Purple Scarves — Debra Bergoffen, Director

A few years ago we jokingly refused to call our Women’s Studies weekend work session a retreat. Women, we said, could not afford to retreat. The joke it seems is now on us. Surrender is in the air. The consciousness-raising groups of earlier feminist days are gone. In the twenty first century married women are meeting (sometimes secretly!) to read Laura Doyle’s The Surrendered Wife (http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking_point/newsid_1245000/1245345.stm) and to coach each other in the fine arts of feminine submission. According to Doyle, neither women nor men will be happy until women get back into the business of making men feel like men.

The abuses of the British created an American awareness of the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Uppity women reveal a fourth natural right—the right of feeling like a man. This right requires the presence of submissive women. The argument goes like this: women ought to submit to men's rule because men by nature are rulers; men by nature are rulers because they have women to rule; if women do not submit to men’s rule men cannot fulfill their nature as rulers; going against nature makes everyone unhappy. I’ll spare you an analysis of this logic. The idea of sexual equality, dismissed by the Southern Baptist Convention and The Promise Keepers on Biblical grounds is now rejected on the secular, but very American, ground of the pursuit of happiness. Is it time to trade in our signature color purple, for the white flag of surrender?

Within the academy, debates are raging about the continued relevance of Women's Studies programs. Our success, some argue, now makes our programs superfluous. The resurgence (endurance?) of these myths of women and men suggests that this optimism is premature. It reminds us that there is still much work to be done. Speaking out against the injustice of institutions, habits, and ideas of happiness grounded in the idea of sexual inequality is still necessary.

We have been building a community of women and men around the liberatory ideas of equality and diversity. We have instantiated these ideas in our courses, programs, and events. We see the Center as a place where these ideas are lived. As a living community, however, we cannot take our vibrancy for granted. We need to think about our future; about productive ways to respond to social and political forces; about creative ways to contribute to the intellectual and communal life of the university.

It's been several years since we rejected the idea of a retreat for the banner of “How To Can Do Days”. Many of you have suggested that it is time to gather together again — time to consider where we have been, and time to think about where we want to go. I think that you are right. Budget realities make a weekend event a dream. A day event, however, is possible. Let's take time at the beginning of the fall semester to chart our course. We are looking at scheduling this for either Friday, September 7th or Saturday September 8th. Let us know which day you would prefer. Details will follow. Send suggestions. Purple scarves will be provided.
Retiring WMST Faculty Member Sara Looney: An Interview with Anita Taylor.

Matrix periodically features interviews that highlight the work and contributions of Women's Studies faculty members. This issue we feature an interview with Sara Looney on the occasion of her retirement. Anita Taylor conducted the interview. Through her questions we discover the ways in which Sara’s path over the last twenty-one years crossed and took up the cultural and women’s movements of these decades.

Q: I would appreciate it if you would talk briefly about your path to GMU, because it seems relevant to what you did after coming here, especially your route to women’s studies.

A: From 18-26 I was a nun in Shreveport, Louisiana. I earned my BA in English at the Mariillac College in St. Louis, where my undergraduate education was primarily preparation for high school teaching, but also provided a firm grounding in theology and philosophy. I decided to leave my religious career in the late 60s, which was a time when a large exodus from the Catholic religious orders was occurring. After completing the BA, I married Mike Looney, a union now of 32 years. I taught for a year in a middle school in Milwaukee, living and working in a black neighborhood when Milwaukee experienced its worst violence following the assassination of Martin Luther King. Then I received a fellowship for graduate study at the University of Denver, and earned a PhD in Communication.

When I finished the degree we relocated to the State University of New York where my husband was offered a teaching position. The only opening for me was an administrative position. In 1980 I came to GMU as an administrator to start an academic advising center, with the intention of staying 5 years or so and moving on to an academic career. Twenty-one years later I retire here! In retrospect, it’s clear that what kept me here was the opportunity to fill a variety of roles. I have a low threshold for boredom, so it worked for me to move from the academic advising center to Chief Student Affairs Officer, University Ombudsman, Assistant to the President and then to full-time teaching faculty member in Communication and New Century College, and developing courses for Women’s Studies.

Q: What brought you to Women’s Studies?

A: As with many women of my generation, I found myself at about 45 becoming interested in women’s issues. I participated in several projects aimed at helping the university respond to women’s issues and I wanted to support an area where women and their concerns could be the subject of academic study and research. As Associate Vice President I could help with funding and space when the faculty proposed the program. When the program was being formed, I found it wonderful to watch Karen Rosenblum manage the meetings of the faculty group developing the Women’s Studies program. The structure and style were a welcome contrast to what I had experienced as an administrator.

I was also drawn to what was considered a “new” movement at the time of looking at non-patriarchal forms of religious and spiritual expression. Michelle LeBaron and I created a proposal for a course exploring women and spirituality that was chosen as the Women’s Studies Readership, (a wonderful program created by Clara Lovett that has since been “defunded”) and we had a semester to develop the course. The Readership supported us in team teaching the course. This course filled and has since been taught several times. Emerging from our experience with this course was our mutual interest in collaborative work in conflict resolution, which led to the 12 hours of course work in New Century College in conflict transformation.

My interest in Women’s Studies grew from my interest in paying attention to things of ongoing value. I realized how little we (women) have known about “our” place in the world. I realized how important it is for universities to have a place that supports and encouraged women’s voices, where women don’t feel alien. The Women’s Center and the Women’s Studies program have been a strong force for bonding women faculty and staff as well. Beginning in 1987, I worked with Rose Pascarell, Dorcas Goodwin, and Anita Taylor to create the annual faculty breakfasts and dinners. These serve as a continuing opportunity for women on campus to meet and discuss their common interests.

Q: So, you don’t think we’ve reached a “post-feminist” age when such events are no longer needed?

A: Definitely not; I’m not even sure we’ve reached a feminist age.
Looney Interview (continued)

Q: Why are you retiring now? You are not at an age you’re being forced out the door; most people would consider yours an “early” retirement.

A: My retirement is “of a piece” with my life plan. I always intended to go back to my beginning work in direct service and am now moving in that direction. For the past 4-5 years I have done a lot of volunteer work in my community and I want to do more. It is part of what brought me out of administration several years ago. I realized that parts of me as an administrator had developed that I didn’t like. When I heard myself saying to someone to do something because I said to do it, I knew it was time to leave and return to service. Teaching was that in part, but now it is time to do the community work that I love and so badly needs doing.

Q: As part of this “going back,” I know that for all your life you’ve “played” with painting and drawing, but now you are studying art seriously, that, indeed, you have a work included in a show hanging at the Fairfax Government Center.

A: Yes, I’m doing classes in oil painting and watercolor and love doing it. I find the work totally absorbing. It’s as if I enter an altered state of consciousness when I pick up a brush.

Q: Anything else that ought to be said?

A: I’ve had wonderful opportunities at GMU and have loved working here for these past 21 years. This is an institution with an incredible future and much of its strength comes from the women who work here: the faculty, staff and wage women who often give to the institution far beyond their compensation. And our students are a wonderful resource. One of the best things about teaching here is how the classes are enriched by the “older” women who come here for all the reasons that urban/suburban institutions attract such placebound students who didn’t enter (or finish) college at the earlier ages.

Q: Sara, if I remember correctly, you’re not fading totally out of our lives?

A: I will certainly be around Mason for years to come—probably for the rest of my life. It will always be important to me. So I’ll be working on projects and visiting my friends here frequently, perhaps even teaching the occasional class.

—Transcribed by Debra Bergoffen
11th Annual Women’s Leadership Conference

“Faculty Wonderful!” “Uplifting!” “Time to Get Back to the Center”: A Report on the 11th Annual Women’s Leadership Conference

The 11th Annual Women’s Leadership Conference, a day focused on “Women in the Media,” began with an uplifting talk by Marcia Ann Gillespie, editor of Ms. Magazine since 1993 and prior to that editor of Essence. She was named “One of Fifty Faces for America’s Future” by Time for her achievements. Gillespie told an audience of approximately 125 conference attendees that she was going to share her way of thinking about leadership, a subject which “burns in my soul” all the time.

First, she said, we must find our voices. She noted women’s tendency to be silent in rooms filled with “others” but to talk in the hallways outside the room. “Girlfriends,” she said, “we can’t be mumbling here. Our voices are meant to be heard. Voice is the key to leadership. Step up, take risks.”

But another key is what her grandmother called “takin’ low.” By that she meant that women don’t always have to be up front but can learn to promote others by listening, “really listening,” including listening to the self. “It’s not about winning,” Gillespie said, “it’s about ‘being’, getting cozy with yourself, believing in something strongly, living the songs we sing about.” She also talked about the need to include people in our lives who will question us and our choices, not just surrounding ourselves with “the perpetual amen chorus.” She advised women to be open, to be surprised, to keep our sense of wonder, and, finally, to talk about our values and what things are sacred to us.

Gillespie asked us to think about the “click points” that made us become feminists. For her, it was being at church when she was eleven and hearing the minister publicly shame a 15-year-old girl for being pregnant and unwed. As he exhorted her to ask the church’s forgiveness, she remembers her feet and the feet of all the women beginning to tap out their anger at the minister, yet all remained silent. And nobody said a word when the man down the street beat up his wife every Saturday night. “I became a feminist,” she said, “in the silences imposed on us. Silence is the thing that most marks our oppression.”

She also became a feminist during the Civil Rights Movement because it was only about the African-American men while the women were in the kitchen frying chicken. She became a feminist because “otherwise I would have lost my sanity” with all of the boxes put around women. She needed to hope for a just society. Leadership, she said, is making the idea of a just society a reality. “Girls, the guys have had their turn deciding how the world goes down. It’s our turn. But we can’t just be better men—not Margaret Thatcher’s, Condoleezza Rices,” she said.

Gillespie closed by retelling a story told to her by Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, a woman who never moved above poverty level but who was one of the first to stand and be counted. The story was about a trick some boys played on a blind woman. They asked her if the bird they held in their hands was dead or alive. If she guessed alive, they planned to kill the bird; if dead, to let it go free. The blind woman told them that it didn’t matter, what matters is that we “live by the possibility of what we hold in our hands.” We hold in our hands the possibility of leadership, Gillespie concluded.

Gillespie’s talk was followed by a Q&A session. In response to a question about how she achieved her success, she said that her father always encouraged her, from when she was a small child, to use her voice. She also attributed her determination to the difficult days of segregation when “black folks used to say to their kids, ‘You know we’re depending on you.’” Student Samantha Davis asked how she could stop herself from apologizing for talking too much in classroom discussions. Gillespie replied that we should never apologize for talking out and, when we find ourselves apologizing, to have someone pinch us until we stop.

Concurrent sessions began immediately after Gillespie’s talk. These included “Delivering the New Message (Using Multimedia),” with Deborah Alderson from
Leadership Conference Continued

Anteon Corporation; “Shattering Images: Women Dismissing, Creating, and Reclaiming Media,” with Cindy Lont, Chair of Communications and WMST faculty; “Playing Herself: Gender and Sexuality as Performed by Hip Hop’s Lil Kim,” with Michele Smith-Bermiss, English and Af-Am faculty; and “Out of the Box and On to the Adventure: Women, Leadership, and the Outdoors,” with Jessica Gilbert and Star Wilbrham from Hemlock Outlook.

The sessions, presented in a discussion format, were lively and informative. In Cindy Lont’s session, for example, Sally Merten questioned the meaning of a shift she's noticed in commercials where men act like simpletons and need their wives to set them straight. Others responded with thoughts about the kind of expertise women are shown to have in these commercials as well as the implied message that only bumbling men choose strong, smart women or, conversely, that strong women turn men into idiots.

After a “networking lunch,” Yvette Richards Jordan, WMST faculty (who attended with her small daughter and husband), introduced the video “Killing Us Softly III.” The Conference concluded with a wrap-up panel, moderated by Debra Bergoffen and consisting of Yvette, Cindy Lont, and Sandra Wilbur from the Fairfax Commission for Women. Each gave their impressions of the day’s events with Cindy noting how wonderful it was for her to be reminded, in the midst of our busy lives, that there are things that center us as women and as feminists. In the short Q&A which followed, a heated discussion centered on how we can raise our daughters so that they will not be so influenced by all of these media images and, conversely, the need to recognize that parents are not totally responsible for all of the bad things or the good things that children become. In her closing remarks, Debra thanked Rebecca Walter and all of the organizers and volunteers for their hard work. Then, echoing Gillespie, she asked us to remember that we “hold the possibilities in our hands and the choice is ours to give them life.”

—Terry Myers Zawacki, English
FEMINIST BOOKSHELF


Yes, this really is a map to the terrain of the female body, feature by feature. Eggs, x chromosome, breasts, clitoris, uterus, hormones, fat and muscle—Natalie Angier explores all through a lucid exposition of biology and medical science enlivened by her distinctive personal voice and offbeat sense of humor. In the “well tempered clavier,” for example, Angier produces a hymn of praise to the clitoris even as she asks probing questions about evolutionary biology—what is it for?—and covers the history and sexual politics of “treatment” for intersexed people. Her chapters on hormones cut through the nonsense that characterizes much discussion of this subject; among many other topics, you will find a thoughtful analysis of estrogen replacement. Here as elsewhere, Angier refuses simple answers but offers a wealth of information and reflection shaped by her spirit of inquiry, curiosity, and critical intelligence.

A science writer for the *New York Times*, Angier shapes her prose with authority and grace. Most of all, this book stands out for Angier’s abiding respect and affection for her subject. Very rarely, I recognized with a pang as I read, does one encounter such full-hearted acceptance and celebration of women’s bodies. This is also a book unapologetically and undefensively addressed to women. Men are cordially invited to overhear, but the book is not about them.

*Woman* is highly recommended for anyone who loves and hates her own body, and who wants to engage more fully in the feminist project of joyful self-acceptance.

—Barbara Melosh, English


*The Politics of Gender after Socialism* is a stunning analysis of how the gender relations of the former socialist states are being transformed in the transition to privatization and market economies. Written as an extended introduction to a multidisciplinary research project on gender conducted with colleagues from East Central Europe, the book provides an overview of the central themes that emerged from that research and draws out its theoretical implications. In their analysis of current developments, the authors generate critical new insights into the distinctions between public and private, dependence and autonomy, and coercion and choice—key terms that have structured feminist analysis—that advance scholarship not only with respect to East Central Europe but also in the West.

Certainly, the “transition” has had a differential effect on the lives of men and women with respect to new conditions in the labor market and diminished social welfare services. This alone would suggest that the “transition” needs to be considered from a gendered perspective. But the authors make a larger claim, that different aspects of the transition are being played out through gendered constructions and discourses. For example, public debates about reproduction (and particularly about abortion) are also coded arguments about the morality and political legitimacy of the state. But the way this discourse plays out varies widely, given the specific political and historical context (Ceausescu’s Romania vs Catholic Poland, for example) in which it arises.

One of the wonderful things about this book is that Gal and Kligman’s analysis consistently goes beyond the ideology of socialism or nationalism and is finely tuned to the contingencies that shape both state policy and social practice. The authors also provide detailed background about the former socialist states and make illuminating comparisons with the social policies and gender distinctions that support the welfare states of the West. Finally, by showing how processes of state formation and marketization are both constituted by gender and reflexively shape gender relations, they demonstrate how crucial gender remains as a category of social and political analysis.

—Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, Sociology
Semester at Sea: Community and Caring as Education

In the fall of 1999 just as faculty and students at George Mason were gathering momentum for the new term, a van loaded with my family of five broke down on the Washington beltway. The van was en route to the airport, bulging with essentials for one hundred days at sea. Somehow, we found alternative transportation and made it to the flight that would take us to Vancouver, Canada and embarkation. Hoping that this stormy beginning was not a portent, we boarded the SS Universe Explorer as faculty and family, ready for an extraordinary experiential education adventure.

The SS Universe Explorer sails twice a year to ports unusual for tourist operators, giving students and faculty unique opportunities to develop global perspectives. In-port trips are led to jungles by biologists, Indian dalit villages by sociologists and Chinese mental hospitals by psychologists. Semester at Sea has been offering this experience to students for more than sixty years, and the opportunity to travel as faculty with my children had special meaning to me because I had reveled in the experience as an undergraduate 23 years earlier.

We joined over seven hundred undergraduate students on deck, craning for a last glimpse of loved ones as we sailed out of Vancouver harbor. This scene was to be repeated a dozen times as we slipped in and out of ports in Asia, India and Europe. Teaching on board ship is very different than teaching at Mason. There were distractions that could not be ignored, like the flying fish and dolphins that often swim shipside through the Indian Ocean. Students were known to fall out of their chairs when the sea was rough, or to slide as a group from one side of the room to the other when a rogue wave surprised us. They brought real experiences from the ports to relate to our conflict resolution curriculum: experiences of civilization’s treasures and the relics of its struggles, preserved not only in museums but in the faces of people they met. They developed new understandings of war when they saw the shiny red tile roofs of Dubrovnik, reconstructed since the conflict there. They learned about gender as it shapes commerce in Hong Kong, relief efforts in Cambodia and public worship in Morocco. They learned about themselves.

For my family and me, the time on board ship was as precious as our in-port adventures. There we became part of a community with the feeling of a rather wealthy village. Unhurried conversations happened in hallways, lounges and classrooms, freed as we were from telephones, email, and the need to attend to house, car and the many tasks that make up “everyday life.” There was time to explore, to reflect and to linger in ways that felt luxurious. There was time to dance, to share discoveries, to celebrate milestones. We left the safe haven of the ship with regret and fond memories when the hundred days were over.

I could not help but reflect on the time, a few years earlier, when I had worked on the President’s Future Committee at George Mason University to gather perspectives about our direction. I realized that many of the things students, faculty and staff had named as important then were available on the ship. Our teaching and learning were integrated not just by discipline, but by the diverse and rich experiences that proved both reality-test and resource. Our sense of belonging was strengthened through shared values, experiences and caring for each other and the communities we visited. The intensity of our adventure stimulated us to express our feelings and dreams to each other, and to engage in collaborative creative endeavours.

When you’ve been to sea, it is impossible to forget the spaciousness and elegance that is our planet. The touch of tiny babies in Indian orphanages stays on hands; the mud of the jungle lingers in fabrics. But what lasts best are the relationships, the times when someone not famous in an unknown place stopped to offer a hand or a smile, when a friend touched my shoulder as I read sad news from home. It is this experience of community and relationship that has informed my forthcoming book, From the Heart: A Relational Approach to Conflict Resolution.

—Michele LeBaron, Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution
In the 1970’s, a widely displayed bumper sticker proclaimed “A woman’s place is in the House...and in the Senate.” Each election cycle provides an opportunity to reassess women’s progress in elected and appointed political office. Three factors are generally examined in these reassessments: the overall number of women in office, the appointment of women to influential political positions, and the likely impact these women will have on policy issues traditionally viewed as important to women.

In terms of the standard benchmarks for women in elected office, the 2000 election shows continued, slow progress. The current 107th Congress reflects a record number of women in both the Senate, 13 of 100 members, and the House, 61 of 435 members. At the state level, four current governors are women. The Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University (http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/cawp/index.html) reports a slight decrease in the number of women in state legislatures: 1,656 women in 2001 – 14 less than in 2000.

President George W. Bush has scored a number of “firsts” in his executive appointments. Condoleezza Rice is the first woman and the first person of color to be appointed National Security Adviser. He appointed three women to his cabinet: Gale Norton is the first woman to be Secretary of the Interior, Ann Veneman is the first woman to be Secretary of Agriculture, and Elaine Chao is Secretary of Labor. Among other high level executive appointments, Bush appointed Christine Todd Whitman as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

President Bush has also scored “firsts” in appointing more women to high-level White House staff positions. Karen Hughes, as counselor to the president, is the highest ranking woman presidential aide in history. At the daily senior White House staff meetings, eight of the eighteen attendees are women. And, the general culture in the White House is touted as being “family friendly” with expectations that staffers will leave work at a relatively normal time, by Washington standards, and limit their work on the weekends.

In the current administration there are over 480 full-time presidential appointments requiring Senate confirmation. The Brookings Presidential Appointee Initiative (http://www.appointee.brookings.edu) is tracking and analyzing Bush’s progress in filling these positions. By the end of March, selections had been announced for about 125 positions – with about a quarter being women. President Bush’s personnel director reports that about 30 percent of Bush’s choices for high-level positions are women. If this appointment trend continues, the number of women appointed by Bush would be comparable to the number appointed by Clinton and exceed the number appointed by former Presidents Reagan, about 12 percent, and Bush, about 20 percent.

Although the Bush administration may have a laudable record in terms of appointing women, numbers do not necessarily signal an administration that is concerned about women’s political issues. At the same time that the Bush administration is characterized as being as diverse as the Clinton administration, it is also characterized as being even more conservative than the Reagan administration. On substantive women’s issues, the Bush administration generally and Bush’s women appointees in particular do not receive high scores. This is not surprising. Republican women running for office or appointed to office are likely to have worked within the Republican Party and to represent more traditional Republican positions.

President Bush’s appointees may well be representing gender but not representing a diversity of viewpoints or a range of women’s views. Public opinion polls reveal a “gender gap” with more women supporting the Democratic position on a number of social and economic issues. To date Bush has not appeared concerned about that gap. If Bush is given the opportunity to appoint a Supreme Court justice, which appears probable, that appointment will be the most important in terms of women’s political issues and most telling about Bush’s position on those issues.

—Pris Regan, Public and International Affairs
CRITICAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND STUDENT DIVERSITY

For the last two years, we have co-taught a course in NCLC called Creating a Just Community in the Face of Difference. One of our biggest challenges has been to put our theory into action. To us, critical feminist pedagogy emphasizes the practice of examining inconsistencies between historically institutionalized knowledge and an individual’s experience of subordination and oppression. In the process of that examination, students develop critical tools necessary for resisting and responding to oppression in socially just ways. But how to translate this into the daily practices of the classroom? And what does this mean in relation to our particular student body, which is ranked among the ten most diverse in the nation?

Gender differences, of course, remain painfully evident in the classroom. Both women and men are rigidly constrained by gender role expectations, manifested particularly in restricted patterns of participation. At this year’s Women’s Leadership Conference, keynote speaker and Editor-in-Chief of Ms. Magazine, Marcia Ann Gillespie, was asked how she found her way to feminism. She responded that “it was in the silences” – all the silences imposed on women, and all the silences women imposed on themselves. A critical pedagogy examines the silences in the classroom. What is not being said? Which voices are being marginalized at the moment?

In addition to gender differences, our students come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, with 16% Asian, 9% African American, 7% Hispanic/Latino, and 4% international students. 23% of our students speak a language other than English at home. 64% of the student body is reported as white. (In our current course, some students locate their home cultures in Zambia, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Mexico, Bolivia, Sierra Leone and Lebanon!) Now that GMU is past the “token” stage of minority enrollment, a rich range of voices from students of color is possible. What strategies have we learned to prevent silencing or marginalizing these voices?

Mason is diverse in other ways. GMU does not keep count of our GLBT students but we know from representative studies that 5-12% of our students identify as GLBT. Students also are different ages and come from radically different social class conditions (and conditioning.) Moreover, our students tend not to be insulated from the rest of the world. Many are putting themselves through school, including some single mothers. Others receive help from relatives, but pay for their cars and living expenses. (Yes, cars; hardly superfluous in Northern Virginia.) Others are economically privileged. How do such differences manifest themselves in the classroom? Can we acknowledge – and find ways to accommodate the hectic schedules of hard-working students while maintaining academic standards? Do dominant forms of academic discourse confound and intimidate some students from working class backgrounds and, if so, are there mitigating approaches? Are there useful strategies for working with prejudiced or insensitive comments about any sexual, religious, political or other identity, instead of ignoring the comments or shaming the speakers?

In practice, exploring issues of difference can be both problematic and liberatory. It seems to us that to be transformative, classroom discourse must allow individuals to discuss their personal stories which illustrate group subordination. That means creating space expansive enough to hold feelings of victimization, anger, guilt, fear, and empowerment as well as a wide range of ideas. It also means working with privileged as well as targeted group identities, helping students reduce the misinformation and mistrust that hinders them from hearing one another and becoming each others’ allies. Here’s our bottom line: to create a classroom community that offers space and safety for every individual to continually explore and authentically represent her or himself.

Many factors play a role in choosing teaching/learning strategies which are maximally inclusive. They include disciplinary content, particular student demographics, classroom process, group identities of the instructor, and selection of course materials. We have been exploring these issues actively for the last two years in our NCLC class, and some experiments have worked better than others. The main question has been: How can we “open up” our classroom so that more students are intellectually engaged? Our over-arching strategy has been to build community in the classroom. With mutual connections developed over time, we find that class attendance increases, participation expands and deepens, and more authentic communication occurs. Then, the skills and practices of building community in the class can be extended outward. We employ principles and exercises from Sheri Brown’s National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), in which people learn to listen, shift their attitudes, and become fierce allies with one another. This only seems to happen to the degree that students genuinely believe that --in this classroom—every person and every group counts. We’ve also been working with the model of “deep democracy” originating with Arnold Mindell and John L Johnson. Their main idea is that groups work best when they honor all aspects of themselves, individually and collectively, especially the parts injured, dishonored or ignored. It takes some careful observation and practice to observe and name whatever is happening in the moment without making anyone wrong. We’ve been experimenting with tools such as “checking-in” with the class during or after emotionally charged moments, asking for a “weather report” when we sense the energy going dead, and working constructively with insensitive and prejudiced comments rather than ignoring them or shaming the speakers. We also have worked out some useful steps for treating subjects which are painful to some class members, such as rape or racial profiling.

We imagine that you have found useful resources and strategies as well, and it would be great to hear about them. An opportunity is developing to do just that. Under Karen Rosenblum, the Office of University Life is planning a two-day “Teaching Retreat” in August, 2001, where faculty will explore the opportunities and challenges of working with the heterogeneity of our student body. A large part of the workshop will involve faculty giving “mini-lessons” which demonstrate our own best practices in a diverse classroom. This could be an exciting chance to work together, reminiscent of the old PAGE retreats. If you would like more information, please contact Victoria Rader at vrad@mu.edu.

—Victoria Rader, Sociology
—Rose Pascarell, University Life
Virtually Safe: Creating a Space for Survivors of Violence Online

My research on domestic violence has led to my involvement with the Communities Against Violence Network, directed by Marc Dubin. CAVNET is an online community collaborative that comprises a database, a listserv for experts, and an online voice and text forum for survivors of abuse. I co-facilitate the CAVNET forum, which provides a safe, anonymous space for survivors to tell about their experiences of violence, ask for help, and get information. The forum draws a diverse group of 700-800 visitors a month during its bi-weekly sessions.

What can an online forum do for survivors? The importance of providing a safe space to tell one’s story of abuse and to be heard and believed cannot be underestimated. Visitors to the room often say and hear that being able to talk about the abuse and listen to other survivors’ stories, has dramatically improved the quality of survivors’ lives. On a weekly basis, new visitors come in and build up the courage to speak about their experiences. As weeks pass, they often begin to talk about the abuse, seek local services or leave the abuser if they have not already done so. Perhaps most importantly, the survivors learn from each other that they are not alone, that the abuse was not their fault, and that it is possible to heal their wounds.

The stories told in the forum serve as a reality check for my own research and as an irreplaceable source of information about the nature and outcomes of abuse. What I learn from the survivors points to areas of concern not currently being addressed by research, service providers, or legislators. Most striking is the detrimental impact that the culture of victim blaming has on survivors. Although the visibility of abuse has increased dramatically over the past 30 years, victim blaming continues unabated, and this is an area that prevention and intervention efforts need to begin to address. In addition to providing me with a place learn about issues related to violence and abuse, the forum allows me to share what I know about domestic violence with people who can use the information most. CAVNET provides a unique opportunity for anyone who would like to help end abuse to learn from the experts, those who have been there. For more information on CAVNET and the online forums, see www.cavnet.org.

—Molly Dragiewicz, Center for Policy Research for Women and Families