A Room of Our Own: Girls, Feminism, and Schooling

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Written in the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf’s astoundingly poignant text, A Room of One’s Own, reverberates almost a century later. Woolf’s essay invites its readers to join her in search of the answer to the question of “women and fiction,” and in the process we are treated to a piercingly articulate perspective on the condition of women in a world culture built on women’s exclusion and subordination. “A woman,” Woolf writes, “must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (6). Although it is true that unlike in Woolf’s time, girls’ education is no longer dependent on the fortunes of a Mrs. Seton who might bequeath a college and library for young women. The issues of the relationships between education, creativity, and women’s access to privacy, space, and resources remain deeply relevant.

In the spring and winter of 2002–2003, these themes reverberated in State College, Pennsylvania, a time and place Virginia Woolf would likely have had trouble imagining. And yet, come together they did, in an initiative to set up a Women’s Health Resource Center in an alternative high school. This article tells the story of the creation of the center from three inter-twined perspectives. Laura was, at the time, a twelfth-grade student, whose idea it was to establish the center as part of her graduation requirements. Amy, Laura’s English teacher, supervised her project. And Marnina was a recently hired faculty member in the College of Education and Women’s Studies Program at the Pennsylvania State University. She served as a resource person to the center, attending and co-facilitating, with Laura, the group’s weekly activities. With each of us bearing different relationships to the initiative, to feminism, and to the question of girls and schooling, writing from our separate perspectives underlines the complexities of doing feminist work in schools. Our voices both overlap and diverge, fuse and separate, and the result is a rather nonlinear story, similar to the process of creating the center. Through its multi-vocality and circuitousness, the way in which the story is told enacts a feminist telling that re-positions the often-opposing entities of educational theory and practice as entities with more fluid boundaries. Shifting and merging between and among the voices and narrative, theories and practices of engaging in feminist work in schools are woven together, and in the process both are inflected with powerful contradictions and possibilities.
The School, The Community, The Project

Amy: Delta School is part of the State College Area School District, a large district in the middle of nowhere. We are in the center of Pennsylvania, and the closest metropolitan area is over two hours away. What we do have going for us in that the town of State College is the home of Penn State University, with over 40,000 students and some great programs and opportunities. The university is the primary employer of the region.

The Delta Program was formed twenty-five years ago and was called the Alternative program for those students within the school system who could not or would not function with the rest of the herd. Delta students want an environment that is different from the large classes, bell-ringing, and lockstep curriculum. The area is very homogeneous racially and the students and teachers at Delta reflect the mainly white population. While State College is quite a prosperous town, the surrounding area is economically depressed with a significant amount of unemployment and poverty. Many Delta students are the children of Penn State faculty; others are the children of staff and service workers at Penn State as well as local small industries. It is impossible to categorize Delta students academically. Many are exceptional students, who choose Delta for the flexibility our program offers, including the opportunity to take university courses towards advanced college entrance. Other students struggle to meet basic high school requirements.

Laura: The Delta program is located in the oldest building in the district. When I began attending, half the building was an elementary school and half was Delta. Then the elementary school moved out, leaving that half empty. The school is old—the heat doesn’t always work. The walls are covered in student murals from the last twenty-five years of inhabitants. If you walk through Delta’s two hallways, past the gym, up three flights of stairs, past the abandoned classrooms and the pictures of Dr. Seuss characters painted on the wall, and into what used to be the library, around the corner is the librarian’s office—now the Delta Grrrl’s Health Collective.

The room is pretty big, with two skylights and windows that open onto the abandoned library. On the walls are built-in bookshelves, two of which are filled with feminist books and one with pamphlets. If it’s a meeting night, Marnina and five to ten girls between eighth and twelfth grade are sitting and drinking coffee out of hand made mugs at the table or on the couch or on the beanbag chairs, or on the rug on the floor. There’s probably old rock and roll or Ani DiFranco playing on the computer’s CD player—the only part of the computer we can figure out how to use. The desk has been spray painted purple, and there are posters on the wall about the suffrage movement, Planned Parenthood, and definitions of feminism.

Amy: The logistics of finding a location for the center was not easy. There wasn’t a spare classroom to be had, not even a decent sized closet. So we looked to the empty half of the building. The location was a little out of the way, but some well-placed signs could direct people there. It took much longer to secure this location than we wanted. Even though the space was empty, all the proper channels had to clear it. It took four months—almost half the school year.

Marnina: Before my first Delta Grrrl’s Health Collective meeting, I e-mailed Laura for directions to the school and the meeting room. “We’ll meet you at the front door,” she said. “It’s kind of complicated to find the room.” Laura had contacted me about her idea for the center some time before this first meeting, having heard through the university grapevine of my research interest in girls and girl studies. I had previously conducted
ethnographic research with girls, in an inner-city middle school in Toronto as part of a school-community project. I therefore had some experience in working through some of the barriers of trying to introduce a feminist project in a school setting. I don’t think it is a coincidence my previous project also encountered difficulty attaining a room for the specific use of the girls. Such difficulties seem a regular feature of feminist experience in schools, youth clubs, and university contexts. The issue of inadequate space is, for example, also a regular discussion item in the Women’s Studies program at Penn State where I teach. In the office I sit in now as I write, as a visitor at the University of McGill’s Center for Research and Teaching on Women, there is a poster making a plea for resources for the Women’s Studies program. It reads, “She has a room of her own. Now she needs the furniture. Help Support a Chair in Women’s Studies.” Woolf’s sentence reverberates across space and time.

In the case of the Delta project, the obscure location raised concerns about accessibility from the students’ perspective and safety and supervision from the administration’s. However, being so out of the way also meant that the group existed in the periphery of the systems of regulation and surveillance that are a structural feature of life in schools, even alternative schools. Neither fully inside nor outside these systems, the group was able to create a space in which to flexibly express identities beyond those usually finding legitimacy within the school. For me, the existence of the center within the walls of a public school offered the opportunity to re-visit an issue that has been central to feminists in the field of education. That is, how schools might become possible “public spheres” for the encouragement of resistance and the building of a critical counter-hegemony for girls. My involvement with the project was not so much as a site of research potential as much as about becoming involved in a community to which I had just moved and my sense of the importance of what the Center could offer girls at the school. Attending the group’s meetings soon became one of the highlights of my workweek.

Amy: Several things distinguish Delta from other schools. Firstly, students are placed in small groups of between ten and fifteen and assigned advisors. These groups are called “clumps,” a term the students coined themselves. Clumps meet weekly to receive announcements and discuss school issues. Clumpers also meet three times a year individually with their advisor and their parent or guardian to set learning goals, plan academic schedules, review community service hours, and assess progress towards graduation.

Secondly, Delta differs from other schools in its governance. Each clump elects members to represent them in the school’s governing body, the Advisory Council, which is made of students (who run the meetings), faculty, parents and the School Director. These meetings are held once a month and through them policy is made: courses suggested, schedules for the next academic year reviewed and approved, school trips planned, committees formed, etc. Advisory council runs by consensus, and this method guides the rest of the school. About once a month, we hold an all-school meeting where the school gathers to receive school-wide announcements and debate issues central to the students. Students moderate and record meetings.

Thirdly, Delta’s version of the State of Pennsylvania’s mandated “Graduation Project” differs from other schools’. The project was established by the state to help students develop skills to succeed in the “real world.” Whereas a traditional high school might offer “graduation classes” in which students can enroll, attend, and pass their graduation project, we offer no such program. At Delta, students design their own graduation project, some of which are immense.

Laura: The Delta Grrrl’s Health Collective is not your average public school scene. But
maybe it should be. In the past four years, I have watched many of my close friends battle with depression, self-mutilation, eating disorders, dating violence, drugs, and pregnancy, among other things. I spent a long time thinking that I somehow magnetically attracted everyone with problems. We couldn’t have been normal teenage females, right? I, for one, was completely unprepared to deal with all of it. In my family, when we don’t know how to solve a problem, we buy a book. So as I read and my circle of friends expanded I learned that our group of troubled girls was by no means unique.

There are countless studies explaining how as girls go through high school their self-esteem declines, their rates of major depression and eating disorders increase, and their risk of dating violence grows to one in four. The statistic I found most alarming was that young women dealing with these problems felt alone in them. Apparently, every clique is like mine—we all think we’re the only ones.

The grant writing assignment in Amy’s business and technical writing class gave me an opportunity to think through how I could address these problems within my school community.

Amy: Call me crazy. I decided to have my students research and draft a grant proposal as part of their learning experience in my Business and Technical Writing class. I brought in experts, culled from our many talented parents, to present how to research funding sources. I brought in other experts to discuss grant writing in general: writing style, approaches to filling in forms, what to avoid. I wanted students to discover that it is one thing to want money, but an entirely different thing to justify the need for that money to an external funding source. Even if you have a great idea, it can be difficult to get financial support for it. I also wanted to emphasize that when you do make a match, it can spark a drive in you that will open up many possibilities.

Girls, Feminism, Schools

Laura: It seemed to me that girls had two places in which to address our problems within the Delta community. The first one is an academic space, where adults define problems. In this space, though, problems like eating disorders, depression, self-mutilation and drug use are treated as personal problems requiring individual attention, isolated treatment, and adult intervention. This approach seemed problematic to me. If one in four girls show signs of major depression and most girls I know cut or burned themselves, starved themselves, or made themselves throw up, how individual could these problems be? Problems so ubiquitous among a particular group of people, namely young women, would have to be social in nature. As the second wave feminists told us: the personal is political.

The second space is a social space in which students interact with each other and understand themselves in terms of those interactions. While the first space isolates girls and imposes an authority many young women are unwilling to accept, the second space is inadequate in that students are not always informed enough to help each other. Both of these spaces, although generally understood to be co-ed, are in fact, male dominated. There was a need for a third space, one that was student driven but still intellectual, where girls could become a community of experts about themselves. What was needed was a space where girls could develop agency to reinterpret the world on their own terms. This third space1 would be labelled explicitly female.

I began to think of this third space as an actual physical space because of my visit to Wells College. I was impressed with their basement women’s center, which housed a library and meeting space for campus activist groups. I could use grant money to replicate this idea at Delta! I wrote a grant proposal to the American Association of University Women, which was not funded
because I procrastinated in getting my organizational commitment form filled out. However, as I wrote that proposal my idea for the center grew, changed, and became something I really felt like I could do, something I needed to do. So I looked for alternate funding sources. I wrote two grants to local foundations and received $1,300.

While I was waiting to hear about the grants, I wrote letters to college campus women’s centers across the country explaining my project and asking them to send me a book they thought might help young women dealing with health issues. I expected maybe a book or two. I received nine boxes of books from twenty-nine schools. Delta’s director found me the space that I described earlier, we got some furniture and a computer, and we were on our way.

Amy: With the acceptance of the proposal came much jubilation and many new “adventures,” or what I like to call sparring with the administration. Of course, this is a negative connotation, and one I don’t want to encourage, but to be honest, when I tried to find the right verb, there just wasn’t a substitute. We did not volley things back and forth, we did not banter, we did not discuss (though it took the guise of discussion). No, we were on totally new ground and we were constantly feeling for each other’s positions, strengths, and weaknesses. This “sparring” played itself out in the discussion of four issues: location, staffing, materials, and sponsorship.

Marnina: There seemed to be a profound incongruity between the administration’s vision for the center and the girls’. This was particularly evident in discussions about the books, pamphlets, and other resources that would be included in the center’s collection. Although most of the attention focused on the concern of appropriateness for the high school setting, there was an underlying issue that structured this concern and yet was never spoken of: the question of what is a girl, and what are girl issues? It quickly became clear that there were multiple and contradictory discourses through which definitions of girls and girlhood were being made, and the differences were incommensurable. Simply put, the administration’s liberal version of “girl power” bumped up against the girls’ grrrl power. While the former emphasizes empowerment, self-esteem, individualism, and the securing of success for girls within the existing power structures, the latter is concerned with much more transgressive possibilities. Grrrl power aims not merely to humanize our current social and cultural structures, but to transform the grounds of its existence. In questioning the relations of power that produce and sustain gendered, raced, classed, and sexed inequities, grrrl power invites new expressions of femininity, validates sexual desires beyond the heteronormative, and reconstitutes what it means to be a girl in schools, at home, and in the wider society. The books on the shelves, the activities and group discussions were mainly about exploring this set of ideas, and they provoked a certain uneasiness and anxiety on the part of the administration.

Laura: All texts have multiple interpretations, and the Delta Grrrl’s Health Collective is no exception. All parties involved—the girls, the school, and the funding agencies—interpreted the center differently. In my mind, the best example of this was the naming of the center. In my grant proposals, letters, and presentations I called the center “The Young Women’s Resource Center.” I liked this name, it sounded responsible, it seemed clear, and it was in a language easily understood by those I wanted to support my project. However, one of the first orders of business for my student steering committee was to change the name. We realized that in order to convince anyone to use the center it would have to sound cool. Although the name “Young Women’s Resource Center” signified responsibility and maturity on my part to the adults involved, it signified an adult
space to the students involved. Females my age don’t generally call ourselves young women—we call ourselves girls. It seemed important to name the space in our language as well, and to label it explicitly female. We chose the Delta Grrrl’s Health Collective. It is partially named after the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. This is a second wave feminist collective who got together to inform themselves about their own health, because their doctors felt they were incapable of understanding and therefore made decisions for them. These women learned for themselves, taught each other, and eventually published *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Grrrl comes from the riot grrrl movement, which is an early 90s feminist punk rock movement. Women got sick of sexist artists, shows that were dangerous to them, and the assumption that any girls interested in punk rock must be someone’s girlfriend. So they started bands, wrote zines, and organized their own shows. We admired the “do it yourself” ethic of both groups, and hoped that the center would be a similar space where girls could be cultural and knowledge producers. Anyway, we felt that even if no one else understood the history of our name, it sounded cool. We also thought that our logo—the motto “chicks rock” over a baby chicken with a spike collar—would convey that this was a student space.

The struggle over the name is a metaphor for the creation of the center in general—a struggle for agency and an ability to define ourselves. If the center was to be a site of empowerment, its name should suggest that teenage girls are important and the focus.

**Amy:** Staff instantly noted the Grrrls Collective change. Was it appropriate? I never really did understand the problem that some of the staff members might have had with this change. Perhaps it was the fact that it happened so suddenly in what appeared to them to be an already fast-paced, high-impact project. My concern was more for the funder. The grant never mentioned that the funds were for a Grrrls Center. Would changing the name imply a shift in audience, thus a shift in the proposal’s goals? In addition, Grrrls are not boys, and this change might close the door on male participation.

**Marnina:** In one meeting I attended, the question of boys’ access to the center was raised in a way that I found very troubling. At a certain moment, Laura was praised for the way in which boys had been encouraged to visit the center during its opening ceremony, by the prospect of getting free pizza. “Keep that in mind as a strategy to attract boys to the center,” she was told, “because it’s a problem to promote it as a girls only space.”

What significant social and cultural changes have transpired, that the permissibility of a space for girls to work on issues specifically relevant to their gendered and sexed experience is not acceptable? The answer is, I am sure, very complicated. However, one aspect of it must surely relate to what has been termed the new “gender wars,” where boys rather than girls are viewed as in need of special consideration and support. Within education circles, the “what about the boys” debate has taken a few different forms, some more progressive than others. The debate is multi-stranded, drawing on emerging discourses of “failing boys” as well as the equity discourses that feminists have successfully used to win rights for girls and women. Recent reports about girls’ out-achieving boys in standardized tests have raised alarms internationally. However, as many feminist researchers have found, much of the “failing boys” and “achieving girls” discussions do not cover the complexities of which boys are failing and which girls are achieving. Although a more careful reading of the results show that it is upper- and middle-class girls who are achieving and working class and impoverished boys who are failing, the dominance of the “failing boys” discourses leaves the impression that all girls have not only caught up with boys but are surpassing them. Therefore, boys and
not girls are in need of resources and support. Obviously, this sets up a false dichotomy that leaves the gendered competition for resources in place and leaves unquestioned the ways in which the underlying structures, organization, content, and priorities in the institution of schooling remain very patriarchal.

I was concerned that the creation of the “third space,” to use Laura’s term, was not seen as reconcilable with Delta’s admirable goal of creating an inclusive school. I was troubled that the administrator positioned the girls as responsible for ensuring the boys’ comfort—a very traditional gendered role in which girls becoming women are still asked to pay attention to and prioritize men’s needs. I wondered why boys’ uncertainty and discomfort in entering a girl-defined space was not seen as an important teachable moment for the boys. How is that the opportunity for boys to reflect on how rare it probably was for them to imagine a space in which their experience and needs were not centered, was not seen as a valuable and worthy lesson and topic of conversation? Similarly, why was a discussion about the terms and conditions under which boys might be invited to enter a girl-defined space not even conceivable?

It seemed to me that in emphasizing the relation of boys to the center, what was lost was the opportunity to focus on how the Resource Center, as a girl-defined space, could prove to be an important pedagogical site in which young women could interrogate and critique the conditions structuring their lives as gendered subjects both within and outside the school.

Laura: At our group’s first meeting, we watched the video, “All I Wanna Do.” This is a movie set in the 1960s about an all girls’ boarding school threatened with going co-ed. The girls team up to take over the school and force the administration to keep it single sex. Although some of the girls initially want to go to school with boys, through the course of the movie they realize that female space gives them the freedom to pursue goals and interpret themselves in ways they could not do in a co-ed institution. A group of girls, calling themselves The Daughters of the American Ravioli, reinterpret the school as text, to create more agency in their own lives.

We watched this movie first, because it embodied my plan for the center. I wanted to present to young women a variety of texts both popular and theoretical and then work as a community of learners to become readers. I wanted girls to learn that they interpret texts; texts do not simply act upon them. This room for interpretation gives us agency to change texts that represent us in ways we disagree with. Girls could look at their own issues, see them as social, and then use this agency to create change.

Marnina: Among the goals of feminist pedagogies is the critical examination of the connections between gendered personal experiences, social, cultural, economic and political structures, and the possibilities for their transformation. The question of how subjects are formed through their positions within social structures is a central tenet to the envisioning of feminist social change. The use of a popular film about girls’ lives offered the Delta group an entry into this kind of process by providing a framework for looking at the ways in which gender is constructed at a personal level within a network of social practices. Sometimes responses to the films evoked personal stories that then elicited others to share their similar and/or different experiences. In this way, with the opportunity to collectively analyze gendered social practices and to identify the contradictions of our own lives, we could, as a group, become analysts of our own cultural and social practices. The group analysis created the possibility of a collective critique of the myth of an individualized adolescence. Through these discussions, a questioning process was initiated about not only how gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and class shape subjectivity,
but also how these categories are generally understood as natural and inevitable. It was a way to “extra-ordinarily” re-experience the ordinary—our everyday experiences as gendered beings. Informed by aspects of critical theory, these strategies are a means of exploring how social forces shape subjectivity and how these processes can be challenged through critical reflection and action.

Laura: I didn’t know what texts I would use or how I would encourage girls to interpret them, but I had a goal. This was probably best, as I tried to structure the activities around what young women were interested in. I started to think about book groups and speaker series, but quickly learned that girls were more inclined to participate in art projects, play readings, and viewings of films. Although the two book groups I planned were total failures, in that no one read the book, there were books at the center that almost everyone involved read. One was Leslea Newman’s *Out of the Closet and Nothing to Wear*, a series of short stories about being a femme lesbian. Another was Susan Brownmiller’s history of the second wave. Also, many girls showed up to do a reading of *Lysistrata*, a play about women’s organizing against war using the strategy of refusing to have sex with their husbands. We performed this in bed sheet togas. We also performed a reader’s theater version of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* for ourselves.

Amy: Another sparring match had to do with the Resource Center’s materials: its books and pamphlets. This was a real sticky wicket. The Young Women’s Center wanted to address issues that affected teens. This did not just mean fashion and role models. Some of these issues included, but were no means limited to, sexuality: becoming or not becoming sexually active, birth control, sexual identification, masturbation, and abortion. As you can imagine, these are eyebrow-raising issues and they were the ones that, as Laura’s advisor, primarily concerned me at this time. The center housed literature that may have been appropriate for a mature teenage audience, but it was open to all students at the Delta program, and we serve seventh through twelfth graders. In addition, we had to ask ourselves what was the role of the school district in educating its students in highly personal issues. Of course, this was the entire mission of the center.

Marnina: Central Pennsylvania had been a hotbed of dissenting discussion about sex, sexuality, and educational institutions. The previous year, this conservative rural area with strong religious foundations had seen a number of high profile incidents and responses building on a history of contention. Most provocative was an event called “Sex Faire” organized on the Penn State campus by some of the feminist student organizations. This sex-positive program is organized as a fun and educational way to educate the student population about issues such as safe sex, sexually transmitted diseases, and reproductive rights, using games like Orgasm Bingo and Body Parts Twister. The event attracted the attention of state politicians who called for its cancellation. Representative John Lawless brought a video camera and taped some of the activities. He also took the issue to the state government and proposed a bill to reduce state funding to the university for having financially supported the student groups who organized the activity and others on related topics. The threats were real and the repercussions significant. However, most importantly for the Delta Collective, what transpired within the community was a heightened awareness of clashing cultures, morals, and investments, which provoked anxiety and fear. It was, I think, with this episode in mind that the Delta administration removed all the texts from the Resource Center that focused on lesbian sexuality and on the new relations between bodies and desire.

Although the administration’s position seemed to be that it was protecting the
school from the same kind of unwanted attention that the university had gotten and/or the younger students from “inappropriate” materials, what this stance obscures is how schooling is always already associated with sexuality in rich and complicated ways. As public or state institutions and places of everyday life activity, schools are sites where sexual and other identities are developed, practiced, and actively produced—through the curriculum, through social interaction, and through organized activities. Students, but also teachers and to a lesser extent other participants (parents, usually mothers, and other carers, for example) are “schooled” there, as gendered and sexual beings. Sexual and other social identities, as possible ways of living, are produced in relation to the cultural repertoires and institutional conditions of schooling. Although these processes are rendered invisible when what are assumed to be heterosexual identities are being produced, they become all too visible when other forms of sexual desire are named.

Amy: Our first step was to seek the aid of the school district librarians. At a meeting with them we concluded that any book they had on any shelf in the school district’s libraries was okay. We then reviewed the library policy against texts, which was fairly liberal. An official complaint procedure had to be followed, which required various forms to be filled out until they reached the upper echelons of the school hierarchy. But as far as the purchasing of new books, the librarians relied on what was needed in the library and what they deemed acceptable for the audience that would have access to the texts.

Almost all our books were donated, so although Laura wanted to purchase new materials, this wasn’t so much an issue as was the screening of existing texts. This screening was a two-step process. First, Laura, Delta’s director, and I read reviews of all books in the center. The fact that we got those reviews from Amazon.com meant that they were all positive, but it did highlight some texts that by their nature needed closer examination. Second, we went through all of the books in the center, looking at the index, table of contents, and reading selections. This process was opened up to the school staff, but the three teachers who offered the most input (other than the director and myself) were the social studies teacher, the health teacher, and the guidance counselor.

Laura: Books were a central component of the center. In September, the administration suggested that the Delta Grrrls meet with the high school librarians to discuss their criteria for selecting books. They told us they had no rubric for screening books prior to purchase, but had a complaint policy. They suggested we find a review for each book in our collection. We found a review on Amazon.com for each of the over one hundred books in the library and compiled them in a binder. We thought we were set.

At the same time, we were also soliciting requests from students about books they wanted in the center. These included Inga Muscio’s Cunt; Karen Salmansohn’s The Clitourist; My Secret Garden by Nancy Friday; and three magazines: Bitch, Bust, and a radical menstruation ‘zine with an unusually obscene title. Although all were legitimate, popular, and important Third Wave texts, I did not present these to the administration. Among group members, we discussed what we thought would be considered school appropriate and what would not, and we avoided or got permission slips for those texts we thought would be found unacceptable.

This system worked until the end of the school year. As the graduation project exhibit approached, teachers realized that parents would be in the center. I was asked to go through and remove possibly objectionable material, although I was never given a definition of “objectionable.” This had a certain logic; if I censored myself, then the teachers wouldn’t have to. However, the day before the graduation project, exhibit items were removed by a committee of teachers.
They removed *The Vagina Monologues*, Leslie Feinberg’s *Trans Liberation, The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, and a book of essays by Gloria Steinem. Also removed were a calendar of witches, Planned Parenthood stickers and posters, and the majority of our information on health for lesbian and bisexual women.

The most disturbing act of censorship was the removal of most of our pamphlets on queer health. While most straight girls have at least a basic idea of how to protect themselves from pregnancy and STDs, this information is not so readily available for queer girls who tend to think that lesbian sex carries no danger of disease transmission. These girls already feel isolated and are even more reluctant than heterosexual girls to ask their parents, teachers, or counselors for information. Including information on homosexuality normalizes it, making lesbian and bisexual girls just another part of the female student population the center serves. Not including this information would imply that there were no queer students at Delta, further isolating questioning students. It would also imply that lesbians are not included in the category “girl.” The Delta Grrrls didn’t think this was an acceptable message, especially considering that many of us identify as lesbian or bisexual.

We also received a letter from a teacher suggesting that we were irresponsible educators for presenting a biased perspective on the issue of abortion rights. We were told that stickers from the organization Planned Parenthood, which simply said “planned parenthood,” would have to be balanced by anti-abortion stickers, if they were to remain. Along with information from Planned Parenthood, none of which advocated abortion, we had information on birth control and several pamphlets advocating abstinence for a variety of reasons. We saw this as presenting a range of information that allowed girls to make their own responsible decisions. Suggesting that girls need information and empowerment to take control of their own bodies is a political agenda, but no more of a political agenda than those regularly presented in classrooms when teachers choose what information is and is not necessary to the understanding of a subject and what sources will be presented.

**Amy:** Laura was unhappy. Laura was frustrated. When some of the texts were pulled she understood. Outdated materials behoved no one. When some of the graphic material was pulled, she understood because many of the brochures and pamphlets could be obtained by students in any number of health care facilities downtown. But, when some “fun” texts were pulled because they contained adult language or situations, even in the spirit of fun, it took an element of control away from her and, perhaps, changed the flavor of the center. This was a difficult time for all of us because we all felt that we were compromising, and subsequently no one felt satisfied.

**Marnina:** Schools are often theorized as sites of regulation and the reproduction of social, cultural, and economic inequities. Feminist and other critical pedagogues have also conceptualized schools as having the potential to create more expansive possibilities. Often this mission is the explicit mandate of alternative schools. Some of the more repressive aspects of life in school are purposefully subverted by practices like including students in school governance, broadening curriculum content, and undermining hierarchical relations by the use of everyone’s first names: administrators, teachers, and students. Yet, as the institutional base for the Resource Center, Delta was also something of a contradictory place, both supportive of the project and also constraining. The Grrrl’s collective’s attempt to push the boundaries of permissible expressions of identity, feminist politics, and grrrl culture collided with the limits of educational culture. It seemed that, at least at the official level, a critical counter-hegemony for
girls that went beyond a very conservative feminist agenda was not to be. However, the space of the group itself was an entirely different matter altogether. Here more expansive possibilities were nourished and thrived.

Laura: There were three projects that I felt somewhat approximated my goals: the Barbie unit, Valentine’s Day, and the Women’s History Poster Project. The series of activities around Barbie dolls were some of the first planned for the center. I was looking for an accessible starting point, something with which everyone would have some familiarity. Barbie is one of the most ubiquitous cultural icons defining femininity, and it turns out people love talking about her. Every time I mentioned my plan to someone she would tell me why she hated Barbie, or what kind of Barbie she had, or how she played with Barbie, or how her mother never let her play with Barbie—everyone had something to say.

We started on a personal level by reading an article on interpreting adult recollections of Barbie play and discussing our own childhood interactions with Barbie. We then branched out into social interpretation of Barbie by reading the Barbie Chronicles, watching a documentary about the doll, and discussing the doll as a cultural artifact. Finally, we decided to give Barbie a makeover or two. This doll symbolizes women in our culture; unfortunately, she presents a very narrow definition of woman, which we decided to widen. Currently displayed in our center are WTO protestor Barbie, homeless Barbie, full body tattoo Barbie, and folk rock lesbian Barbie, among others. During this project, we quite literally reinterpreted the texts with which society presents us.

Once a year, on February 14, Hallmark does its best to remind young women that we really ought to have boyfriends. Valentine’s Day is a commercial holiday that encourages us to feel socially defective if we’re not dating. In January and February, we combined two reinterpretations of Valentine’s Day. The first was Eve Ensler’s V-Day initiative, in which groups on college campuses around the country perform the Vagina Monologues on Valentine’s Day to raise money and awareness for groups fighting against violence toward women. We attended a performance of the Vagina Monologues at Penn State. We also read and discussed the Monologues ourselves and had an invited speaker from the local shelter for women escaping domestic violence. Finally, we watched a documentary about rape. Ensler’s initiative redefines this holiday as educational, feminist, and activist.

The second reinterpretation I borrowed from my Quaker elementary school. In elementary school, we cut out big construction paper “affirmation hearts.” Everyone in the class wrote a note to each student telling them something you liked about them and attaching it to the heart. So on Valentine’s Day we reminded each other why we’re valuable and that we’re loved. And we ate lots of cookies.

Our third project was a display of posters about famous women for Women’s History Month, in the window of the local used bookstore café. History is generally presented from the point of view of rich white European males, which means it leaves out the point of view and accomplishments of many groups of people. We decided to highlight a couple of our heroes we felt everyone should know about. We chose women from a variety of periods and backgrounds: Alice Walker, Margaret Sanger, The Goddess, Sojourner Truth, Anne Bancroft, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Joan Jett. Originally we planned a kind of treasure hunt by placing the posters in a variety of locations around town with labels stating, “Women’s history is hard to find: look for the next poster at . . . .” Each of the posters we made would relate to the store where we placed them. However, due to difficulties with photocopies, we ended up placing them all in the window of the downtown coffee shop/book store. Our hope was to get people to take notice, and consider the possibility of multiple histories.
Amy: How does the story end? Well it doesn’t. As the New Year rolled around, no staff member at Delta was able to take over the staffing of the center. As a result, the center is not open to the students on a walk-in basis, which was one of the goals. It is and will always be in a state of flux. The building where we are housed is old and will probably be either renovated or closed. Either way, space changes will be made, or the center may move to a more central location. With that will come a new focus on accessibility.

Conclusions

Woven together, the various strands of the Delta Grrrl’s Health Collective story tell a tale of the unfinished and unfinishable feminist work of claiming a room of our own. It’s a story that underlines the cyclical necessity of re-thinking and re-negotiating rights to space, what shape such spaces take, and what it is that can take place there. Notwithstanding the extent to which gender equity issues have been taken up and addressed within schools and society more broadly, young women’s access to a space in which they might collectively reflect on and re-shape gendered and sexed experiences is far from redundant. What the Delta story suggests is the need for students, teachers, and feminist researchers to creatively, diligently make the case for young women’s access to such spaces from a range of perspectives and positions. Gender norms are continuously changing, offering new opportunities to girls as well as setting new limits. The rooms we claim for ourselves must be fluid enough to accommodate shifting expressions of and contradictory expectations about what it means to be young and female. It is rooms such as the out-of-the-way Delta Grrrl’s Health Collective where the processes of re-defining spaces, identities, and power relations are recognized as being in a state of necessary emergence that may open paths for schools to become sites where something interesting can happen.

NOTES

1. See Gonick.
2. See for example, Savier.
3. See Bhaba for a discussion of the concept “third space.”
4. For an in-depth discussion of girl power vs. grrrl power see Driscoll; Garrison; Jacques.
5. See for example, Epstein, Elwood, Hey, and Maw.
6. See for example, Epstein and Johnson, for a detailed discussion on sexuality and schooling.
7. See for example, Loutzenheiser.

REFERENCES


