

Service-Learning Courses as the Way to Promote Gender Equality and Inclusion in the Higher Education

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Abstract

In the epoch of COVID-19, it is essential to gather social memory of this unprecedented event and to preserve the voices of mothers whose lives the pandemic had significantly disrupted. Remote work affected mothers, and it is an alarming trend that many achievements for women equality for career building are now jeopardized by the ongoing childcare crisis triggered by COVID-19. My service-learning courses require my students to conduct interviews of female faculty and staff members of Oklahoma City University (where I teach) and then reflect on significant challenges which the COVID-19 pandemic imposed on women. In my presentation, I will address the philosophy behind offering such a course and assignments which students complete for this course.

Keywords: *Experiences outside the classroom; gender equality; motherhood.*

1. Introduction

In the epoch of COVID-19, it is essential to gather social memory of this unprecedented event and to preserve the voices of mothers whose life the pandemics had significantly disrupted. To promote civic engagement of my students in understanding the impact of the pandemic on gender equality in the higher education, I have transformed two of my courses, *History 1103, U.S. History since 1876*, and *History 1303, World history since 1500*, to courses including a service-learning component. These courses traditionally have a high enrolment. Service-learning projects in these courses allow to build a platform for saving the voices of mothers employed at OCU during the pandemics. My service-learning courses require my students to conduct interviews of female faculty and staff members of Oklahoma City University (where I teach) and then reflect on significant challenges which the COVID-19 pandemic imposed on women. In my presentation, I will address the philosophy behind offering such a course and assignments which students complete for this course.

2. How the Pandemic Affected Female Faculty Members

Even in families where both spouses work in academia, caretaker responsibilities and responsibilities of educating children when schools are online are disproportionally on the shoulders of women. Remote work affected especially mothers, especially those raising their children alone, and / or raising children with disabilities. It is a truly alarming trend that many achievements for gender equality in terms of the number of women at workforce and women's opportunities for career building are now jeopardized by the ongoing childcare crisis triggered by COVID-19. Even in families where both spouses work in academia, caretaker responsibilities and responsibilities of educating children when schools are online are disproportionally on the shoulders of women. Statistically, the number of submissions to academic journals from female authors had dramatically declined, when, on the contrary, male authors have increased their submissions to academic journals. COVID-19 has redefined the learning process forcing the female faculty to develop online instruction in the middle of the semester, to transform traditional on-campus courses to online courses, and to juggle constantly professional responsibilities and responsibilities of taking care of their children when schools moved to on-line learning, or when their children were sent---very often---abruptly to quarantine. The worst aspect of this problem is that women are so overwhelmed by ongoing crisis that many of them do not have any time, energy, and resources to express their concerns and to act as the active advocates for finding solutions for this crisis. Service-learning components in my undergraduate courses helped students to become aware of child care crisis and to preserve the voices and testimonies of women who balance the responsibilities of motherhood and their commitment to excellence in teaching, research, and service to the professional world.

3. Service-learning components and learning outside the classroom

For service-learning, students have composed groups (from 2 to 4-5 students) that allowed them to develop skills to work in teams, to collaborate, and to bring their diverse interdisciplinary perspectives in conducting research on women. After consulting scholarship on oral history, students had articulated questions for interviews. One of the key purposes of this history course is to teach students how to gather primary sources for research and how to interpret, analyze and to create a narrative based on such primary sources. By conducting interviews, transcribing them and interpreting them students had deepened their understanding of history and the craft of historians. Then the students had approached a faculty member or a staff member. After conducting interviews, they needed to submit transcribed interviews. Then groups needed to present in class on overall problems which mothers face in the US. Groups also developed analytical papers on motherhood in the U.S. before and during COVID. This project helped students to become aware of a necessity for serious reforms in child care, public health system and support of working mothers. As a transcription of interviews is a time consuming process (it can take up to seven-ten hours to transcribe an one hour-interview), every student in my course will be involved in gathering such primary sources and every student will provide at least ten hours (and more) of service for OCU.

In addition, the goal of our community partner, Archives of OCU located at Dulaney-Browne Library, is to preserve the institutional memory of OCU. This experiential learning contributes to the creation of institutional memory of OCU during COVID-19. Students have acquired a better understanding of the key role of the archives of OCU in preserving the institutional memory of OCU and the broader role of OCU as the essential resource for providing intellectual and social support for the community and for promoting diversity and inclusion in the State of Oklahoma. As the world has been experiencing the deep crisis of the pandemic, OCU has been the source of support – intellectual, social, emotional- for its students, faculty, and staff and community by continuing its mission of supporting faculty coming from diverse perspectives. As our learning community is encountering the challenges of COVID-19, the public image of OCU and its history for the next generations will greatly gain and benefit from preserving and recording the everyday struggles and everyday heroism of women, our colleagues whose responsibilities of both caregivers and educators have risen exponentially during the pandemics and when no traditional venues for support (child care) was either available or safe because little is known about ways COVID-19 affects children. The archives and public memory of OCU need to preserve the voices of women-mothers during COVID-19 also because the pandemics make it so difficult for women to have energy and strength, time and resources to have their voices recorded, heard and not forgotten.

The learning outcomes of the service component are students' new skills in conducting an interview and, broadly, their learning of the methods of oral and public history. Another set

of the learning outcomes are the development of students' skills in speaking, writing, critical thinking, interpreting and synthesizing material, understanding interdisciplinary approaches in examining society as this project will require them to read peer-reviewed work in history, philosophy, women's study, gender theory, sociology, and feminism. Learning outcomes are assessed by the quality of their transcribed interview and a paper which will be graded, also with a help a rubric. The service-learning component will also develop students' broad understanding of gender equality, demands of combining motherhood and of a professional career, necessity for self-advocacy and struggle for women's rights.

4. Civic Engagement and Commitment to Gender Equality

I have accumulated a collection of over fifteen transcribed interviews with the faculty and staff members of OCU the most of which will be deposited in our University's library archives. When students compose questions, they engage themselves in a dialogue with the faculty and, very importantly, develop empathy towards multiple responsibilities which the female faculty have. Many students who interviewed female faculty and staff members were astounded to realize how many obligations the mothers have. The students had expressed their new sense of appreciation of that the female faculty and staff members still make their teaching and the priority and that students had never felt the duties of motherhood took away attention from students. The students shared that they would no longer take for granted how much the faculty is doing for them and that conducting the interviews was the an eye-opening experience for them. It is the essential lesson that the students will take from the service-learning course. These days many critiques point to "empathy fatigue" when the faculty had to do all kinds of adjustments during the COVID-19 and when students would rely on their faculty for all kind of emotional and psychological support. The project had revealed to the students that the students need to have a great deal of understanding and empathy to the faculty as well.

This service-learning project taught my students many skills, including the art of composting meaningful questions which invite for open-ended responses. Below are questions from one of the interviews: "If you had, like, a sort of game plan once COVID hit, what was your plan to make your family situation work out, and your home situation, kinda go smooth and as successful as possible once COVID hit? ... Did you ever find yourself ... kind of just finding yourself in a situation where you would try new things, and it seems like nothing else was going to work?... And one last final question from me, if you had to go back and experience quarantine again, what would you do differently? Like how would you approach it, and what would you do the same? Are there any positive changes that you've had to make to your lifestyle from COVID that you think you might keep when the quarantine is over? Like, from the extra time that you guys have together, or anything like that, that you've enjoyed from COVID? What ways have you discovered have been useful in kind of helping your child

understand what's going on in the uncertainty of everything?" (interview conducted on March 3, 2021 for History 1103.) When conducting the interviews, students would learn that the pandemic made especially difficult the duties of taking care of children because schools switched to a remote format in the middle of the semester. When in the field of the higher education we associate this switch with zoom and with an opportunity to provide synchronous instruction, in some public schools teachers would only send assignments and would respond via e-mail to students and parents' questions. It means that explaining a subject to children especially, if students were in elementary or middle schools would be on the shoulders of mothers (mostly.) In addition, several female faculty and staff members have shared that their husbands would remain working outside of their homes and would not be able to contribute much to educating their children when schools were in remote format. One of the faculty members confessed that it was exceptionally stressful to combine all obligations in the absence of a help from relatives who, due to lockdown, would not be able to provide any kind of relieve to mothers.

Female faculty and staff members also shared their frustrations with the increased social expectations from American mothers. One of the interviewees has confessed that despite the immense advances of feminism and ways how household duties are now expected to be divided between spouses, when her relatives and friends were visiting her house during lockdown, she felt guilty that her son, a toddler, would not have a perfect order in his room. Still, in 2020, unspoken assumptions were that it is women's responsibility to keep the house look impeccable – no matter what kind of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unprecedented public health catastrophe, may happen outside of the very house at this very moment. At the top of it, as children were spending all their time at home, it was a near improbable task to keep the house very tidy. Children would also require much more time commitment as far as meal preparation and cooking would concern. Because they were not in schools anymore, mothers would have to indulge children's growing appetite for it is a very well known fact that the pandemic made people eat more to alleviate constant anxiety, fear and uncertain future. One of female faculty members shared that children would demand much more attention from their parents and would become much "clinger." Interviewees would also express their frustration with the proliferation of social media content on "perfect" mothers who would re-design their homes to make an inviting learning space for their children, would make videos of cooking extraordinarily difficult meals, and would develop multi-layered activities for children. All these picture perfect stories, photos and videos could make any mother who was juggling her professional duties and duties of motherhood feel quite lagging behind. For at the top of these idyllic and often sentimental images of happy mothers lies a very disturbing reality of being a mother in the U.S.

In the U.S., even before the COVID disrupted the lives of mothers, mothers have less legal rights and protections than in many other prosperous countries in the world. First of all, there

is no universal free medical insurance in the U.S. as it is the case for many other countries. From the moment a woman starts to expect the child, she is becoming dependent on medical insurance either through her employer or her spouse. There are no laws protecting mothers' rights at a workplace in the U.S.. Historically, women-mothers and, especially, single mothers are often expected to let go first during economic recession. There is an ongoing shortage of child care facilities in the U.S, and women seeing to balance their professional careers and motherhood need to be pay a very careful attention to crafting their public image: to put it bluntly, motherhood is a liability in the U.S. Women have to be very careful about projecting their public image at the workplace and remembering that “motherhood is not an excuse” for whatever comes to her life whether it is a sudden 10-day quarantine on which a child can be put in his/her school with no notice due to exposure to COVID (and I am referring now to my own personal experience as the mother of a student in an elementary school in Fall 2021) or expectations that an employee can easily attend an evening or weekend activity. It is the theme which Andrea O'Reilly is exploring in her multiple books on motherhood.

Service-learning projects help student to develop historical skills of gathering and interpreting primary sources and creating a historical narrative. The service-learning component of the courses reflects and incorporates my courses objectives in the following way. Among key learning objectives of the courses is to examine “how the marginalized and disaffected have struggled to ensure that America fulfills its promise” (J.Roark) of equality, citizenship, and political participation. The experience of women and mothers represents an essential component of the courses. In addition, the important learning objective of the courses is to introduce students to the recent research methods of oral, public and digital history and to develop their digital literacy.

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