Social Justice for (University) Credit? The Women’s and Gender Studies Practicum in the Neoliberal University

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Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) have long institutionalized some form of praxis in their degree programs - often understanding students working in, and with, community organizations as “activism” and thus as pivotal to the field’s commitment to engender social change directly and not only teach about it. Accordingly, many WGS programs in Canada have some form of practicum, internship, or co-operative education program on the books, either as a compulsory or as an optional part of the undergraduate — and increasingly also of the graduate — degree. Nearly half, or twenty-three out of fifty, Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) undergraduate programs at Canadian universities list such a component. Four WGS programs among and in addition to these, list a graduate level praxis component, bringing the total number of praxis components to 27 at 24 institutions. Thus, collectively WGS have much experience regarding community involved praxis learning. This expertise should position WGS programs well as Canadian postsecondary institutions, increasingly “discover” that students’ community involvement is beneficial, not only for students’ motivation and the university’s reputation, but also when making the case to politicians and the public for liberal arts’ continued relevance. WGS expertise is rarely recognized when community-based service learning is institutionalized in postsecondary

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institutions. And, the neoliberal emphasis on workplace readiness that drives these initiatives puts WGS in an interesting position of having to capitalize on teaching feminist praxis.

In this paper, we tackle the larger question of how WGS programs negotiate the growing demand of both workplace-ready and community involved postsecondary education by taking a close look at how praxis components are conceptualized on program webpages. As the first step in a larger study, in 2012 we examined the web-based program descriptions of all Canadian WGS programs that have instituted a practicum, an internship, a placement, or a co-operative educational experience. Understanding the praxis component as a productive site for studying how WGS programs negotiate the changing landscape of postsecondary education in Canada and position themselves vis-à-vis the demands that these changes make on all academic programs, our initial analysis of web-based program descriptions shows that these articulate the goal of feminist teaching for social change side by side with the claim of preparing students for the labour market. More in-depth research is needed to understand more fully whether the praxis component becomes a site of collision between feminist activist aspirations and the new managerialism with its goal of workplace readiness, and whether this leads programs to adapt creatively or merely conform to changing postsecondary agendas in the context of the ongoing struggle for survival and relevance of WGS programs. The larger question that drives this research is whether and how WGS programs are changed as universities change, as these programs move away from broad liberal arts education to an increased emphasis on workplace readiness.

**The Neoliberal University as Context**

Today the Women’s and Gender Studies practicum must be analysed in a context of neoliberal policy approaches to postsecondary education in Canada. For some time now it has been evident that the culture of postsecondary education has been shifting under the influences of neoliberalism (Newson, 2012). Neoliberalism affects both the organization and funding of university education at federal and provincial levels as well as the strategic research and teaching goals of individual university administrations. Prominent among these shifts are: the governmental underfunding of education and a corresponding increase in tuition rates (CAUT, 2012a); the devolution of full-time faculty positions into part-time casual labour (CAUT, 2012b); and, the overall devaluation of any degree program that cannot be said to lead directly to a specific job in the paid labour force upon graduation and, more specifically, that is not located in academic fields thought to lead to the development of new products and services, such as the sciences, engineering and health (Newson, 2012). Less prominent, but equally problematic, is the way in which education-related
services, including everything from food and cleaning services to the private medical insurance on psychological counselling services, have been steadily parceled out on a contract basis to private corporations over the last twenty or so years (Reimer and Ste. Marie, 2010, p. 139, 149). Furthermore, the trend toward handing upper level administrative positions over to men and women whose credentials are no longer the PhD but rather an MBA marks a significant shift in academic culture of Canadian postsecondary institutions toward managerialism (Newson, 2012).

In a global context, especially in contrast to those countries considered to be ‘developing,’ Canada is rather fortunate to have enjoyed the protection and support of postsecondary education by the state for so long in the post World War II period. Inter-governmental organizations such as the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), among others, have increasingly become, “major sites for the organization of knowledge about education, and have created a cajoling discourse of ‘imperatives of the global economy’ for education” (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p. 79). This discourse has supported policies on financial austerity for education in the world’s poorest countries, where the World Bank has frequently required states to download the full fee for the service of postsecondary education to the student in order to receive loans that support the functioning of the rest of the state apparatus. For instance, globally, states have largely been absent from the responsibility of subsidizing all levels of education (whether primary, secondary and tertiary) and in many states education is traded as a service that can be commodified at any number of levels (Tomasevski, 2006; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). With the Canadian provincial governments continuing to fund on average about 65% of the cost of university education in 2009, though that has decreased from 90% in 1979, Canadian students might even consider themselves fortunate in comparison (CAUT, 2012a). Universities in other parts of the world have long since learned to operate as private enterprises, both in terms of the policy structure, goals, and values attached to their degrees; Canadian universities are in the process of having to do so as well. The impacts of these shifts are most evident in the critiques of the university that both student and faculty organizations make, and to which academic freedom and the right to access an advanced education are central. Organizations like the Canadian Association of University Teachers, numerous part- and full-time faculty unions across the country, and student general assemblies have been the most vocal in making clear the impacts of increased tuition and decreased essential resources, such as fewer full-time faculty, as was demonstrated in Quebec in 2012 (Marshall, 2012).

Predictably, the question of postsecondary education’s applicability to the knowledge-based job market has captured the attention of administrators, students, and university marketers alike – a preoccupation
that is itself indicative of the encroaching managerialism of the institution. There is no shortage of interest in university education, one large UNESCO study says there has been: “a 53% increase in the global demand for university in the last 10 years” (cited in Miller, 2010, p. 200). But what exactly is the demand for? Despite some evidence from the UK that employers outside the professions and trades prefer to train their own employees (Parker, 2003, p. 533), many universities are trying to demonstrate strenuously that a university degree is a direct job-entry qualification. And, indeed it already is. Statistical evidence shows that humanities graduates have comparable rates of employment to graduates of other types of college and university education (Walters and Frank, 2010). Nevertheless, university administrations and policy experts have developed the notion that every student must arrive on the job market with directly transferrable skills and that certain fields, such as the liberal arts, cannot possibly hope to address this need without major adjustments. The conclusions of the Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services, known simply by its author’s name as the “Drummond Report” (2012), suggest that the transformation of universities can partly be accomplished through the institution of work placements and internships prior to graduation (Drummond, 2012). In Ontario, this recommendation has come about in the context of proposed major restructuring of the public sector economy in order to reduce the provincial deficit and in the process requiring universities to streamline their offerings. For example, in their survey of, “the new baccalaureate programs in Ontario universities that have been approved over the past six years, about 90 percent have titles that suggest a career orientation” (Clark et al., 2009). The liberal arts have come under scrutiny in this context for not producing students as proto-professionals with a specific job title awaiting them. Public criticism is heaped upon the liberal arts for creating a failed middle-class, as suggested below in an editorial response to the 2012 students’ general strike in Quebec – a strike that protested the threatened gradual retraction of provincial funding from postsecondary education:

The protesters do not include accounting, science, and engineering students, who have better things to do than hurl projectiles at police. They’re the sociology, anthropology, philosophy, arts, and victim-studies students, whose degrees are increasingly worthless in a world that increasingly demands hard skills. The world will not be kind to them. They’re the baristas of tomorrow and they don’t even know it, because the adults in their lives have sheltered them and encouraged their mass flight from reality. (Wente, 2012, emphasis added)

It has been suggested that students increasingly think of themselves as consumers and expect their education to be a made-to-order product (Brulé, 2004). Some have even developed typologies of commodification to describe
the neoliberal university environment. For example, Brian Miller (2010) lists several modes of commodification that include— the universities as a point of sale for credentials or a skill set, and a university education as a step towards ever more voracious consumption through increasing one’s future earning power.

WGS programs are sympathetic to the reality that students face a pared down learning environment, rich in private sector-sponsored technology that is short on full-time faculty as well as tremendous debt post-graduation. WGS programs also feel the pressure to address more directly the context of fear of future youth unemployment. In 2012, youth unemployment in Canada was 14.7% for 15-24 year olds, double that of Canada’s total jobless rate; 27,000 fewer youth were employed (Penhorwood, 2012). According to Statistics Canada, the unemployment rate for this same group as of March 2016, although slightly better than in 2012, continues at 13.4% (Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, The Daily, March 2016). This is the context in which students make decisions about which courses to take and what program of study to commit to. And this is the context in which WGS programs undergo curricular reform.

WGS Praxis Between Service and Activism
Given the wealth and diversity of institutionalized praxis and community learning in Canadian WGS programs, surprisingly little critical literature exists that reflects upon this curriculum component in the specific contexts of Canadian WGS and/or current trends in Canadian postsecondary education more broadly. The same cannot be said for the American context, where an extensive body of literature analyses the university organized WGS praxis component. An even larger body is concerned with the role of what is called “service learning” in the wider university. In part, this dearth of Canadian specific literature can be explained by the fact that the broader term “community service learning” (CSL), meaning the integration of work in and with the community into university learning, is still a relatively new concept for Canadian postsecondary institutions. In contrast, service learning has been around in US postsecondary education for at least two decades, during which it has received presidential support, first by the Clinton administration and, more recently, from Obama’s White House. However, just like their US counterparts, Canadian WGS programs have been early practitioners of institutionalizing community-based, experiential learning initiatives in undergraduate, and increasingly, in graduate curricula—a role for which WGS is rarely recognized (Naples, 2002).

Given the wealth of the (overwhelmingly) American body of literature addressing community service learning broadly, and WGS community-based learning specifically, a complete literature survey is impossible. In the following, we draw out some of the more problematic assumptions underlying the literature and take into view some of the more helpful
reflective critical engagements with community-based learning initiatives.

Common to the feminist literature is the assumption of a quasi-natural affinity of WGS and praxis learning, probably due to the widely circulated origin story of academic WGS as having emerged as the “arm” or “academic wing” of the second women’s (liberation) movement (Dugger, 2008; Washington, 2000). From this, many practitioners continue to take for granted a specific activist WGS mandate and make activism the raison d’être of the field. Accordingly, merely teaching about feminism or “raising feminist consciousness” is insufficient to many. Some, like Nancy Naples, even charge the institutionalization of Women’s Studies in the academy with, “constrain[ing] the development of collective political action” (p. 387). More widely shared, however, is the self-understanding that in WGS, “we teach not only to educate our students, but also to enable them to use this knowledge to work for social justice” (Williams and Ferber, 2008, p. 47). To do so requires us, “to teach students to merge feminist theory with social action in order to transform systemic gender, class, and race inequalities” (Bubriski and Semaan, 2009, p. 91). Within this view, the WGS community practicum, internship, placement, action project, university-based community service learning, and co-op program becomes invested not only with promoting, but with actually accomplishing, transformative learning that targets (structural) change—a rather grand promise and expectation, to say the least.

The broader problem with the field’s attachment to activism is, as Catherine Orr has pointed out, that activism is “an ill-defined, endlessly-elastic term” often, “used in punitive ways to chastise WGS practitioners whose scholarly projects or theoretical orientations stray too far from the practical—and thereby political …—application that activism is said to represent” (Orr 2012, p. 90). The elasticity of the term means that nearly all and anything can qualify as “activism,” and a distinction between charity, volunteer, and social justice work is often missing. At the same time, certain forms of community engagement—such as the daily struggles of marginalized women—rarely are recognized in these terms (Orr 2012, pp. 87-89). Orr suggests that the less obviously or less immediately political is frequently lost or devalued (p. 97) in this insistence of the field’s activist roots as its founding principle. To add to Orr’s analysis, the danger of WGS practitioners devaluing the less immediately or less obviously political lies in reducing university learning to its “use value.” Such emphasis on the greater “use value” of certain forms of learning over others shows an affinity to the technocratic and corporate evaluation strategies employed in the neoliberal university, and thus is something we might want to resist rather than embrace.

In some quarters a sense of (political) urgency drives the arguments for the institutionalization of praxis components in the WGS curriculum. For some, the urgency arises from the shifting political climate of the last 30
years, marked simultaneously by the neoliberal attack on the welfare state, increased privatization, larger global/local interdependence – all of which make community service learning seem a political necessity today (Barber, 2012). For others, institutionalizing praxis has a more compensatory function: to make up for the loss of what once were vibrant larger social movements; and, for the (presumably) decreased involvement of WGS students (and faculty) in community activism today (Forbes, Garber and Kensinger, 1999; Bubriski and Semaan, 2009). Both approaches are thrown into sharp relief in the Canadian context where, as Joanne Muzak (2011) reminds us, the conservative government, under Prime Minister Harper, since it came into office in 2006 systematically defunded feminist women’s (and any other) advocacy organizations that countered the government’s socially conservative agenda. Canadian non-profit organizations were prohibited from using federal funds for research, advocacy, or lobbying. As a consequence, feminist organizations became depoliticized and were increasingly called upon to provide social services instead. Further, as Lise Gotell points out, these neoliberal policies often compel non-profits, “to adopt an individualized and depoliticized lens” (cited in Muzak, 2011, p. 97) onto social problems, gendered or otherwise. This, together with insufficient numbers of placements in feminist non-profits, means fewer opportunities for students to observe actual activist work during their community placements and thus a larger risk that they mistake social service work, as important as it may be, with work that targets the very social structures that perpetuate social inequalities and injustices. We also may want to heed the early American Women’s Studies scholar Bonnie Zimmerman’s caution that the emphasis within WGS on volunteer activities “may actually reinforce current power structures and relations by taking on some of the work that used to be considered the responsibility of the state” (2002, p. 188). Canadian educator Don Dippo (2005) similarly asks us to consider whether community placements – by feeding our and the students’ illusion of doing “something” – inadvertently advance, rather than challenge, the “neo-conservative fantasy” that volunteer work can replace the welfare state.

While anxieties over the present state of politics, mixed with a nostalgic longing for a lost activist feminist past, might animate much of the WGS praxis literature, the critical voices cited above should remind us that community-based learning can and should not always, nor exclusively, be equated with activism. Assuming that a WGS praxis component is ‘activist’ simply because it requires students to learn from or with, or engage in activities outside of the traditional classroom, seems faulty. It is also equally faulty to assume that broadly practiced community service learning might not spawn activist commitments among students. The interpretation of a WGS praxis component as engaging in activism or charity might in fact depend upon the audience. Indeed, WGS’ exemplary
“community involvement” is also strategically employed to demonstrate the field’s continued (now civic) relevance to university administrators looking at WGS programs with the budget axe already in hand. Case in point, in 2012 at the University of Alberta, the proposed graduate WGS program received public provostial approval precisely for its mandatory community service component; an approval that certainly did not laude this praxis component for its activist feminist agenda.

Indeed, the wider US literature on community service learning asserts a whole range of other associated benefits, many of which the feminist literature embraces too. For students, community involvement is thought to make theoretical material more relevant by providing “real world contexts” (Dugger, 2008, p. 1; also Evans et al., 2006), and so enhance variously their academic skills and social character; communities are presumed to have their needs met; and universities can improve their community relations (Bubriski and Semaan, 2009). Seemingly, it’s a “win-win” situation for all. Needless to say much of the literature is rather enthusiastic.

Some authors worry whether the students’ work assignments sufficiently correspond with community needs or whether they risk draining further resources from already overburdened organizations (Forbes, Garber and Kensingher, 1999); others rightly wonder how to distinguish short-term charitable, status-quo-preserving work from sustainable interventions into larger structural inequality. Certainly, the extent of time spent in the community setting and the kind and extent of reflection taught in university courses that accompany the praxis component matter greatly. In this sense, WGS programs with a deep theoretical commitment to challenging hierarchy and transforming unequal relations of power may be well-placed to initiate meaningful relationships with community partners, in which even if the individual students are somewhat transitory from year to year, the institutional commitments of the program to the host organization buoy up a substantial relationship of trust (Byrd 2007). But as to whether WGS implicitly offers such sustainable relationships is a matter of contention, especially, if programs are pressured to deliver experiential learning outside the classroom with limited resources or within a set number of weeks in a term.

Another concern is whether a short-term excursion into marginalized communities and populations effectively can rework students’ grasp of the roots of marginalization, or whether the practicum risks being an exotic trip to “the other side of the tracks,” possibly reinforcing the racist and classist presumptions it seeks to challenge. Recalling the role of community service in the criminal justice system as a “punishing pedagogy,” Forbes, Garber, and Kensingher (1999), for example, are sceptical of compulsory service learning because, “forced volunteerism … is at best an exercise in observing otherness and at worst a missionary expedition” (p. 162). To the authors’ mind the promise that community service provides students with experiences of the “real world” of “different people”, “presents
volunteerism as a way to experience and uplift the unknowing underprivileged” (p. 162). A less scathing view considers that even successfully changed consciousness does not equal successful larger structural change. And, encountering differences and inequality in the community, not unlike learning about it in the classroom, does not guarantee attitudes of identification, empathy, or solidarity with those who suffer. It may just as well lead students to a refusal of those deemed to be “too saturated with injury,” as Judith Butler reminds us (1993, p. 100). The mostly short-time community involvement may promise meaningful learning experiences and the acquisition of new skills (or at least a line on the CV) to university students; serve the self-understanding of the instituting program; and, raise universities’ public image. But the question remains: what makes feminist praxis learning different from other internships, or “traditional service learning”? Sheila Hassal Hughes’ suggestion that the latter (problematically), “tend[s] to signal professionalization and self-advancement,” is not really persuasive (Hassal Hughes, 2008, p. 37). As we will show below, WGS programs do this too. Indeed, the very desire to neatly distinguish (problematic) mainstream service learning from (critical) feminist activist praxis does neither bear out in the literature nor in the content analysis we undertook of the web descriptions of praxis learning components in Canadian WGS programs. While we might want to claim that feminist praxis institutionalized in the WGS program has a distinctly different genealogy that squarely places it within intersectional and structural analyses of power and engages in dissident citizenship, our analysis shows a much more complex picture. Certainly, some course descriptions emphasize activism, but others underline the professionalization and the career advancement that internships and service learning offer to students. While these might be strategic representations, in order to prove the field’s relevance in the contemporary university, the question remains: how do programs negotiate their activist aspirations, assuming they have them, with the demands for job preparation and workplace readiness so central to current neoliberal postsecondary education agendas?

**Analyzing WGS Praxis Online**

We now turn to a content analysis of how WGS programs describe online the praxis components they offer. For this, in 2012 we analysed the web presence of 24 Canadian WGS programs that listed a practicum, internship, or some other form of experiential learning outside the classroom in their program descriptions. Four of these programs also included a practicum in their graduate programs, raising the total to 27 practica at 24 institutions. The practica, including graduate and undergraduate courses, were clustered mainly at universities in Ontario (12) and British Columbia (7); with the remainder in Alberta (3); Manitoba (2); Quebec (1); Atlantic
Canada (1) and a distance education program (1). They were spread out across both large and small institutions with varying numbers of full time faculty. Indeed, we could not find any clear correlation between program/university size and praxis offerings, nor did we find clear regional differences. However, further research involving interviews with program representatives about the history and practice of experiential learning at their respective institutions may provide us with a more nuanced understanding of whether, and how, size and region may matter.

In our critical discussion of web-based course descriptions, we have elected not to identify programs by university name but instead only indicate a general geographical location or broad university size for a variety of reasons. We do so because we realize that online materials are only partial, often fragmented, and strategic representations that may or may not describe fully what a program actually does. We also realize that program websites in particular can under- or over-represent what a program offers or be subject to messaging guidelines from a centralized public relations bureaucracy. More often than not program websites are subject to the under-funding of technical services where the task of developing, framing, and maintaining websites falls upon under-resourced staff. Our interpretations are necessarily limited to the two most important features of program websites—the program and course descriptions. We focus on the latter, as these texts are enduring representations of a program’s activities having been approved not only by the program but by higher governing bodies within the institution. In addition, our goal is not to critique individual programs, but to understand the broader state of feminist praxis in WGS programs across Canada.

Since neither region nor size appear to be clear determinants for whether programs institute praxis and how, our analysis does not focus on these factors. We do use size and location, however, as pseudonyms so as to not have to identify individual programs by university name. Based upon our research interests, we conducted a close reading of the web-based descriptions of praxis components and coded them according to how each described the relationship between feminist theory and praxis and whether/how they articulated some form of training for the job market as a goal. While some course descriptions fall firmly in one of these camps, others seem to retain elements of both. Based upon our close readings, we identified three different approaches to the ways university classroom-based and praxis learning are theorized. In a second step, we further identified three different ways in which skills-training, as one aspect of workplace readiness, is articulated in these web descriptions.

**Approaches to Theory and Praxis**

WGS program pages utilize a wide spectrum of different terms to name and promote the specific quality of the praxis component they offer: some
speak of “volunteer opportunities,” others of “on-the-job training,” “practical experience,” “working in the community,” and/or “activism.” Certainly, these different terms connote significantly different values, with “volunteering” being evocative of charity work, and “activism” of social change. Other, seemingly neutral terms like “practical experience” and “working in the community,” are nevertheless energized by a hegemonic valuing of the practical over the theoretical, where “community” often is equated with the “real” world and the university with the illusive “ivory tower.” Thus, even apparently neutral terms risk widening the very gap between theory and praxis, between university and community learning, that the praxis component seeks to overcome.

However filtered the complexity of the relationship between theory and praxis at times may be represented on WGS program pages, we can distinguish three distinct approaches to the relationship of theory and praxis in program descriptions: the first, which we call the exposure to praxis approach, imagines that students will learn from organizations through observation, for example, they will learn “how to do activism.” In the exposure model, the organization is presumed to know and the student in need of knowledge. The following, from the webpage of a WGS program in the prairies, exemplifies this: “This practicum course offers advanced Gender and Women’s Studies students the opportunity to learn about feminist activism taking place outside the university.” The organization, as teacher, is imagined to model to students its strategies for social change, for alliance building, fundraising, decision making, interacting with government agencies and non-profit organizations and so on. The practicum is about learning a set of techniques through observation. While practical, entirely missing from this approach is a consideration of what students might not only learn from their observations, but also how they make sense of what they see, which is distinctly different from the study of techniques. A missing component then, which may well be present in the actual running of the course, is an opportunity to examine the meaning of their experience for their own feminism. Exposure to praxis is then strangely disinviting of reflexivity.

A second quite widely used approach to praxis we call the application approach. Here the relationship between students and organization is reversed. Students are assumed to bring feminist theory and knowledge, acquired in their university education, to the organization. One midsize university describes it this way: “The application of feminist theory to field-based practice acquired through placement with an organization, community group or service.” Even more sharply formulated is the application model by a WGS program at a large research university, according to which students will not just apply in the field what they learned in the university but furthermore, “will implement the theoretical knowledge they have acquired in Women’s Studies,” with the lofty goal of “improving the social or cultural
position of women” - not only in Canada but “also globally.” This aim of improving women’s lives through students working a couple of hours a week in a feminist organization seems a rather optimistic ambition.

A third approach, more humbly and perhaps more usefully, emphasizes that the practicum is a site of integration and synthesis: meaning that in the practicum or placement course students are supposed to integrate knowledge acquired in course work with what they learn at the organization. Alternatively, the purpose of the practicum course is described as a process of reflecting upon the experience of field-based learning in the community. One program in eastern Canada describes this the following way: “[s]tudents will explore the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of their field-based experiences.” An undergraduate program at a western research intensive university more vaguely states that the praxis component, “facilitates links between scholarship and activism.”

In some descriptions, though, theory and praxis are not linked in any discernible way. As to the reasons for this lack of elaboration, we can only speculate at this time. It may be that “practical (work) experience in Women’s Studies” is so self-evidently of value to the program creators that it seems to require no further elaboration. This seemingly whole-hearted embrace of the task of preparing students for the job market — whether voluntarily, out of conviction, or defensively we do not know yet — brings us to the other dominant theme, which is skills training.

The Relationship of WGS Praxis to Workplace Readiness

Given our research interest in how the increasing demand for a workplace-ready postsecondary education is negotiated in Canadian WGS programs, we paid special attention in content analysis to how the web-based descriptions of praxis components spoke to skills training for post-graduation employment. While the relationship between theory and praxis in the program and course descriptions might be any of the three models we have just discussed (exposure, application, integration/synthesis), the relationship of praxis to training for workplace readiness offers insight into how WGS programs may be responding strategically to neoliberalism. Training is broadly imagined as the practice of knowledge acquired in WGS alongside skills that are acquired in a liberal arts education (such as questioning; writing; communication; research skills) with strong emphasis on refining these skills in a “real-life” workplace. As such, the descriptions of the praxis components we found on WGS program webpages suggest three different approaches to skills training: job skills training; research skills training, and training in feminist activism.

The first approach is evident in components with an obvious focus on job skills training in general. The pressure to prepare students for jobs, resulting in practicum related promises such as “high quality resume, contacts” and a set of other seemingly marketable skills, is exemplified by one co-op office
at a western Canadian university. The promise, and demand, for seemingly marketable skills also bears down on WGS programs, which, in turn, must demonstrate their relevance in the 21st-century university. A small number of WGS programs have creatively developed collaborative arrangements with other departments and professional schools such as social work, business, and criminology. In these, the praxis component is not under the direct control of the WGS program but is advertised as a unique feature of a joint degree that appears to be under the purview of the other program. The praxis components are clearly meant as work experience in preparation for the job market and even as a qualification for a professional degree that integrates a WGS perspective (e.g.: social work) and/or prepares students for entry to a professionalized (feminist) non-profit sector. At the other end of an administrative spectrum is one remarkable program at a large, research, urban university in central Canada that exemplifies what we think the ‘neoliberal university/real life work experience’ might be. Nearly all aspects of the educational experience are downloaded to the student or the organization, with core WGS faculty taking no role whatsoever, and the university taking credit for offering ‘real world’ experience. In this case, the student locates the internship placement; negotiates the terms of work with the organization, which must provide a work supervisor; and then proposes the placement to the department for approval. But in addition, the student also finds him/herself a faculty supervisor somewhere in the university (not necessarily in WGS). All of the administration for the internship appears to be added to the workload of an existing administrative assistant.

A second approach to the praxis component as skills training focuses on the development of research skills, or emphasizes knowledge production. For example, one midsize university in central Canada has a centrally organized community research placement office that invites the community to make use of the university’s most obvious resource: researchers. The office appears to operate very much like a job bank for students and as an access point to inexpensive, largely unpaid labour, for community organizations; practically an ideal arrangement for all parties. It is not our goal to critique the range and type of projects available to students, which is impressive, or the social justice orientation of the projects, which is truly remarkable. For example, students might spend the term quantifying and tracking the activities of a food security agency; they might investigate neighbourhood cohesion for a municipality, or write up the oral histories of immigrants at a social service agency. But of the dozens of placements described in the bank, virtually all required student researchers to deliver what appear to be major components of existing services in those organizations, indicating that this university’s praxis component subsidizes the organizations’ operations with unpaid workers. University credit appears to be their only remuneration.

A third approach to praxis learning as skills training emphasizes feminist
action/activism. Based upon the literature’s strong emphasis on organized community involvement as activism, we were surprised to see how few Canadian programs explicitly state that the praxis component is activist training. One large research-focused university in central Canada offers a clearly defined social justice-oriented praxis component where “students work in and outside the classroom on community organizing projects.” But others that referenced activism seemed to be contradictory to say the least. For example, the general description of one small WGS program in a large, western city emphasizes its career focus, “the program will help prepare students for careers in government, social work, and business,” while the specific praxis component course description emphasizes the development of “practical and political skills” acquired by “engaging in feminist activism.” Has activism here become another line on the CV, another marketable skill? This example illustrates the "elasticity" of the term activism noted by Catherine Orr (2012).

It is in this second aspect of the praxis components – *i.e.*, their relationship to training or workplace readiness – that we begin to see the multiple institutional responses to the pressures of neoliberalism. Some WGS programs continue to go it alone, offering a praxis component and absorbing the costs and benefits of brokering community relationships. Others are allying themselves administratively with other fields in order to provide students with opportunities for professionalizing. Others still are coming to rely on a central administrative body in the university that serves the praxis component of multiple programs, of which a few are even arranged as a kind of placement or ‘job bank’ into which community organizations place internship or task descriptions that students from many programs, including WGS, can browse. Finally, at least one has offloaded virtually all administrative tasks and costs associated with the praxis component to the student. Further in-depth research is clearly required to explore whether the desire to train for activism actually has been overtaken by the need to demonstrate relevance to a specific type of workplace.

**Conundrums and Conclusions**

From this initial study of the online descriptions of 27 internship/placement courses in 24 Women’s and Gender Studies programs across Canada we have learned that there continues to be significant investment of WGS in experiential learning and community involvement. But our preliminary content analysis of, admittedly rather limited, public web-based descriptions seems to suggest that the character of these program offerings are changing. The change we note is from the outright activist aspirations that initiated the praxis components—and to which many faculty members probably are still deeply attached—to a rhetoric of promoting WGS program in terms set forth by, or at least reminiscent of, a neoliberal agenda that increasingly drives universities to become centers for
job preparation. Under the current pressure of making all liberal arts education intelligible to communities and government, the rhetoric of praxis is less and less about activism and social justice work, and more and more about skills training for the so called ‘real world.’

As we conclude this paper and plan the next steps of this study, we wish to contextualize our preliminary observations by the findings of an important study carried out by Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice (2011) on recent shifts in the pedagogical approach and curricular content of first year WGS courses across Canada. Their study suggests that as a result of sustained critique from outside and inside the field, a significant shift has occurred in curricular content across WGS first year classrooms, away from an essentializing of “women” and “their experiences” to what Hobbs and Rice helpfully summarize as interrupting the universalizing tendencies of WGS through intersectional analyses; gendering and queering; globalizing, internationalizing, and transnationalizing; and, indigenizing and decolonizing the curriculum in WGS (Hobbs and Rice, 2011, p. 142). The authors note that, “[t]he curricular moves we identify, however, are broad and internally diverse: they can be taken up in scholarship, teaching, and activism in many different ways and are subject to continual debate and revision” (Hobbs and Rice, 2011, p. 144). If the ‘gateway’ course to Canadian WGS programs reflects larger shifts in intellectual and political engagements, then what is the significance of these for more advanced levels of study in WGS, including the praxis components discussed in this paper?

Due to the nature of the calendar course descriptions it is impossible to tell from this preliminary analysis of WGS web presence how these curricular changes affect the ways praxis components are reflected upon and contextualized within the university classroom. With the exception of the examples below, we found no language in the online descriptions that gestured towards these curricular shifts. However, there are some important exceptions: three programs out of 27 have specifically outlined political commitments in their praxis course descriptions. One graduate level course description suggests that the practicum mirrors thematic clusters set out by the program and that these most probably reflect faculty teaching and research strengths, and thus an ability to make informed connections with community organizations. This indicates that some programs have thoughtfully limited or defined the type of debates and organizations that students are asked to place themselves in. Two programs, one undergraduate and one graduate, set out commitments very similar to those indicated by Hobbs and Rice in their actual course descriptions, with attention to ‘queering’ and ‘decolonizing’ knowledge production and community collaboration. The graduate program, however, makes an additional intellectual and political commitment to challenging neoliberalism through the content of the praxis component. If in our future research we plan to explore whether any of these political
commitments are repeated across other programs, it may be that the four areas of curricular change set out by Hobbs and Rice in the first year course can inform how we also understand the goals of feminist praxis in WGS.

In conclusion, evident in the descriptions of various praxis components are two main pedagogical concerns that foreground the production of WGS’ graduates re/entry into the labour force – the relationship of theory to praxis, and workplace readiness. Further and more detailed research is required to consider how the four major curricular shifts suggested by Hobbs and Rice (2011) may map onto these two pedagogical approaches to feminist praxis. For example, is it possible to consider decolonizing knowledge production and at the same time produce ‘workplace-ready’ feminist social workers? Or, what will WGS’ graduates bring with them to the field of public policy if steeped in transnational feminist approaches that de-centre the interests of dominant Euro-Western countries? If so, what might that look like in practice and what is required of students and host organizations in order to achieve this goal? The next steps in our study will help us to understand better how these praxis components actually work on the ground so as to allow us to make more certain claims about how WGS programs position themselves vis-à-vis the challenges that a neoliberal education agenda poses for the field, its commitments, and its survival.

Notes
1. Praxis as a term and a program refers to applying and enacting ideas. The term has a long history within philosophical discussions. It references Marx’ injunction in the theses on Feuerbach ‘to not only interpret the world, but change it,’ which informs the liberation pedagogue Paulo Freire’s (1970) call for “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). Freire, in turn, has been central to feminist pedagogies’ investment in not only teaching about, but engendering directly, social change. We use the term “praxis” here as an umbrella term for the diverse modes of experiential community based-learning initiatives within WGS programs, which we assume to share the field’s commitment to social justice.

2. In fact, at the time this content analysis was carried out, only 48 programs at 48 institutions were listed as members of the Canadian Women’s Studies Association, which was recently re-named Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (http://www.wgsrf.com). However, some institutions, such as the University of Toronto, have ‘satellite’ campuses that have robust stand-alone programs offering a practicum or some type of applied research in a community setting, raising the number to 50 program websites consulted. For the purposes of the research informing this article, we have worked with the 50 programs including their graduate and undergraduate programs. Among these we discovered 27 praxis components at 24 out of 50
Canadian institutions with the vast majority being part of an undergraduate curriculum. In subsequent research, we expanded our scope to include institutions from an updated WGSRF membership list and fresh searches for WGS programs at all Canadian universities, colleges and CÉGEPs, raising the number of known WGS programs from 50 to over 80 institutions in Canada.

3. One exception here is Joanne Muzak (2011).


5. On student preference of charity over activist work see Bickford and Reynolds (2002).

6. Certainly, some authors draw a distinction between charity and social change work; however, feminists are not the only ones to do so: see Marullo and Edwards (2000)

7. We came to these broad categories after multiple readings of each of the 27 course descriptions. We read first as “newcomers” to the WGS program with the question: “What is our dominant impression if we were considering taking this practicum?” We also read these descriptions as university faculty who have ourselves, coordinated, and designed program content and websites. We understand, for example, that the order of a sentence or the placement of a key word in a course description can affect curricular approval or ultimately, enrolment numbers. The two orientations of theory/praxis and job market readiness emerged as a result of our research questions from these close readings.

8. As stated above, in the following we use size and location to anonymize programs rather than as analytic categories.

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