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Inquiring Communally, Acting Collectively: The Community Literacy of the Academy Women eMentor Portal and Facebook Group

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Women who work in highly male-dominated fields such as science and the military often find it difficult to establish a place for themselves within their workplace communities. In this essay, I examine how two related online communities for military women enable participants to overcome their workplace isolation, form a collective consciousness, find positive mentorship, and develop a community literacy that affords them a voice through which to enact both personal and public change.

Second-wave feminist[1] Carol Hanisch wrote her 1969 essay "The Personal Is Political" as a response to social critics of the time who were dismissing the practice of women gathering together to form consciousness-raising groups as being akin to "personal therapy" or mere "gossip sessions." In the essay, she argues that these meetings ought instead to be recognized as serious political activities with the potential to lead to real community change. Hanisch asserts that these sessions constitute a form of civic action because "personal problems *are* political problems. There are no personal solutions. There is only collective action for a collective solution." In other words, she and other feminists saw a compelling reason for women (and some men) to consider together the personal *and* the social effects of prevalent stereotypes of women, including: women are intellectually inferior, women should not try to compete in a "man's world," women serve primarily as objects of men's sexual desire, and women are sensitive and emotional (Hanisch, emphasis added). Without the opportunity to participate in forming a collective consciousness, Hanisch suggested, an individual woman would have more difficulty moving beyond the personal impact of these stereotypes to the shared will in order to attempt to enact more widespread social change. Such collaborative exploration of personal and social problems also constitutes a form of community literacy. As Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower affirm in their essay "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry," "people inquire into personal and public problems not simply because they wish to express or share their viewpoints, but because they want change" (20), both personal *and* public change. In this

essay I will explore one attempt among military women to accomplish such change through the establishment of a digital mentoring community.

The personal and collective problems connected to gendered stereotypes, such as those Hanisch identified in 1969, (and thus the need for change) are still fairly pervasive in the predominately male workplace of the United States military service, as evidenced by recent memoirs penned by military women. For example, Kayla Williams's *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* imparts her experiences as a linguist in the Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Early in her narrative, Williams describes some of the long-standing myths about military women that she personally encounters while serving on active duty in a war zone:

> Slut. The only other choice is bitch. If you're a woman and a soldier, those are the choices you get. I'm twenty-eight years old. Military Intelligence, five years, here and in Iraq. One of the 15 percent of the U.S. military that's female. And that whole 15 percent is trying to get past an old joke. "What's the difference between a bitch and slut? A slut will fuck anyone, a bitch will fuck anyone but you." So if she's nice or friendly, outgoing or chatty—she's a slut. If she's distant or reserved or professional— she's a bitch. (13)

Unfortunately, Williams's experience as a woman in the military service is not uncommon, nor is the fact that military women typically have limited numbers of other women within their immediate commands (their local worksites) with whom they feel comfortable discussing such issues or from whom they feel it would be appropriate to seek personal and professional advice.[2] This inability to engage with other women in consciousness-raising groups in order to form community literacy practices that could potentially lead to positive change only increases for military women the sense of isolation and aggravation about these lingering stereotypes and the very real effects of these workplace attitudes on their personal and professional lives.

As one of three female Navy officers deployed overseas for six months during the years 1994–1995 on an amphibious assault ship carrying a contingent of more than 2,500 men, I did not encounter quite the same level of negative stereotyping from the male sailors, Naval officers, and Marines with whom I served as Williams did from the men in her unit. Even so, on more than one occasion I did have men with whom I worked question my ability to lead (especially my ability to lead men) and other men who made insinuations about how and why I received strong evaluations of my work from senior (male) officers—reasons that had nothing to do with my work ethic, my aptitude for the job, or my contributions to the ship's mission. Because I was the most junior female officer of the three on board, and

because my daily work routine was so far removed from the duties of the other two women onboard, I felt unable to commiserate with or seek help from them, nor did I feel particularly at ease discussing these issues with my male peers or supervisors on the ship. As a result, I, like Williams, felt an acute sense of isolation because I lacked access (face-to-face or electronic) to a community of female colleagues from whom I could readily seek guidance and with whom I could establish community literacy practices. Therefore, I was unable to work together with other women to try to institute change—to bring my individual, personal workplace challenges into the realm of collective action—or at least to find a way to establish a voice within my command.[3]

Like women in the military, women in science work within "an extremely male-dominated domain" and therefore face similar "exclusion, isolation, and negative treatment" (Settles et al. 271) in their workplace cultures. In a study of 135 faculty women in the natural sciences, researchers from Michigan State University and the University of Michigan found that female mentoring buffered the negative effects of stereotypes within academic science departments. In particular, the researchers found that female mentors increased for individual women scientists the sense that they had "voice" or influence within their workplaces (272).[4] Specifically, by forming relationships and engaging in dialogue with their female mentors, the women scientists improved their ability to establish self-advocacy. The researchers determined that establishing "voice—the attempt to change rather than escape from an objectionable situation—contains the potential for transformation by bringing the self into connection with others" (Gilligan, qtd. in Settles et al., 271) and subsequently results in a higher sense of individual agency and community value. In other words, having access to female mentors with whom they could share and deliberate about their problems allowed the women scientists to develop a community literacy that resulted in their increased ability to express their views publicly among their male colleagues, which thereby increased their personal job satisfaction and mitigated the impact of negative stereotypes within their personal and professional lives.

The nonprofit organization AcademyWomen recognized that many female military officers who work in highly masculine environments in relative isolation from other female colleagues could likely reap similar benefits from female mentoring.[5] The group also recognized the value of mentoring in general, given the research findings that mentored individuals report having "greater satisfaction, career mobility and opportunity, recognition, and a higher promotion rate than nonmentored individuals" (Bierema and Merriam 213). Therefore, in 2008 AcademyWomen established the eMentor Program. Built upon the conceptual framework of e-mentoring as defined by Laura Bierema and Sharan Merriam,[6] this

electronic portal offers current, former, and future servicewomen a virtual gathering place in which to seek guidance from and share literacy practices with a community of other women officers.

According to their public website, the eMentor Leadership Program "provides a mentoring forum for experienced female leaders to share their wisdom, insights and professional expertise with the next generation of military women." These female leaders include "more than 30 flag, general officers and SES [Senior Executive Service], more than 20 corporate Presidents and CEOs, 25% Senior Executives, 35% Civilian/Former Military, 65% Active Duty Military, 73% Masters Degree, [and] 5% PhD" ("eMentor Brochure"). Women from all branches of the US military—Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Navy and Marine Corps, and Merchant Marines—and from all types of job specialties—pilots, medical officers, intelligence officers, logistics officers, legal officers, human resource managers, surface warfare officers, midshipmen and cadets—are enrolled in the program as mentors and as protégées.

The series of images that runs in a loop on the eMentor homepage celebrates women not only in their public roles as "colleagues and leaders" but also in their personal roles as "mothers, sisters, and daughters." This negotiation of and overlap between professional expertise and personal experience among the community of female colleagues communicating in the eMentor online space can also be seen in the categories of the areas of "strength" from which each mentor selects in order to create her profile on the password-protected area of the site. I'll highlight a few here:

- **Gender-Related Challenges** - Resolving challenges related to female gender in the most professional and ethical way.
- **Leading in an All-Male Team** - Inspiring excellent performance and accomplishing the mission in an all male team/division/unit/command/work setting.
- **Work-Life Balance** - Achieving personal and professional goals while having a great quality of life.
- **Pregnancy Planning** - Planning pregnancy in a way that supports personal and professional goals.

As these examples show, some of these topics do fall under stereotypical "women's issues" related to the private domain, but the range of topics also reveals an explicit concern with public, professional issues as well.

This juxtaposition of personal and professional identities essentially mirrors the ways in which Paula Gillespie, Laura Julier, and Kathleen Blake Yancey describe their professional yet also personal electronic conversations via e-mail with each other in 1999. In their dialogic article, they reflect upon how they expressed themselves both "as mothers and sisters and daughters, as friends" and also "as scholars…and always as women" (298) as they sought to discover how the (then relatively new) virtual communication

space of electronic mail might affect women's communication with each other. They also wondered how communicating via e-mail might "bring women together—to think, to talk, to laugh, to work, to understand, to become," to "voice the landscape" and perhaps even to discover "a discourse of their own" (1), a community literacy. Likewise, the women who participate on the AcademyWomen eMentor site are seeking to "voice the landscape" of female military service and of life as a woman after military service, and they have discovered a space in which they can and do use "a discourse of their own."

The eMentor site contains a variety of personal and public communication spaces within it. After creating a profile (which includes civilian and military career information, current job information, mentoring strengths, hobbies and interests, demographic information, and contact information), each mentor and protégée can seek out "connections" based upon a search filtered through any number of the characteristics included in the profiles. Once a mentor and protégée establish a connection, a private discussion forum is created in which the two participants can exchange asynchronous messages. Instant messaging and Skype chat are also integrated into the eMentor portal as synchronous online communication options for mentors and protégées. In the *Mentor Handbook*, the eMentor facilitators make it clear that "the internet can pose some obstacles to clear communication" (2) and may present impediments to bonding. Therefore, they highly recommend that the mentor and protégée pairs either talk on the phone or via voice or video Skype within the first two to four weeks of establishing their connection and ideally to meet face-to-face when possible ("4 Steps").[7]

If (as in my case) a mentor has not yet established a connection with a protégée, she can still contribute to community literacy practices within the site through posting links to articles in the "Articles" forum,[8] by posing or answering questions in the "Question and Answer" forum, or by participating in the discussions being posted on the "Mentors Forum," the "Career Forum," the "Open Forum,"[9] or the forum connected to her particular branch of the military. In addition, participants receive weekly e-mail updates informing them of new members who have joined, new articles that have been posted, and new questions that have been asked. These e-mails include individual profile updates, which show each participant how she can work to make the program better—by writing or posting an article, for example, or by proactively reaching out to a protégée or mentor. As a result, even a member who is not logging on to the eMentor portal daily to connect with a mentor or protégée is kept up to date about the community and can quickly begin contributing to those discussions that capture her interest or fall within her realm of expertise or can be inspired to log on to see if one of the new members might be a suitable connection

for her. Furthermore, each month all participants receive electronically the "Mentoring Matters" newsletter, which provides more general updates about the program.[10]

Along with the eMentor site, AcademyWomen has extended its electronic community presence onto Facebook as a closed group. This group currently includes more than two hundred members who post personal updates ("Visiting Vegas! Woo-Hoo!!"; "Just moved to London and am getting settled"), friendly inter-service barbs ("Go Army, Beat Air Force!"), conference announcements ("Officer Women Leadership Symposium 23–24 September"; "2012 Joint Women's Leadership Symposium"), general announcements ("1st Female AF Air Combat Vet in Run for Congress"; "Jeanne M. Holm, 88, dies; first female Air Force general"), and book recommendations ("Check out *Mommy The Sailor*"; "Download *The Scarlet Empress* eBook by Grant. If you want to support a sister. . . The heroine is a F-16 pilot"; "Fellow Academy Women: It's been an honor to write a bio/war chronicle on one of our fellow Long Gray line members, GEN David Petraeus, and will be an even greater privilege to leverage the book to draw attention to wounded warriors. *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus*").

In addition to these short announcements, personal updates, and promotions, members of the AcademyWomen Facebook group share links to news items that are likely to affect the community, both military-related ("Military Children Stay a Step Ahead of Public School Students"; "Military divorce rate at highest level since 1999"; "Does Military Service Turn Young Men into Sexual Predators?"; "Agreement elusive on women in combat") and related more generally to women ("Working Moms Multitask More Than Dads—and Like It Less"; "Stop JC Penney and Forever 21 from putting more sexist clothing on their shelves"). Like the eMentor portal, the closed Facebook group provides a "safe" space for the members of the AcademyWomen community to inquire together into personal and public issues and to consider ways in which they might attempt to affect change—by choosing to stop shopping at JC Penney or signing petitions to be sent to Forever 21, for example, or by considering together how to respond personally, professionally, and/or publicly to news commentators' claims such as "Women in Military Should 'Expect' to Get Raped."[11] In this space, unlike in most of their workplaces or even in some of their homes, the AcademyWomen can engage together about these issues in a discussion that is uninterrupted by men's voices or overtaken by male authority. They can use a discourse that values a personal orientation and encourages the support of others, a discourse that promotes "nice" conversations and downplays competitiveness, while not negating or concealing differences in opinions or approaches. By engaging in these community literacy practices,

they can find their voice, raise collective consciousness, and possibly even effect public change.

In "Gender and Democracy in CMC," one of the first scholarly attempts to assess the validity of the initial climate of optimism about the democratic nature of computer-mediated communication,[12] Susan Herring studied the participation rates and message contributions of men and women on two academic LISTSERVs. She found that messages by women consistently were shorter and received fewer average responses, and she determined that overall the women participated less. Furthermore, the women on the LISTSERVs Herring studied "contributed most to personal discussions followed by queries soliciting advice or information from others" (6). The men, on the other hand, contributed most to "issues and information postings" (6). According to Herring, the styles of language the men and women used tended to reflect these gendered purposes as well. The women's postings reflected their personal voices and efforts to establish a supportive community, while the men's postings featured their attempts to establish individual authority (8). While conducting her research, Herring also discovered that when women attempted to initiate topics of discussion on the LISTSERVs, their topics were less often taken up for discussion by the group as a whole, and when a woman's efforts to establish an equal voice resulted in public denunciation by one or more male members, it effectively silenced not only that woman but the other female contributors as well (4–6). Herring attributes these gendered differences in men's and women's computer-mediated communication styles to the "cultural norms of sex-appropriate behavior with which children are indoctrinated from an early age: while boys are encouraged to compete and engage in direct confrontation," she explains, "girls are taught to 'be nice' and to appease others" (9).

In her study on the effects of technology on verbal communication, Margaret Lowe Benston also found that men tend to establish themselves as the authorities and thus control online conversations, resulting in women's voices being muted or even the inability of women to participate at all in electronic discussions (24). Even when stereotypical "women's realms" such as sexuality and reproduction became topics of serious consideration in public online forums, Benston discovered that male "experts" often attempted to take control. As Benston explains, once male "experts" take control of the discourse, traditional women's knowledge (e.g., midwives) becomes devalued. L. Jean Camp revealed the same phenomenon in her study of early online discussion groups that ostensibly were formed by women and for women about "women's issues." These virtual spaces, Camp found, "quickly [became] swamps of men's bile. Even the discussion groups that [focused] primarily on parenting [became] arenas for men to pat themselves on their collective backs, to discuss how much more difficult it

[was] to be a father than a mother, and to discuss the discrimination against and oppression of fathers" (115).

This tendency of male voices to take over women's discussions in publicly accessible virtual spaces is one motivation for women to develop password-protected, nonpublic discursive spaces in which women communicate exclusively with one another. Recognition not only of the personal but also the professional and political value of "nice" discussions purposefully intended to allow participants to solicit advice or information from other members of the community is another. Therefore, exclusive sites such as the eMentor portal and AcademyWomen Facebook group provide for women relatively safe spaces in which they can seek out each others' support and mentorship.

As Natalie Fixmer and Julia Wood explain in their 2005 essay "The Personal Is Still Political: Embodied Politics in Third Wave Feminism," personal forms of female resistance are often still regarded as "mere lifestyles choices or politically ineffectual obsessions with individual locations, circumstances, and preferences" (236). However, as Fixmer and Wood recognize, personal forms of resistance can become more politically effectual when individual women come together in communities such as the AcademyWomen electronic sites to talk with each other, to form coalitions, and to find voice. Indeed, forming coalitions is a major tenet of Third Wave Feminism. According to Fixmer and Wood: "[T]hird wave politics reflect a commitment to building coalitions and a kind of solidarity that fully recognizes and attempts to work with both interlocking facets of identity and the interlocking nature of oppressions" (242). They go on to explain that third wavers embrace three forms of embodied politics: "(1) redefining identity by engaging the complexities of differences, ambiguities, and multiplicities in and between women, (2) building and working with coalitions to forge an inclusive solidarity, and (3) engaging in personal acts of resistance in local sites where injustices occur" (237–8).

While its founders might not identify themselves as "third-wave feminists," the AcademyWomen websites instantiate each of these three "third-wave" goals as articulated by Fixmer and Wood. First, the sites strive to bring together "a diverse set of women with a broad range of ranks and areas of expertise, thereby enhancing the perspective and insight to participants within the program." In addition, the communication tips handout available on the eMentor site reminds participants that "different [participants] have different worldviews which translate to different interpretations for common concepts. These 'understanding gaps,'" the handout goes on to explain, "may cause negative reactions to comments that are misunderstood due the listener's interpretation. If you have a negative reaction to a comment by your mentoring partner, ask clarifying questions to help you understand her meaning." Second, the sites not only

offer one-on-one mentor and mentee relationships, but also encourage members to contribute to the collaborative forums and postings meant to help participants address recurrent situations and solve persistent personal, yet also political, problems, such as: "Recovering from a rape to a point where I feel 'normal' and like I'm ready to date again"; "Figuring out how I keep my career going as well as it is now and have a baby"; and "Wondering how I get my husband to do more work inside the house without insulting what he already does." Finally, through the mentoring processes—both individual and communal, formal and informal—the AcademyWomen can work together in the relatively "safe" electronic spaces, unhindered by authoritative male voices, to devise strategies for engaging in personal acts of resistance in their local commands and workplaces that may eventually lead to positive changes in attitudes and actions, not just locally, but throughout the military and the larger society.

Endnotes

1. First-wave American feminisms are associated with the nineteenth-century reform movements to overturn women's social and legal inequalities. Second-wave feminisms in the United States grew out of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and banded groups together to fight against discrimination and women's second-class status. Third-wave feminists "claim that their feminism engages differences and multiplicities within and between women that were ignored by predecessor feminist movements . . . and incorporates feminism into everyday life more than previous feminist movements" (Fixmer and Wood 237).

2. Even if a woman in the military has a senior female colleague in her local workplace from whom she can seek advice, perceptions of favoritism within such a mentoring relationship can be a concern for both mentor and protégée. As Raymond Noe, David Greenberger, and Sheng Wang point out in their article "Mentoring: What We Know and Where We Might Go," such perceptions can "give rise to suspicion, jealousy, and even resentfulness in employees who are not involved in a mentoring relationship" (140). The ability to receive advice and mentoring from another female military member who is not in the protégée's immediate chain of command through online communities such as the eMentor portal, therefore, can offer valuable benefits.

3. Settles et al. point out that research supports "the value-expressive function of voice, which suggests that satisfaction is related to being able to express one's views and may not be related to being able to influence actual outcomes" (277).

4. As Cheryl Glenn explains in *Rhetoric Retold*, the dominant ideology in ancient Western culture established a "cultural code" of the ideal woman having "a closed mouth (silence)" (1), an ideal that has stubbornly persisted in one form or another in the 2,500 years since.

5. Fortunately, on my second six-month deployment (1996–1997), approximately two dozen women officers were assigned to the ship, most of whom were essentially my peers in terms of rank and experience. Although not a "critical mass" by any means, having this community of women peers with whom to interact and with whom to establish some peer mentoring relationships made a significant difference in my workplace satisfaction and my personal enjoyment of the overseas ports of call!

6. Bierema and Merriam define e-mentoring as "a computer mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé which provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling that is often boundaryless, egalitarian, and quantitatively different than traditional face-to-face mentoring" (214).

7. Despite the potential drawbacks of electronic communication in a mentoring relationship, there can be some advantages to the medium as well. As Bierema and Merriam point out, "While technology can be viewed as an impersonal approach, the medium promotes easier access and perhaps more candid communication than would occur face-to-face" (220–21). In addition, "By offering a 'safe' context for establishing relationships between diverse parties, e-mentoring holds the potential to erode some of the traditional power dynamics that tend to structure mentoring relationships" (220). This absence of power dynamics can be especially important to women in the highly structured environment of the military, which relies heavily on the rigidly divided chain-of-command.

8. Recent posts in the "Articles" forum include: "Is USCG Changing from 'Guardian' to the Gender Specific 'CoastGuardsman?'"; "Discovering Your Leadership Style"; "Entrepreneurs can get assistance from VETransfer"; and "Balancing Work and Life as Dual Military Couple."

9. Recent posts in this forum include the subject lines "Pregnant Midshipman" and "Dual Military Careers."

10. For example, the February 2012 newsletter contained this announcement about a "new future program we are calling STEMGirls eMentor. STEMGirls will pair middle and high school girls with military and civilian women working in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) careers. Sponsoring employers will be recognized on the eMentor website."

11. This comment was posted on the AcademyWomen Facebook page in response to Fox News commentator Liz Trotta's remarks on 12 February 2012. In response to a Department of Defense report that showed a 64

percent increase in violent sexual assaults since 2006, Trotta stated, "What did they expect? These people are in close contact."

    12.Remember that *New Yorker* cartoon from the early '90s in which a dog is seated at a computer and is remarking to another canine, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."?

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