in a New Millennium?”, stresses challenges to the viability of the traditional structure of institutions of higher education. “[I]f colleges and universities do not make stronger connections to the world, many



of them will simply not survive, or at least not as we have known them,” she contends (22). Service-learning programs provide a solution to this problem, using experiential learning to develop students’ skills and provide contacts for careers. Through “real-world applications for classroom concepts, real-world work experience for resumes...skills in solving problems, making decisions, communicating, thinking critically, planning, and participating in collaborative groups,” programs may also improve academic writing skills and content knowledge (24). While she notes critiques of this model, Bridwell-Bowles stresses the power of writing in real-world contexts and suggests that service-learning “offers us a new way of thinking about the function of higher education” (27).

Thus the emphasis in the service-learning models Bridwell-Bowles describes is on increasing students’ (and often community participants’) access to skills, jobs, and upward socioeconomic mobility. This set of values embeds key assumptions about how we can know what kinds of changes are beneficial—what we are calling an epistemology of change. These assumptions include the belief that specific societies are on a path of gradual progress and improvement represented by historical movement through the scientific and industrial revolutions into a technologically driven, capitalist economy thought to be linked to representative forms of government that support free speech, human rights, and related values.

Such beliefs hold important implications for determining what kinds of change should be promoted. First, they suggest that the current socioeconomic and political systems comprise an improvement over past systems (and, by extension, over non-western systems seen as paralleling earlier western systems). Second, they imply that such systems are continually improving. Third, they assume that individual well being is best served by helping individuals succeed within these systems. These three implications also entail a key ethical assumption: that while access to skills and resources may require some equalization,



the existing socioeconomic and political orders provide a structure that makes equal opportunity and fair social relations possible.

Bruce Herzberg's essay "Community Service and Critical Teaching," offers a sharply divergent set of assumptions about what service-learning programs can and should accomplish, and about how to determine what kinds of change are desirable. For Herzberg, service-learning programs may allow students to regard social problems like homelessness and poverty as "only personal" rather than as the result of systemic causes (58). His students' service-learning experience parallels those of students in the programs described by Bridwell-Bowles, in that Herzberg's freshmen provided literacy tutoring to adults in a homeless shelter. However, their writing course focuses not on tutoring strategies but on "the study of literacy and schooling" (59). Herzberg's analysis therefore focuses on the difficulty his students experienced in "transcend[ing] their own deeply ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy in their analysis of the reasons for the illiteracy they see" (61). Students' papers are successful, he argues, when they "show a growing sophistication about the social forces at work in the creation of illiteracy" (65). His ultimate goal emerges as Herzberg concludes that "developing a social imagination makes it possible not only to question and analyze the world but also to imagine transforming it."

Clearly, Herzberg presumes the need for large-scale systemic change that recognizes and revises fundamental inequities structured into existing socioeconomic and political orders, advocating not change within these existing orders so much as their dramatic overhaul. The epistemology of change embedded in this view is (post-)Marxist, in that it presumes the need for revolutionary changes that will produce a Marxist or socialist economic order, presumably with a more genuinely representative political order. The ethics built into this perspective involve transforming students' consciousnesses. While the focus of change in the service-learning programs Bridwell-Bowles describes



includes both students and community participants, Herzberg's ethics presumes changing students' worldview can bring about a revision of an unjust, exploitative socioeconomic system.

In yet a third approach, Linda Flower provides a more elaborated epistemology and ethics of change. Pointing out that culture inevitably shapes our moral and ethical commitments, and that our best interpretations of service, compassion, and mutuality are hypotheses, Flower contends that successful community literacy programs must counter tendencies toward "a hierarchical association between people who are 'the problems' and those who are 'the solvers'" (101). In place of the traditional scientific and philosophical quest for certainty she proposes "collaborative social action" based on John Dewey's "experimental way of knowing," an epistemology that views knowledge not as certainty but as hypotheses that guide our actions (101). In this view, *all* ideas are hypothetical, to be tested by applying them and assessing the consequences. As Flower explains, "the radical premise of Dewey's philosophical pragmatism is not just that knowledge is interpretation, but that the meaning and value of ideas lie in their enabling *conditions* and *outcomes*" (102, emphasis in original). "The meaning of mentoring (like the meaning of adult 'advice') is not in its 'truth' or 'wisdom,'" she writes, "but in its outcome for that teenager and for the relationship it creates" (102).

Based on this set of assumptions about knowledge and change, Flower proposes community literacy programs in which university students and faculty engage in collaborative projects with community participants, jointly defining the problem they will address, the solution they will develop, and the form of that solution. Cultural difference becomes a resource for generating knowledge because it provides multiple perspectives that participants synthesize and negotiate in crafting representations of, and solutions to, the community problems they choose to address. The goal of such programs entails going "beyond knowledge based on academic research alone or on contact solely with



the community's professional representatives or bureaucracies [a]nd ... beyond transferring knowledge to the community, by moving toward inquiry *with* the community" (106).

Thus Flower articulates an explicit epistemology and ethics of change, while those features remain implicit in Bridwell-Bowles's and Herzberg's texts. In contrast with Bridwell-Bowles's epistemology and ethics, Flower's presumes, like Herzberg's, that change is necessary. But unlike Herzberg, Flower contends that no single authority, whether rooted in academic knowledge or in a revolutionary program of social change, can effectively define the best direction of such change. Her contention is both epistemological and ethical. That is, effective change requires the collaborative involvement of all affected, not only for ethical reasons but also for practical reasons, because discovering what kind(s) of change can provide a viable solution to community problems demands the multiple perspectives of all involved.

In her opinion piece "The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research," Ellen Cushman builds on Flower's epistemology and ethics of change. She critiques approaches that define the public intellectual in terms of a focus on middle-class and upper-middle-class policy-makers, administrators, and professionals. Like Flower, she advocates creating knowledge through collaborative inquiry, arguing that when public intellectuals interact with community members, "they create knowledge with those whom the knowledge serves" (330).

Cushman extends Flower's approach, proposing specific research methods for constructing such mutually developed knowledge. Activist research methodologies that combine "postmodern ethnographic techniques with notions of reciprocity and dialogue," she argues, avoid "the traditional top-down approaches to ethnographic research" (332). Such methodologies revise traditional modes of participant-observation by requiring the researcher to "actively participate in the community under study" (332). Thus, she concludes, "public intellectuals challenge the value system of



academe by starting with the assumption that all language use and ways of knowing are valuable and worthy of respect” (335).

Cushman makes two vital contributions to Flower’s approach. Her first contribution links Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism with relevant systematic social science research methods that add a substantial new dimension to pragmatism. Her second contribution pushes academics to reflect on how our identities and subjective experiences influence our perceptions and the knowledge we produce, thus adding another level of collaboration and negotiation to the mutual construction of knowledge that Flower advocates. In the sections that follow, we draw on our pilot data to show how the epistemology and ethics of change that emerge from Flower’s and Cushman’s work can be used to develop a research-based theory of gender literacy.

Grlz2Women, Women2Grlz: Giving Birth to a Program

The circumstances that led to the birth of the program we named “Grlz2Women” (G2W) were fortunate—the President of our university unexpectedly decided to allocate funds from an ongoing internal research enhancement program to research in the humanities and social sciences focused on women and girls. The impetus for our own proposal, which the program eventually funded, was twofold: we wanted to develop a program aimed specifically at middle-school girls, and we wanted to question the now-common assumption that educational and career advancement for girls automatically means mentoring them into math and science. Our program, we said, would be unique in its focus on the gendered literacy practices specific to adolescent girls. We knew that research has shown that their focus on finding and establishing gender identity highly inflects, and often limits, girls’ interests in developing academic literacies of all kinds (Eder, Evans, and Parker; Finders). Further, we believed that by exercising their existing gender literacy through research and writing, the girls in our program might come to value the acquisition of academic and pre-professional literacies more



highly and perform better in multiple content areas as existing research indicates they are likely to do (Scott 1). G2W, we hoped, would provide ongoing support to girls encouraged into higher education and in some cases into non-traditional fields; it would help them design their educations and careers with an awareness of the potential pitfalls—from isolation and obstructionism in non-traditional fields to the devaluation of those more traditionally female. We hoped we could draw on discussions regarding these anticipated situations that girls might already be facing in order to bring out strategies they were already employing. Our presumption—that supporting girls’ recognition and conscious negotiation of systemic gender inequities could contribute to changing those inequities—converges with one shared by Herzberg, Flower, and Cushman, namely that systemic change is indeed needed for more equitable social relations.

G2W recruited English Education students (studying to become secondary English teachers) in a tutoring practicum course as tutor-mentors for a group of middle-school girls at Hispanic Support Services (a pseudonym, abbreviated HSS) in its existing after-school program. Additionally, students in a graduate-level research practicum taught by the English Department would observe the program at the site to develop proposals for empirical research. Our own research objectives were rather less concrete, focused primarily on developing our definition of “gender literacy” through observation of the interactions between the tutor-mentors and the girls in the program as well as through later analysis of transcripts and other texts—including, presumably, a video on “careers for girls” that was to be the final outcome of the eight-week curriculum. By setting these open qualitative research objectives, we sought to construct a groundwork for undertaking Cushman’s approach to social change. Specifically, we hoped to gain initial understanding of community members’ values, concerns, and strategies around gender, as well as more awareness of our own. We saw our project as beginning a negotiation of such values and perspectives.



We collected data collection during and after the course. Hilary collected all texts generated for the course including Frances's written assignments and other course materials, assigned reading, and students' work with Frances's comments. The student texts that provided most of the data on which this article is based were observation notes students completed after each session. Frances asked students to document their observations with concrete details and to reflect on each observation. We have drawn heavily on these observation notes in developing our findings.

The observation notes built on other course components Frances used to prepare students to tutor. She asked students to read Rafoth's *A Tutor's Guide*, to work with sample student papers during class time, and to conduct mock tutoring sessions based on them. Practicum students read texts on adolescent females' underlife literacies (literacies that support social interactions not sanctioned by schools, such as note passing and magazine reading in class), for instance, Margaret Finders's *Just Girls* and Jabari Mahiri's *What They Don't Learn in School*. Students also wrote reflection papers and longer papers on these texts; we have drawn on those papers as well in constructing our findings.

As we already noted, things did not always go according to our plan. The unusually snowy winter meant that we lost two of eight planned weeks to school closures, and another to the breakdown of the HSS boiler system. The University's and public school's spring break eliminated two more weeks, and a public school winter break eliminated another. More surprising was the fact that the program, which we had been assured included numerous middle-school girls, was only able to produce two or three such girls at any given time; worse yet, different girls attended our program during any given week, and they often left before our curriculum sessions were over for the evening. The need for the mentors to re-introduce themselves after missed weeks or as new girls joined the program meant that progress on the curriculum was slow, and that the "careers for girls" video became impossible to produce.



Nevertheless, a total of six mentors faithfully met with those girls who were available each session, and discussed with them their educational and career plans. Each mentor reported each week on the discussion and their interactions with the girls. Given their frustration with the many changes of plan and interruptions, the mentors also wrote about what they saw as their lack of progress on several fronts—their inability to proceed systematically through the curriculum, their need to re-explain the program on multiple occasions, and what they saw as the lack of bonding between themselves and the girls. Mentors frequently voiced their fears and frustrations to their instructor, Frances, who reported these discussions to the remaining researchers once we began as a group to analyze the primary data at our disposal: the subjective experience of the mentors as they reported it in their journals, papers, and reading responses.

Reticence, Perception, and “Appropriate” Literacies

In analyzing our data from the G2W project, we use the ethical and epistemological assumptions of Cushman’s and Flower’s work. That is, our analysis works to “create knowledge with those whom the knowledge serves.” It engages with the HSS community and combines a traditional emphasis on systematic data collection and interpretation with a more postmodern emphasis on dialogue, reciprocity, and reflexivity. We thus work to understand assumptions about gender, gender literacy, and academic literacy that community and college G2W participants brought to the project as a crucial first step in developing a genuinely collaborative approach to working with gender literacy. Because we are working from Cushman’s and Flower’s theories of social change, we believe that understanding is crucial both ethically and epistemologically. While the G2W pilot project developed from dialogue with our community partner HSS and therefore entailed collaboration, we argue that the fuller understanding of community perspectives generated by a synthesis of traditional and postmodern qualitative research methods is essential to developing an adequately collaborative



approach. In this section, we present the findings we garnered from this synthesis of research methods. In the following section, we explain their relevance for a viable theory of gender literacy.

We generated five key findings directly relevant to theorizing gender literacy, both more broadly and particularly in community literacy settings. While some of these findings focus specifically on mentor-mentee relationships and on mentor perceptions of mentees' attitudes toward career and higher education, we argue that those findings relate directly to those on gender roles. Further, we contend that the findings as a group provide important insight into the work needed to develop a fully theorized understanding of gender literacy and its relations to other literacies. We summarize the findings as follows:

1. Mentees demonstrated notable reticence, and mentors articulated discomfort with their reserve;
2. Mentors held a range of sharply differing perceptions of mentees' sense of gender identity/gender roles;
3. Mentors held a range of sharply differing perceptions of mentees' level of interest in, and attitudes toward, career and higher education;
4. Mentors documented, and valued highly, significant moments of connection with mentees, moments that transformed the distance between mentors and mentees into more substantive dialogue;
5. Mentors held conflicting ideas about how best to promote gender and academic literacies and about appropriate relations between these two related literacies.

In the remainder of this section, we illustrate examples of each finding from the initial data collected on G2W's pilot semester.

In their observation notes, mentors stressed the fact that their middle-school mentees demonstrated significant reserve and distance, more



than the mentors (or we, as the project's organizers) expected. In her notes on the first meeting with mentees, on February 6, 2008, Erin notes, "it was awkward...there is an age gap and they don't know us—so they were guarded" (1). (Mentors and mentees agreed to participate in a research study approved by our university's Human Investigation Committee. All mentor and mentee names are pseudonyms.) In the third session, held over six weeks later on March 31, 2008 due to already noted cancellations, Erin found it "difficult to spark discussion" and comments in explanation, "girls are uncomfortable discussing things in front of adults and a group of people...Perhaps they feared being judged" (3-4).

Similarly, in her notes on her first meeting with mentees on February 4, 2008, Amanda says, "the conversation did not flow as I had expected it to" (1) and then documents behaviors like girls' quiet voices, folded arms and crossed legs, and very straight posture, commenting that they seemed to be "protecting [themselves] from possibly providing too much information" (2). Karenne, in observation notes on her first meeting (February 13, 2008) with mentees, says, "There were some long silences at times," adding, "the girls were fairly reserved and didn't offer a deep look into their lives, which is to be expected on a first visit" (1). Like Amanda, Karenne follows up with documentation of behaviors she interprets as reticent.

Our experience with community literacy projects suggests that such discomfort is common in an initial meeting. However, icebreaker activities and conversations typically provide a basis for building greater comfort. What stood out to us about the mentors' discomfort was its persistence, both throughout nearly all mentors' first meetings and beyond. Our experience suggests that this persistence is unusual. An example of mentors' discomfort with that persistence appears in Karenne's notes on her second meeting with mentees, which took place on March 19, 2008. Karenne says, "I would feel much more comfortable if I knew the girls better" (1).



Of course the lapse of time between meetings due to unexpected cancellations almost certainly played a significant role in this persisting discomfort, as mentors' observation notes consistently point out. But we believe another factor may have played an important role as well. That factor appears in Karenne's notes on her first meeting with mentees. After pointing out mentees' seeming disinterest and discomfort in talking with mentors, she comments, "mentors seemed just as unsure of themselves at times; should they answer questions honestly, i.e. [t]he struggle of having children and going to school or simply encourage them to go to school." She concludes that there were "no real connections between mentors and girls" (2). This lack of common ground stands out as a clear theme across mentors' observation notes; it alternates with interactions in which mentors and mentees achieved substantial connections. We hold that the counterpoint between distance and connection offers important insight into the work needed to understand how gender literacies vary across different cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

Our second finding suggests the challenges inherent in developing such understanding. In analyzing their notes, we learned that mentors held sharply divergent perceptions of mentees' sense of gender identity and roles. For example Betsy's notes, on her February 6, 2008 initial meeting, document what she sees as a very disturbing portrait of gender roles offered by one mentee: "One girl said she didn't want to grow up because when you grow up girls live in boxes and boys live in alleys" (2). Betsy speculates that something negative in the mentee's family life produced this view and expresses concern for her. Recognizing both the possibility of family dysfunction and the risk of mentors presuming that socio-economically disadvantaged families suffer from such dysfunction, we consider the mentee's comment a metaphorically apt characterization of some aspects of adult gender roles, as she sees those played out in a local culture noted for emphasizing restrictions on females and prominence in street life for males.



In contrast to Betsy's perception of mentees' sense of gender roles, Amanda's first-day observation notes paint a very different picture: "I...was surprised at the level of ambition and self-confidence both girls possessed. They feel girls 'catch on faster' than boys. They liked being female, but they also expressed a desire to be strong like a male or be able to detach emotionally like a male" (1). These contrasting assessments suggest two crucial points related to theorizing gender literacies. First, they illustrate the likelihood that even within local cultural groups, gender literacy will contain complex and possibly conflicting strands. Second, they show that different observers may perceive instances of gender awareness in very divergent ways.

Similarly sharp discrepancies appeared in mentors' perceptions of mentees' level of interest in college and career. Brad's first-day observation notes, taken February 6, 2008, articulate one common view when he says, "the girls were quite shy and had very little opinion about careers, goals, and college aspirations" (1). Angela's observation notes, taken the same day, make a similar assessment when she points out that one mentee "seemed averse to the questions, being humorous with her answers" (1). Karenne's second-day observation notes, taken on March 19, 2008, imply a possible reason for mentees' seeming disinclination to discuss college and career: "I try to put myself in their position and how I would feel if I were asked each week what I wanted to do with my life after high school. I feel as though there isn't much interest on the girl's side" (1). Karenne's statement implies that middle-school-age mentees may see college and career as too distant to provoke sustained interest.

But a very different view of mentees' interest level appears in other observation notes. The mentee whom Angela saw as "averse" to the topic of college and career subsequently grew more engaged, according to notes on a later portion of the first-day meeting (2). As we will show in presenting our fourth finding, Amanda, Betsy, and Karenne all eventually saw evidence of strong interest in the topic by mentees. Further, some



of Amanda's observations suggest a possible reason for mentees' initial appearance of disinterest. In her third meeting with mentees, on March 17, 2008, Amanda speculates that one mentee "either does not have an interest in college or does not feel she can go due to some underlying circumstance(s) or view of herself" (2). Her notes on the next meeting, held March 31, 2008, document several mentees' high level of concern about tuition costs (1 and 3). Indeed, Amanda had noted what she perceived as a surprisingly high level of mentee interest in education in her first-meeting notes, taken February 4, 2008: "Another astonishment I experienced was that the girls were very education focused. I thought that as a team we [mentors] would need to convince or encourage the girls in regard to higher education, but the girls already value education. Our job now will be to help them obtain more information regarding the field of their choice. It seems the girls have put a lot of thought into the fields they would like to pursue" (1).

We see significance in these discrepancies. First, while it remains unclear from our limited body of initial data whether mentees' attitudes toward higher education and career possibilities correlate in any way with attitudes toward gender identity, we believe researching possible correlations is an important step in understanding gender literacies. Second, we suggest that scholars seeking to theorize approaches to working with gender literacy need to investigate whether and how mentor and mentee attitudes toward gender identity complement or challenge one another, and whether and how that relationship correlates with mentor perceptions of mentee interest in college and career.

Based on our fourth finding, we believe that disjuncture between mentor and mentee attitudes may influence both the mentoring relationship and mentees' (perceived) attitudes toward higher education and career. For example, we found that mentor notes describe moments of substantial connection with mentees. On February 11, 2008, the day she was scheduled to meet with her mentees for the second time, Amanda describes finding HSS closed due to severe weather and one of her mentees, Juanita,



sitting outside the building with her brother waiting for their mother to arrive. Noting that she decided to wait with the adolescents, Amanda says that she and Juanita “spoke a little bit about where we live, what churches we go to, and school closings...we got to touch base and become more comfortable speaking to each other. ...Juanita seems like she is looking forward to working with us on this project” (1).

Amanda refers to that observation over a month later in her notes on her third mentoring session, held March 17, 2008. Here she describes a conversation with Juanita about tennis, saying that they talked about the sport because both played. Commenting on that conversation, Amanda says Juanita seems to be happiest of all the mentees at the prospect of working on the G2W college and career project. “I wonder if it has anything to do with our conversation the day HSS was closed, and I waited outside with her. We found out we hold a lot of the same values and go to similar types of churches. If she feels we already have things in common, she may be more eager to work together on helping her research future career goals” (2).

Two other mentors also point out the value of sharing experiences to build connections with mentees. Betsy’s notes on her first session (held February 6, 2008) say, “Telling the girls about ourselves seemed to open them up a little more” (1). Near the end of the G2W program, in her notes on the final session (held April 2, 2008), Karenne explains, “I felt this was truly a breakthrough session. I turned the conversation around and said, ‘As a Mom, what can I do to bring my girls up right?’ This gave them the opportunity to talk about their own relationships with their families and lack thereof” (1). Karenne documents signs of sharply increased interest level, e.g., mentees’ quiet, short responses to questions previously, versus their animated voices, forward-leaning posture, and direct eye contact during the conversation in which they drew on their experiences to advise Karenne (2). “By far, for me, this was the most interesting session,” she declares. Reading this excerpt in



context of other mentoring notes suggests the importance of mentors referencing their own experiences in ways that connect with mentees’.

In her notes on her second meeting with mentees (on February 13, 2008), Amanda describes mentees’ questions to mentors about their college experiences and mentees’ increasing interest level as mentors described those experiences (1 and 2). She comments, “after they began to ask us questions, the conversation flowed more smoothly and the girls relaxed around us” (1). Reflecting on this experience Amanda says, “I don’t believe these girls thought they had the intelligence, resources, etc. to go to college. I think they considered it out of their reach until our conversation” (2).

Karenne’s description of her second meeting with mentees (on March 19, 2008) echoes Amanda’s assessment. She notes that one aspect of the session that worked well was when the mentees heard “first hand from the [university] mentors what school was really like... They always think it will be very hard, and they won’t do well. It is reassuring for them to hear that it is possible to succeed at school and that teachers/professor are there to help” (1). These descriptions all emphasize the importance of mentors sharing their own experience in ways that connect with mentees’ experiences as a key strategy in building successful working relationships.

Such sharing may play a key role in helping mentors and mentees bridge the distance documented in mentors’ earlier notes. The growing bond between Amanda and Juanita suggests that such bridges may result in significant part from conversations that help mentors and mentees find points of commonality in their experiences and values. Given the high possibility of discrepancies between mentors’ and mentees’ ideas about gender identity, we suggest that mentoring programs designed to impact gender literacy may well benefit from designing opportunities for such conversations into their curricula. Even more importantly, we argue that further research is needed into



how such connections in experiences and values affect perceptions and values related to gender literacy.

The complexity involved in finding such commonalities is implied by our fifth finding, namely that mentors themselves held conflicting ideas about how best to promote gender and academic literacies. These conflicting ideas emerged in a sharply defined contrast between two mentors' written work for Frances's course. In her paper, "Invisibility of the Adolescent Girl and Unsanctioned Literacy," written in response to the Literature Review Preview assignment, Erin describes the extracurricular—and unsanctioned—literacies used by adolescent girls in Finders's *Just Girls*. She cites other scholarship on the invisibility of girls in many texts used in K-12 language arts curricula and on the resulting loss of voice for adolescent females. "It is this disconnect [between their own experiences and school-based texts and talk] that leaves many girls feeling that school sanctioned literacy does not apply to their life. Because of this, they feel like they are 'doing school' and only attend school to appease family or friends that value education" (3-4). Erin calls for a curriculum that incorporates depictions and discussions of females' experiences, and for the use of unsanctioned literacies in language arts classrooms as a means to help students develop competence in school-sanctioned literacies. "If the sanctioned or unsanctioned literacy reveals questionable reinforcement of gender stereotypes, it should be seized by the educator as an opportunity for discourse on the subject," she concludes (5).

A marked contrast is provided by Angela's paper, "Practicing for Romance: Adolescent Girls Read the Romance Novel," written in response to Jane Stanley's chapter of the same title in Mahiri's *What They Don't Learn in School*. Angela raises serious concerns with using unsanctioned literacies to develop adolescent girls' skills in academic literacies. After summarizing arguments for using romance novels to engage girls sufficiently to develop their reading skills, Angela says, "As a woman who hopes to teach English someday, I find it



unsettling that there are teachers who find romance novels acceptable reading material for young, impressionable girls. Yes, reading any text helps readers to better understand important rules of language, but there is a bigger issue at stake here. Girls should not be learning how to define themselves through the sexual admiration of boys”

(1). She acknowledges the need for texts and curricula that represent girls and their interests but nonetheless stresses that some materials are inappropriate despite the fact that they spark girls’ interest. “It is understandable and expected that girls want to read about females in books rather than only men; however, it is troubling to know that they are learning about prescribed gender roles from saucy romance novels”

(2). Unlike Erin, who advocates discussion of questionable depictions of appropriate gender roles, Angela insists that some such depictions be excluded from educational endeavors.

We respect both positions and present them here not to endorse one or the other, but to highlight the divided opinions about how best to foster gender and academic literacies, even among a group of mentors who appeared to share a high valuation of G2W’s goals. These divisions imply that even a relatively coherent gender literacy among a given cultural and/or socioeconomic group may contain complex, conflicting strands. This complexity in turn implies the delicate work required to theorize gender literacy, to construct a mentoring curriculum designed both to promote effective connections between mentors and mentees, and to work effectively and ethically with gender literacy. The competing perspectives and the complex, conflicting strands of gender literacy represented in our findings suggest that Flower’s and Cushman’s theories of change as rooted in negotiated collaborations may provide the best approach to using gender literacy education to pursue gender equity. As we show in the next section, such collaborations can shift conflicting perspectives from an impasse to a source of creative solutions.



Implications

Taken together, our findings suggest two larger implications for scholars seeking to theorize gender literacy in a community literacy setting. Both implications demand further research to investigate whether, and to what extent, they appear in other community-based programs designed to promote gender literacy. Both also highlight key steps required to theorize gender literacy effectively and ethically. Finally, both are grounded in the theories of change proposed by Flower and by Cushman. Our findings highlight the intersection between the ethical and the pragmatic in these theories.

First, our findings imply that theorizing gender literacy involves understanding gender *literacies*, plural. Given the discrepancies between mentors' perceptions of mentees' attitudes about gender identity and academic literacy, as well as the discrepancies between mentors themselves about how best to promote gender and academic literacies, we hold that scholars seeking to define and theorize gender literacy must investigate what gender literacy is, and how it operates, among different groups. Based on our initial data, we can at best suggest a tentative list of categories researchers might use to begin studying various gender literacies. These categories include generations and half-generations (meaning twenty- and ten-year age differences), races, ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, cultural groups (from religious to professional to activity-based), and of course genders. Our findings suggest that gender literacy seems likely to be deeply inflected by such categories.

In the spirit of Cushman's ethics and epistemology of change, we argue that scholars working on the topic of gender literacy must conduct the research needed to clarify various cultural groups' beliefs about gender identity. These groups must include academics, both female and male, particularly those involved in programs designed to promote gender equity. Further, researchers must engage in reflexive work to make visible our own values, attitudes, and beliefs about gender identity and



our and exercise of gender literacy. While full reflexive work is beyond the scope of this article, our recognition of both commonalities and differences among ourselves as authors, and between ourselves and both mentors and mentees, testifies to the need for such work. Given the divergent views on how best to promote gender and academic literacies, we contend that effective efforts toward such change can take root only in the collaborative approach advocated by Flower and Cushman.

Second, our findings imply that designing such projects may demand that participants from different cultural backgrounds establish common ground in areas other than attitudes about gender identity and gender literacy before broaching those topics. We suggest that such common ground might best be built on the foundation provided by the postmodern, reflexive research approach Cushman recommends. The surprising persistence of reserve among the G2W mentees, in contrast with the moments of substantive connection and dialogue they and mentors did achieve, suggest that this common ground may play a vital role in helping people with divergent attitudes on gender identity and gender literacy to collaborate effectively. While Flower's and Cushman's theories of change emphasize exploring and respecting differences, their emphasis on dialogue and collaboration also strongly implies the need to build common ground. Our findings suggest that these theories could be usefully extended through explicit attention to the process of constructing such groundwork.

We argue that the need for this groundwork—and for approaches to building it—underscores the intersection between ethics and pragmatics in Cushman's and Flower's theories. Specifically, to pursue systemic changes that will promote equal opportunity through gender and academic literacies, we first need to recognize, respect, and negotiate the values underlying all stakeholders' existing gender literacies. Our findings suggest that these values are likely to correspond in some cases, conflict in others, and complement in yet others. If we hope to revise institutional practices to foster systemic change, we must



undertake the collaborative negotiation with marginalized groups that Cushman and Flower advocate. Our study suggests that to pursue such negotiations effectively, we must take up Cushman's call for reflexive qualitative research methods. Only by investigating our own gender literacies and the values underlying them, as well as those of marginalized groups, can we effectively negotiate with these groups. Such negotiations are key to developing collaborations that produce approaches with active commitment from all stakeholders. Such commitment is central to establishing both ethical relations between researchers and marginalized research subjects and effective approaches to systemic change. Thus our pilot study highlights the intersection between ethics and pragmatics inherent in the theories of change underlying our work.

We see sites of such negotiation as crucial venues for the kind of research that can promote such ethical collaborations and can generate important material for scholars seeking to understand gender literacy. Therefore we suggest that community literacy programs offer a particularly rich venue for investigating gender literacy and its differences across various cultural groups. Differing values, attitudes, and beliefs often emerge more palpably in interactions with others from different backgrounds. Further, community-university programs designed to promote gender equity offer fruitful locations for dialogue on such differences. Thus investigating gender literacy in community literacy programs seems likely to produce especially useful findings.

Conclusion

Perhaps the largest implication of our study is the need for a research-driven effort to theorize gender literacy. We view various bodies of theory, from those on literacy to those on gender, as vital to defining what gender literacy is and how it works. At the same time, based on our findings and their implications, we see empirical, and particularly qualitative, investigation into different groups' forms of gender



literacies as equally important. Most of all, we argue for a dialogic approach that uses reflexive work on researchers' own experiences of, and attitudes toward, gender literacy to engage substantively with community members, students, and others about their own experiences and attitudes on the topic. Only by constructing such a multi-voiced, genuinely collaborative dialogue can we design ethical and effective means of promoting gender equity.

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