DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

POLITICIZING THE PERSONAL: POSTSECRET FEMINIST ACTIVISM

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**Politicizing the Personal: PostSecret Feminist Activism**

**Purpose of Study: Intervention in an Online Environment for Empowerment of Disenfranchised Women**

The purpose of this action research is to help disenfranchised women to understand, envision, and change their oppressive situations and develop a sense of empowerment (Lather, 1986) through strategic online social network participation. Similar to Stokrocki and Andrews’ (in press) *Transitions: A Place for Dreams* project, my goal is for my participants to learn how to strategically use Web 2.0 skills and become empowered through development of a greater sense of agency in virtual space that leads them to choose positive life paths. Through this study, I aim to meaningfully contribute to the field of art education by exploring PostSecret feminist activism. With the participants in this study, I hope to use art to raise awareness of socio-cultural issues of oppression that pertain to women in an effort to stop gender-based violence/hatred.

**Gender-based Oppression and Violence**

Women have been socio-culturally constructed as inferior to men, which leads to negative consequences for women including oppression in everyday life, work, education, and relationships (Tafnout & Timjerdine, 2009). Women are stereotypically thought to rely on men as providers in a relationship. If this is the case, women may lack independence. Women’s freedom to express themselves and network in order to form supportive communities may be hindered and limited due to gender roles and gender-based conflicts. For example, the male

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1 *Transitions: A Place for Dreams* (http://aplacefordreams.com) is a curriculum project sponsored by Floaters and other non-profit groups. Through this project, participants are mentored in order to explore if virtual spaces can empower marginalized individuals through art (Stokrocki & Andrews, in press).
partner in a relationship may provide and therefore control and constraint a woman’s use of communication technologies such as mobile phones or computers due to a lack of trust (Abraham, 2009). According to Abraham (2009), women who claim their autonomy via mobile phone have been victimized. In this negative scenario, which unfortunately represents an acceptable socio-cultural norm, a woman likely feels dominated and helpless.

Oppression of women may involve gender-based acts of hatred and violence towards women. For example, negative consequences of women’s claimed independence and autonomy when using mobile phones without the consent of their male partner include domestic abuse, divorce, and even death (Abraham, 2009). Traditional gender roles and oppression of women will continually persist if women do not envision change and collectively act in order to gain their agency.

**Patriarchy and Acts of Gender-based Hatred Reinforced in Virtual Spaces.**

Despite physical or virtual location, mass media reinforces behavior that privileges the Western male subject. For example, male produced hierarchal online environments mirror patriarchal society in which women are subordinate and objectified. The dominant voices and viewpoints on the Internet are male (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009; Nakamura, 2003). Nakamura (2002) argues that marginalized individuals in physical space, including women, are frequently marginalized in virtual space through a lack of women’s voice and visibility.

While participation in virtual worlds may allow for liberation and multiple identity exploration (Turkle, 1995), there is danger in participation of what Nakamura (2002) refers to as “identity tourism,” trying to pass as a race, class, or gender that differs from one’s own, because representations are likely to be negative and stereotypical. Socio-culturally constructed
stereotypical representations of women are especially pervasive in mass media. Few representations in popular mass media of elderly women, women of various socioeconomic status, and women with varying cultural backgrounds are presented in a way to value these differences. Berman and Bruckman’s (2001) study unveiled that gender may be assumed based on stereotypical gender-related behavior. The anonymity that virtual space offers allows for acts of slander, hatred, and violence towards women with limited repercussions.

Many representations of women in virtual worlds, including avatars and digitized postcard imagery, conform to Western patriarchal societal ideals of beauty and sex appeal despite various options of changing one’s representation to challenge societal norms. At the 2010 International Art Education (InAEA) meeting in Second Life (http://slurl.com/secondlife/Dace/120/235/319/) participants witnessed avatars privileged in specific contexts because of their physical appearance (Keifer-Boyd, personal communication, February 4, 2010). There is a need to eliminate acts of privileging and challenge Western patriarchal acceptable norms including gender-based hatred in physical as well as virtual space. Multiple and oppressed voices must be heard in order to empower those who are marginalized in society (Keifer-Boyd, 2010). Feminists may engage in tactical interventions in order to promote multiplicity of viewpoints.

Feminist Virtual World Activism

According to subRosa, “Some of the most effective activist work by women holds no particular stake in being considered art, although it may rely heavily on visual communication skills or be effective because of the way it makes female bodies and the female gaze visible” (Flanagan, et al., 2007, p. 13). Activist art can reveal women’s critical perspectives, rather than
support the commonly visible male perception of women as sexual objects. Feminist work is powerful when it motivates women to unite and push the boundaries of what is considered art in order to achieve their goal of enacting socio-cultural change.

Through activist art, which can be an act of consciousness-raising, feminists critique and dismantle patriarchal power structures (Flanagan, et al., 2007). For example, an artwork may include imagery that challenges stereotypical gender roles. According to Kennedy (2007), consciousness-raising allows women to realize that they share similar “personal” issues, and that these issues are really political issues that can be dealt with through collective action. By forming supportive online communities and generating collective knowledge, women can be empowered to improve their lives and the lives of others.

According to subRosa, “feminist activist art has always involved tactical intervention” (Flanagan, et al., 2007, p. 4). The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence campaign, the Guerrilla Girls’ calls to action, and subRosa’s irony-filled productions are all forms of 21st century feminist activism that occur in physical and virtual space. Both physical and virtual spaces pose challenges and potentials for feminist activism intended to enable positive socio-cultural change.

Technology is both embraced and strategically resisted by feminists (Fernandez & Wilding, 2002). Cyberfeminists, a term established around the mid-1990s, “investigate the ways in which technology, especially new media and Internet technology, and gender interact” (Flanagan & Looui, 2007, p. 181). Irony and diversity are characteristics of cyberfeminism (Paasonen, 2005). By production of activist art in virtual worlds, cyberfeminists intend to disrupt patriarchal societal practices and power structures that oppress and exclude individuals (Keifer-Boyd, 2007; Keifer-Boyd, 2009). Tactics of appropriation and intervention are employed by
cyberfeminists in order to include women’s issues within the dominant new media discourse. Cyberfeminists’ acts are celebratory, but also challenge the contradictory nature of new media, which provides freedom and restrictions for women (Flanagan & Looui, 2007; Wilding, 1998). For example, Senft (2008) studied camgirls who utilized LiveJournal and homecams as a means for self-expression and community formation. Their intentions were limited, however, due to monitoring of online content and lack of access to monetary funds needed to support their work.

Similar to feminism, cyberfeminism is a term that lacks a universal definition. There are many diverse feminisms (Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2010; Gill, 2007) and cyberfeminisms (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009). Feminist concepts and strategies are in a state of flux and transform in response to critiques, younger generations, differing struggles, and new ideas (Gill, 2007). The Guerrilla Girls’ message is “find your own crazy, creative way to be a feminist and an activist” (Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2010, ¶ 3). Not all women participating in virtual activist art consider themselves cyberfeminists just as not all women who share feminist beliefs of equality in wages, labor, and human rights for women feel comfortable labeling themselves as feminists (Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2010).

Cyberfeminism is a tactic employed by women in order to disrupt societal norms and utilize technology for politicizing the personal. “The personal is a necessary part of cyberfeminist practice” (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009, p. 4). Cyberfeminism aims to include multiple diverse voices and a younger generation of women that may be reluctant to identify as feminists (Fernandez & Wilding, 2002).

Online communication technologies enable feminists to send counterhegemonic messages to a global audience. Cyberart, art created with digital networking technologies for the
virtual world (Colman, 2004), is a form of participatory critical democracy (Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Participatory critical democracy encourages equal participation and critical contributions by all. A goal of cyberfeminists is to empower women to become active in virtual space by allowing them to experience transformation through participatory actions that directly impacts the transitional spaces in which they engage (Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Cyberfeminists “reshape, redefine, and reclaim the new electronic technologies for women” (Bautista, 2003, p. 712). Any woman with technology access and skills can participate in cyberfeminist work. However, there are potentials and limitations to cyberfeminist work.

**Potentials and Limitations of Activism Against Gender-based Violence and Hatred in Virtual Worlds.**

Potential positive outcomes of feminist activism in virtual space include reaching and engaging a diverse and vast audience, offering a transitional safe space for challenging dominant culture and developing counterhegemonic discourse by providing options for anonymity and identity projections, providing a space for multiple and silenced voices to be heard, bridging solidarity by relationship and community formation with individuals around the world that may provide resources not available locally, rewriting a more inclusive history by providing multiple perspectives, advocating for women to become producers rather than consumers of technology, and utilizing technology as a communication tool for increased social interactions that furthers women’s engagement in the world (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009; Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Potential limitations of feminist activism in virtual space include a lack of equal access, unfamiliarity with new media, and lack of training and programming skills (Bautista, 2003; Keifer-Boyd, 2007), a disconnect between the local and global (Keifer-Boyd, 2007), and between personal and political
gender-related issues, an assumed privileged and educated audience, and male produced hierarchal online environments that mirror patriarchal society (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009). Virtual worlds such as Second Life® may provide the potential for women suffering from abusive acts of violence to form new empathetic relationships with those who share their experiences, which may reduce feelings of isolation. Online social networks such as PostSecret and SL also provide anonymity for those who would not participate in sharing intimacies or activist acts in the real world due to a fear of embarrassment or negative consequences in revealing themselves. Global online networks provide an invaluable resource for women. These networks have the ability to connect women all over the world for the cause of spreading awareness and creating strategies to employ against violence towards women. By participating in global online networks, local women and community groups can learn new tactics from participants around the world and directly apply them to their particular local situations.

**Politicking the Personal.**

Online social networks, including blogs, have the potential to function as sites for consciousness-raising in the 21st century. Blogs, such as PostSecret (http://postsecret.com), allow for self-expression, sharing of personal experiences, and interactions and knowledge construction with a wide and diverse audience. Blogs are a new means for facilitating interactions based on intimate revelations and have the potential to foster social transformation (Kennedy, 2007). According to Kennedy (2007), “Feminism has changed considerably over the last thirty years; the days when groups of women met in person to discuss their personal experiences of social inequalities are now few and far between” (p. 1). Online social networks used for communication and community formation purposes, such as PostSecret, may be strategically utilized as a means
for politicizing the personal (Hanisch, 1969) through artifact creation, online discussions, and formation of communities comprised of individuals with a shared interest in enacting social justice. Blogs may promote formations of new feminism(s) that are more inclusive in scope and not limited to White middle-class heterosexual women (Kennedy, 2007).

**PostSecret Interventions.**

By enabling disenfranchised women to share their own experience-based stories via postcard art, online comment posting, and sketchbook entries, I will facilitate expression of oppressed voices and viewpoints that are commonly silenced in patriarchal society. Through my strategic interventions, my intent is to provide opportunities for self-expression that may lead disenfranchised women to connect with others whom share similar experiences and beliefs. When women collectively realize that shared personal issues are political in nature, feelings of depression, isolation, and self-doubt will likely decrease (Fischer, 2010). Feelings of empowerment can derive from collectively generated knowledge (Foster, 2007; Lather, 1991). Through community formation that stems from shared personal issues, women may empower each other to envision life changes and may personally transform their lives and selves as a result. Those who wish to positively transform socio-cultural norms may engage in activism in physical and virtual space. The participants in this study will ultimately decide the extent to which they attempt to change themselves and society.

**Qualitative Critical Emancipatory Case Study**

A critical theory paradigm of feminism will guide my research study. “Feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle which profoundly shapes/mediates the
concrete conditions of our lives” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). The aim of critical theory guided feminist research is to confront, critique, and transform social, cultural, political, economic, ethnic, and gender structures that restrict and oppress people. Feminism finds gender central to “the shaping of our consciousness, skills and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). The goal of feminist research is to make female experiences visible through representation in an attempt to end social inequality experienced by women.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1998), critical theory perspectives such as feminism emphasize advocacy and activism. Progression is identified as emancipation that develops overtime with actions intended to transform existing oppressive structures. The researcher understands the transformative needs of the participants and acts as the instigator and facilitator. The researcher’s actions are intended to expand consciousness and stimulate acts against injustices with the goal of helping participants develop a sense of empowerment. However, the participants may know best what changes are needed in their lives (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Critical feminist theory aims to promote equity.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1998), critical theory’s ontology is historical realism that consists of an assumed reality that forms over time through social, cultural, political, economic, ethnic, and gender constructs and is mistakenly conceived of as “real” or natural. The epistemology of critical theory is transactional and subjectivist in which the researcher and the participants’ values are linked to the study and its findings. What becomes known develops through research of participants’ interactions that dissolve ignorance and develop informed insights. Critical theory’s methodology is dialogic and dialectical. Dialectical dialogue must occur between the researcher and the participants in order to change one’s acceptance of historically mediated beliefs. Through guidance, the researcher inspires transformation (Guba &
According to Denzin (2010), qualitative researchers “have an obligation to change the world, to engage in ethical work that makes a positive difference” (p. 115). They must challenge and make visible the injustices of history in order for positive change to occur (Denzin, 2010).

“An emancipatory approach to research acknowledges its political motivation, explicitly takes sides, and works together with the researched, often those on the margins of society” (Foster, 2007, p. 15). In an emancipatory case study, design, data, and theory emerge through researcher and participant relationships that involve dialogue and reflexivity. The “reciprocally educative process is more important than product as empowering methods contribute to consciousness-raising and transformative social action” (Lather, 1991, p. 72). The purpose is to empower those that are oppressed to understand and change their oppressive situations (Lather, 1991). For example, Lather (1991) discusses the Women’s Economic Development Project (WEDP) that educated low-income women in order to provide them with the skills to research, understand, and change their economic status. According to Lather (1991), the success of the WEDP depends on the centrality of the low-income women to the process of identifying issues and taking action to resolve these issues. Critical emancipatory case studies include the voices of the participants as well as the voice of the researcher through qualitative research methods that involve self-reflexivity and interpretation of participant data.

From a critical inquiry perspective, the methodology or theory and framework that guides the methods used to collect empirical data are connected to issues of power. The main issue is how to combine scholarship and advocacy in order to create knowledge that disrupts power inequalities. In order to generate this type of knowledge through my methods, I utilize the theoretical framework the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969) and explore the constructs:
identity, transitional space, and empowerment. In this study, feelings of empowerment are expected to derive from creation of meaningful experience-based artwork, collectively generated knowledge, and identifying as a member of a supportive community and an individual with agency. Supportive online communities may function as transitional spaces for disenfranchised women that lead them to envision/make positive personal/social change(s). Through strategic interventions in online social networks, I aim to assist my study participants in politicizing their personal by guiding their creation and display of meaningful issue-based activist artwork and critical comment postings (see Appendix A). Critical emancipatory knowledge develops from the interactions that occur during the research process (Lather, 2004). According to Lather (2004), feminist critical emancipatory research includes the following characteristics: (a) research methods are more interactive, dialogic, and reciprocal in nature and aim to promote transformative action and equal participation, (b) meaning is linked to history, social power, and control, (c) theory is grounded in respect for people’s daily experiences as well as confrontation with experiences that are assumed natural, and (d) speaking with participants rather than to/for participants. Similar to Lather and Smithies’ (1997) study, I strive to not overpower the voices of my participants or co-researchers with my own voice.

My desire to conduct a qualitative critical emancipatory case study led to my decision to utilize the ongoing community mail art project and online social network, PostSecret, in an attempt to support the empowerment of disenfranchised women. GRACE (Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment), a research network established in 2005 that focuses on making visible women's sense of agency and empowerment that is developed via Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) (GRACE, n.d.), inspires my proposed study. I plan to conduct a critical emancipatory research case study by working with women survivors of gender-
based violence/hatred in the United States who may be unfamiliar with the potentials of online social network participation for empowerment via community formation and consciousness-raising activist art and critical discourse. I choose to utilize the online social network and community mail art project, PostSecret, for my critical emancipatory case study because it offers potential for women to express themselves, engage in critical debates, and collectively act (Macueve et al., 2009). Artwork is a form of consciousness-raising (Aristarkhova & Wilding, 2009). In the case of PostSecret, postcard art creations that relate to women’s personal issues such as body image, gender-based violence, sexuality, marriage, family, abortion, and media portrayal (Hanisch, 2006; Redfern, 2001) may be submitted, and, if selected for posting online, can be critically interpreted. “Like autoethnographic performance texts, works that use montage simultaneously create and enact moral meaning. They move from the personal to the political, from the local to the historical and cultural. These are dialogical texts” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). PostSecret is unique among online social networks because in many cases individuals anonymously reveal secrets to the public that may be taboo in dominant culture. Similar to the Guerrilla Girls’ strategy of gorilla masks, PostSecret enables women to tell their stories and represent themselves and their experiences through words and imagery without being the target of personal attacks to their careers and physical situations.

There is potential for PostSecret participants to raise awareness of women’s issues and oppression through their postcard submissions or community chat postings. Through a critical content analysis, I found that PostSecret affords strong and controversial dialogue, art interpretations, supported and unsupported comments that challenge or affirm personal beliefs,

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2 The Guerrilla Girls, a women’s activist art group established in 1985, strategically use the names of deceased women artists and wear gorilla outfits in order to conceal their identities (GuerrillaGirlsBroadband, 2008).
multiple perspectives on socio-cultural issues, and identity construction as a PostSecret community member. Members who utilize online artifacts, online dialogue, and online communities to challenge participation norms of online social networks\(^3\) such as PostSecret have the potential to enact positive socio-cultural change in virtual space that impacts the real world when others join in collective actions intended to challenge socio-cultural norms such as gender-based hatred and violence. A qualitative critical emancipatory case study can facilitate collective actions that aim to promote social justice.\(^4\)

**Ongoing Community Mail Art Project**

PostSecret evolved in November 2004 after Frank Warren distributed 3,000 self-addressed postcards inviting the public to mail in a secret.\(^5\) Out of those 3,000 postcards, 100 postcards containing intimate revelations visually and textually represented were returned to Warren. The return number of mail art postcards grew to over 100,000 between 2004 and 2007 (Warren, 2007), and the PostSecret project continues today with the participation of individuals around the world (PostSecret, n.d.b). Each Sunday, Warren typically selects between 20–30 new postcards sent to him to digitally post on the PostSecret site. The PostSecret site includes an online PostSecret Community (PSC) chat in which individuals can connect with others. Through

\(^3\) Online social network participation typically perpetuates social norms of an oppressive culture through uncritical online dialogue and imagery, rather than challenging patriarchal society.

\(^4\) Social justice is equal rights and opportunities for all. Its intention is to end existing social inequalities, oppressive structures, and injustices (Denzin, 2010).

\(^5\) Frank Warren, a small business owner, claims that a dream he had while visiting Paris, France led him to conceive the PostSecret project. In his dream, Warren recalls seeing that the three Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* postcards that he purchased during the day were altered and included messages on their backs. Upon waking, Warren tried to modify his purchased postcards to mirror those that appeared in his dream (PostSecret, n.d.b). These altered postcards were the start of Warren’s postcard art project, PostSecret.
the utilization of PostSecret, I aim to address my research questions with participants that I recruit to this study.

**Research Questions**

My aim is to discover (a) how participation in the PostSecret Community (PSC) constructs identities as PSC members with agency, (b) if PostSecret can function as a transitional space (Ellsworth, 2005) for disenfranchised women, (c) how art educators’ pedagogical approach in informal learning environments can encourage and guide revelation of deeply meaningful gender-based experiences through visual creations, and (d) how art educators may facilitate empowering online social network participation. These research questions drive my proposed data collection and analysis techniques (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990) (see Figure 1).

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6 By engaging in a transitional space, participants “are crossing that important internal boundary that is the line between the person we have been but no longer are and the person we will become” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 62).
Theoretical Frame
The Personal is Political

Research Study Constructs
Empowerment, Transitional Space, Identity

Research Study Questions
(a) how participation in the PSC constructs identities as PSC members with agency,
(b) if PostSecret can function as a transitional space (Ellsworth, 2005) for disenfranchised women,
(c) how art educators’ pedagogical approach in informal learning environments can encourage and guide revelation of deeply meaningful gender-based experiences through visual creations, and
(d) how art educators may facilitate empowering online social network participation.

Qualitative Critical
Emancipatory Case Study

Participants
3-5 women survivors of gender-based violence

New Media Pedagogy
strategic online interventions

Data Collection
Artifacts
postcards, online comment postings, and sketchbooks

Documentation
recruitment process, orientation meeting, library meetings, Cultural Conversations attendance, exhibition, and exhibition interactions

Observations
participant observations of their interaction with online communities, and my observations as a study participant

Figure 1. A research study diagram.
Participants.

I aim to work with 3-5 women survivors of gender-based violence/hatred who are 18 years of age or older (see Appendix B for participant recruitment flyer).

Researcher’s Role: Facilitator, Participant, Observer, and Reciprocal Researcher.

As the researcher in this study that is largely based on study participants’ and my actions and interactions with one another, I will take on multiple roles throughout the study. My roles will include: (a) facilitator in which I will introduce/guide my participants in critical participation in the PSC, National Art Education Association (NAEA) Women’s Caucus (WC) Voices blog, and my blog in an attempt to politicize their personal (see Appendix A), (b) participant in which I will create and submit critical postcard visual responses to my prompts that pertain to women’s experiences (see Appendix A), (c) observer in which I will participate in reflexive praxis while I observe the postcard submissions from my study participants and others that relate to women’s issues/experiences and the online discussion threads that stem from these postcard submissions (see Appendix A), (d) reciprocal researcher in which I will gather relevant data that pertains to my research study questions, analyze and interpret the data collected, reinterpret my study findings with the participants in this study, and finally consider study participants’ feedback on my interpretations.

Data Collection: Artifacts, Documentation, and Observations.

In order to obtain valuable insight regarding potentials for (a) identity construction as a PSC member with agency, (b) PostSecret functioning as a transitional space for disenfranchised women, (c) how art educators’ pedagogical approach in informal learning environments can
encourage and guide revelation of deeply meaningful gender-based experiences through visual creations, and (d) art educators’ facilitation of empowering online social network participation, I will guide study participants’ actions. I will help participants: deeply reflect on their experiences using visualization strategies (Keifer-Boyd, 2003; Keifer-Boyd & Maitland-Gholson, 2007), make meaningful postcards that visually communicate their experiences, and engage in dialogue that stems from their experience-based postcards (see Appendix A). Using Keifer-Boyd (2003) and Keifer-Boyd and Maitland-Gholson’s (2007) visualization strategies as guides, I will help participants in: (a) relaxing, (b) focusing on a specific disempowering event or empowering event (see Appendix A for postcard prompts), (c) recalling or envisioning concrete details about the event, and (d) creating a visual representation of the event using Gude’s (2004) postmodern principles: appropriation, juxtaposition, recontextualization, hybridity, layering, interaction of text & image, gazing, and representin’ (see Appendix A for my weekly pedagogical approach). Primary data includes:

Artifacts

(1) participant weekly PSC comment postings that occur over a three-month period;
(2) participant monthly comment postings on my blog that occur over a three-month period;
(3) participant NAEA WC Voices blog comment postings during a one-week period;
(4) participant weekly visual responses to prompts on blank postcards using various media, i.e., gender-based experience postcard creations for three months (see Appendix A);
(5) participant sketchbooks during three months in which participants will be asked to create a minimum of one weekly entry that verbally/visually represents their thoughts, feelings, and experiences while interacting with the PSC;

(6) online comment postings by PSC members, NAEA WC Voices followers, and followers of my blog as a result of my strategic interventions in these informal learning environments through submission of my study participants and my critical postcard creations and study participants and my critical online dialogue over a three-month period; and

(7) anonymous postcard creations that relate to my postcard prompts by NAEA WC members and Cultural Conversation postcard exhibition attendees (see Appendix A).

Documentation

(1) recruitment process;

(2) orientation meeting;

(3) library meetings;

(4) Cultural Conversations attendance;

(5) Cultural Conversations postcard exhibition; and

(6) Cultural Conversations postcard exhibition interactions.

Observations

(1) participant observations of their interactions with PSC, NAEA WC Voices blog, and my blog via online discourse; and

(2) my observations as a participant of PSC, NAEA WC Voices blog, and my blog.
Data Analysis.

I will conduct visual and discourse analysis by identifying emerging themes and patterns that are relevant to my research questions and by comparing and contrasting my various forms of collected data. I will visually analyze postcard creations and sketchbook entries. Through discourse analysis, I will analyze online discourse via online comment postings. I will analyze single cases as well as cross-cases in order to address how participation in the PSC constructs identities as PSC members with agency. I will conduct cross-case analysis by examining collected data from all cases in order to address: if PostSecret can function as a transitional space for disenfranchised women, how art educators’ pedagogical approach in informal learning environments can encourage and guide revelation of deeply meaningful gender-based experiences through visual creations, and how art educators can facilitate empowering online social network participation. Visual and discourse analysis will enable me to better understand my participants’ beliefs and my own beliefs. When analyzing qualitative data, I aim to increase the credibility of my study’s findings through inclusion of my participants’ voices and feedback.

Trustworthiness and Validity.

In order to establish trustworthiness and validity when conducting a critical emancipatory case study, I must be aware of whose interests my study will serve (Simon & Dippo, 1986). According to Howe and Eisenhart (1990), “researchers must weigh the quality of the data they can gather (and whether they can gather any at all) against principles such as confidentiality, privacy, and truth-telling” (p. 8). The participants’ well-being must be considered by ensuring and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity during my study. It is essential that throughout my study, including data collection and analysis, I am mindful of my own agenda as a qualitative
emancipatory researcher including my transformative intentions, biases, and assumptions. I must be careful to speak with my participants not for my participants (Lather, 1991). My values, as the researcher, and the values of my participants will naturally influence my inquiry; therefore my findings will be value-mediated (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). According to Simon and Dippo (1986), in order for research to be labeled “critical” it must meet the following criteria: (a) the data collection and analysis must relate to the defined problem and research intent, (b) the study must be situated within a public sphere that affords it to become a starting point for social critique and transformation of oppressive and inequitable conditions, and (c) the study must recognize its own claims and realize that these too are socially constructed through power relations and material conditions.

Critical inquiry must be self-reflexive (Lather, 1986). Self-reflexivity refers to considering how my biases shape the study design and reflect the way I interpret artifacts, interactions, and statements. A self-reflexive approach involves critiquing my own theory, modifying my methodology if necessary, and analyzing data according to my research participants’ feedback, as well as deconstructing the meaning of the data (Lather, 1991). Throughout my study, I will maintain a critical reflexive perspective and make my beliefs explicit and visible by showing how they impact data selections, findings, and interpretations. I will also report instances within my study that contradict my beliefs. Critical inquiry driven by my worldviews will limit my data analysis and findings.

**Limitations.**

There will be limitations to my qualitative critical emancipatory case study. I must acknowledge that my study is limited by my own history and educational background as well as
by my participants’ background (Simon & Dippo, 1986). My participant group will only represent a small purposefully selected sample of women survivors of gender-based violence/hatred, thus my selected participant group and their particular values limits the generalization of my study’s findings. Time constraints limit the online and physical content, interaction, and observation data that is collected and analyzed. Finally, my personal beliefs will shape, and, therefore, limit my study’s findings and interpretation. I will make my beliefs, biases, and assumptions transparent by acknowledging, revealing, and reflecting on how they influence my understandings, interpretations, actions, and interactions throughout my study. By including participants’ personal stories represented visually and textually, I will enable my participants’ to speak for themselves rather than restrict their voices through my own retelling of their stories. While conducting a critical emancipatory case study that focuses on politicizing the personal, as the reciprocal researcher, I expect my beliefs to transform along with my participants (Foster, 2007) as well as acknowledge my limited understanding of disenfranchised women’s experiences and access.

**Digital Divide—Lack of New Media Access and Familiarity with Online Social Networking.**

Disenfranchised women tend to lack equal access/control of new media. Online social networking is a privileged form of communication that is not available to all. “Lack of access to the Internet—often found along raced, classed, and still, to a narrowing extent, gendered lines—continues to cut particular bodies out of various histories in the making” (Nakamura, 2002, p. xii). The majority of women that are online are White, middle-class and upper-class, educated, and living in urban or suburban areas (Bautista, 2003). Women without their own financial
means may be dependent on their husbands to supply them with new media access. In these cases, women may not be in control of when or how they utilize new media (Abraham, 2009). Those without the Internet, including some women in rural areas, are excluded from online communities and virtual world feminist activism that empowers women to become active agents of change in virtual space (Keifer-Boyd, 2007).

**Unfamiliarity with Empowerment Potentials of New Media.**

Lack of training and programming skills contribute to women’s discomfort with new media and unfamiliarity with its strategic use for empowerment purposes (Bautista, 2003; Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Disenfranchised women are likely unfamiliar with the empowerment potentials of consciousness-raising via online social networks. Women survivors of negative gender-based issues/experiences and others can strategically intervene in online social networks and participate in what Kennedy (2007) refers to as “feminist virtual consciousness-raising” (¶5), which allows for crossing of physical barriers and has far reaching potentials for enacting social change, in order to raise awareness of negative gender-based issues/experiences such as gender-based violence/hatred in an effort to eliminate these acts. Women survivors of negative gender-based issues/experiences have the capacity to be generators of critical new media content if they have access to and knowledge of its capabilities. The problem that I identify is: Disenfranchised women, including women survivors of gender-based violence/hatred, may lack adequate access and experience utilizing online social networks that may be sites for informal art education, such as PostSecret, for empowerment purposes that potentially lead to positive personal and social transformation.
Content Analysis Example of One Sunday of PostSecret Postcards and PostSecret Community’s Online Discussion Threads and Email Communications

In order to critically analyze the content of PostSecret, while being mindful of my long-term goal to discover if PostSecret may provide empowerment potentials for women, I focus on the month of April 2010. I pay particular attention to the week of April 18, 2010 due to the content of five seemingly abortion-related postcards that were selected and posted by Warren that week. Through critically analyzing PostSecret, including the digitized postcards, PSC chat postings, and PSC email communications, my intent as an art educator interested in how visual communication can generate critical discourse is to better understand how informal learning occurs in regards to women’s issues by participating in the PSC. I also look for evidence of participants’ identity exploration and development as PSC members. Focusing on how women learn through online social networks and how they develop identities as PSC members while participating in PostSecret will aid me in understanding if PostSecret can function as a transitional space (Ellsworth, 2005) for women.

As of April 19, 2010 at 9:50 p.m., three separate discussion threads stemmed from five postcards that are seemingly about abortion: Abortion secrets (16 pages in length), An Email Exchange About the Abortion Secrets (three pages in length), and Women who didn’t regret their abortion (two pages in length). Through my critical content analysis of these three threads, the following themes and sub-themes emerged: (A) strong and controversial comments, (A1) art interpretations, (A2) unsupported personal beliefs, (A3) evidence supported comments, (A4) online dialogue changes to beliefs or reaffirmations of beliefs, and (B) informally learned multiple perspectives on socio-cultural issues. Evidence of (B) informally learned multiple perspectives on socio-cultural issues also stems from my analysis of the digitized postcards.
posted on PostSecret during the month of April 2010. Socio-cultural issue-based themes emerged from my analysis of the April 2010 posted postcards including abortion, body image, drugs, suicide, infidelity, depression, abuse, sexuality, and falsification. I also identified a third major theme: (C) PSC participation constructs PSC member identity, which emerged from my analysis of PSC 2010 email communications. In this critical content analysis, I provide evidence of these themes and warrant my claims.

**Strong and Controversial Comments.**

On April 18, 2010, Frank Warren, founder of PostSecret, posted five postcards that seemingly relate to abortion on the PostSecret blog (see Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). These postcards, which at first glance may be interpreted as pro-life by some, generated many strong and controversial comment postings by PSC members regarding Warren’s aesthetics and values, interpretations of the postcard artworks, and abortion debates. PSC member, tabyyy, acknowledges the potential for controversial debate amongst PSC members due to the content of five postcards posted on PostSecret during that particular week.

`tabyyy` I knew this week’s secrets would spark controversy. As soon as I noticed the number of them (which is a lot. 5 postcards dealing with the same issue? …) I knew I had to come into Sunday Secrets prepared for lots of debate.

`tabyyy`’s comment confirms the potential for debate to occur based on Warren’s postcard selection. tabyyy seems to believe that five postcards dealing with a similar issue may lead to controversy. I observed that 124 PSC members contributed to the abortion themed discussion threads. Some PSC members continuously contributed to the site’s discourse by posting multiple comments and replies to other PSC members that related to the postcard art, Warren’s selection, and abortion.
Figure 2. A postcard that is seemingly about abortion.

Figure 3. A postcard that is seemingly about abortion.
Figure 4. A postcard that is seemingly about abortion.

Figure 5. A postcard that is seemingly about abortion.
Figure 6. A postcard that is seemingly about abortion.

Art Interpretations.

Individuals’ interpretations of the postcard art varied. ShadesOfInsanity, a PSC member, argues that all the postcards that are seemingly about abortion are more pro-life than pro-choice. Runnerman’s abortion discussion thread comment conflicts with ShadesOfInsanity’s. Runnerman claims that he or she entered the abortion secrets discussion believing that the postcards represented a pro-choice bias. While ShadesOfInsanity and Runnerman make generalized statements regarding Warren’s pro-life or pro-choice bias that the five postcards that seemingly relate to abortion collectively demonstrate, the site moderators, Casey and Atzlan, 7

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7 PostSecret interns help moderate the community chat discussion forums (PostSecret, n.d.b). The moderators’ role is to keep PSC members on-topic and prevent abusive/offensive content posting. They can edit and delete PSC members’ posts as well as control forum topics by locking, unlocking, moving, deleting, and splitting them (PostSecret, n.d.a).
interpret the cards individually. Casey argues that the first and last postcards lack visual expression of regret, the third postcard could be pro-life or pro-choice, and the second postcard seemingly supports equality in regards to pro-life or pro-choice beliefs. Atzlan agrees with Casey and further argues that the first postcard’s content may not relate to abortion.

Casey   Honestly, I don't see how the last one is showing any regret about the decision that was made. And the first one doesn't seem to be, either. The third one could go either way, and the second one seems to support equal treatment in spite of different opinions.

Atzlan   Agreed. The first one might not even be about abortion. Unless I'm missing something.

Individuals’ voiced interpretations may challenge and sway how one views the postcards in terms of pro-life or pro-choice. fernweh, a PSC member, responded that the postcards all deal with abortion and are pro-life, but needs to hear others’ perspectives before making up his or her mind. After the moderators’ comment postings, ShadesOfInsanity asserts that the postcards are all pro-life and Atzlan further argues that the first postcard may not be about abortion and that there are multiple ways to interpret the postcards.

ShadesOfInsanity   I thought the first one was either about being pressured to have an abortion or keep a child, but perhaps that was just me.

Atzlan   Why does the first have to be about abortion? it's an empty sonogram scan right? It could be anything.

ShadesOfInsanity   1st one - I suppose it could be about anything, but coupled with "forgiveness" and a sonogram, most people will think of pregnancy, birth, etc. With the sonogram being empty, who will think of a child being born? What else do you think it's about, if not pregnancy or abortion or another related topic? The second one, the girl feels sickened or saddened by abortion. The third one, the girl vandalizes PP's property because of her own bias. The fourth one, the girl is basically saying that her abortion was a huge mistake. And in the fifth one, we see something that looks like a huge heartstring puller to make the person go "OMG so sad". It's an emotional plea used by pro-lifers all the time.
Atzlan

1. It's an ultrasound. Could be anything. I was at the doctor recently. Had an ultrasound done. The screen looked a lot like that. I assure you I wasn't there for anything pregnancy-related. It could be about a miscarriage. It could be about infertility. It could be about prostatitis. 2. Abortions make her want to cry. It doesn't say anything about being sickened or disgusted or thinking it's immoral. When people rubberneck an accident and I get stuck in traffic, it makes me want to cry. It has nothing to do with my moral code or religious views. 3. Agreed...although she removes them, she doesn't vandalize them. 4. She's not saying it was a mistake. Maybe she's depressed. Maybe she doesn't want her life saved. She says nothing about regret or mistakes. 5. Isn't even from the mother's perspective, so really, this kid doesn't know shit. Doesn't apply..... are my examples extreme? maybe. Are they what the secret sender meant? Who knows? Who cares. Frank can post whatever he wants. He often talks about how the best secrets are the ambiguous ones, because then we learn more about other people's secrets by how they interpret them.

These comment postings show how people’s interpretations of the postcard art differed. Based on ShadesOfInsanity’s detailed interpretative descriptions of the postcards, he or she still seems to view the content of the five postcards as pre-dominantly pro-life. Atzlan’s postcard interpretations conflict with ShadesOfInsanity’s. Atzlan argues that the first postcard may not even be about abortion. This shows how PSC members challenge each other’s interpretations of the postcard art by voicing their perspectives on the meaning of the postcards. For example, after Atzlan’s first comment that the first postcard may not be about abortion, ShadesOfInsanity defends his or her first claim that the postcards, including the first postcard, are about abortion when he or she says “1st one - I suppose it could be about anything, but coupled with "forgiveness" and a sonogram, most people will think of pregnancy, birth, etc. With the sonogram being empty, who will think of a child being born?” Atzlan continues to challenge his or her interpretation when he or she replies “1. It's an ultrasound. Could be anything. I was at the doctor recently. Had an ultrasound done. The screen looked a lot like that. I assure you I wasn't
there for anything pregnancy-related.” These dialogue contributions demonstrate that wrestling with multiple perspectives is important and it develops participants’ identities as PSC members.

**Unsupported Personal Beliefs.**

PSC members’ comments are based on personal beliefs, which in some cases are unsupported. ShadesOfInsanity claims to be deeply annoyed by the postcard selection, which in his or her opinion is more pro-life. Addiekins seems to believe that women should have the right to an abortion, but she hopes that they never choose abortion. Addiekins argues that women can’t regret keeping a child.

Addiekins  It's selfish, conceited and unfair to the kid to resent it for something it had no control over. You were the one who made the choice to keep it, you know? So man up, get over yourself and be a mom. If you can't? get an abortion or find a loving family. No excuses.

Addiekins’ comment and comments by PSC members seem to reveal their beliefs and biases. PSC members also make assumptions and claims about Warren’s beliefs based on the postcards that he selects to post. ShadesOfInsanity claims that Warren’s selection of postcards shows his pro-life bias. Adistantdawn, however, does not believe that Warren’s selections are biased. Site moderator, Atzlan, also addresses the issue of bias in response to ShadesOfInsanity’s comments regarding Warren’s biases.

Atzlan Why do the secrets need to be unbiased? I'm not saying they are or aren't. But there's no reason that they should be. It's an art project. Since when does art remain neutral?

I think you're [ShadesOfInsanity] interpreting the secrets a certain way. Which says more about your views than it does Frank's.

This comment by Atzlan seems to call for ShadesOfInsanity to reflect on what his or her comments reveal about his or her beliefs. ShadesOfInsanity further challenges Atzlan by
expanding on his or her claim with further interpretations of Warren’s biases. Atzlan continues to argue that people’s perceptions are impacted by their biases.

ShadesOfInsanity  More often than not, Frank posts negative things about abortion than positive ones. He also posts positive things about the gay community more often than negative ones. He has biases, and if one pays attention, the pattern becomes very obvious.

Atzlan  It's all about perception. Bias, preference ... whatever you want to call it. Do I see patterns, of course I do ... it's part of my job to be perceptive. But I still think you're seeing things a certain way based on your own "biases." We all do.

Other PSC members interpret Warren’s selection as biased and express disappointment in Warren’s postcard selection for the week.

RedRaso41  Frank, This is the first time that I have ever thought that this website was political sided. I have always thought that this was an objective site, but these chosen secrets prove me wrong. Not everyone regrets it, it's not a bad experience for everyone, for some it has waken them up and taught them new things. I agree with ShadesOfInsanity, please go back to be objective!

LittleGreen05  Those abortion themed secrets made me very upset. Frank usually does not pick sides. He doesn't judge or criticize. He simply posts up small snipets of human emotion at its rawest. This is supposed to be a safe place to express the things hiding in the corners of your soul. A place where you can confront your shame anonymously and not be harassed for it. I feel that by posting multiple pro-life themed secrets he is casting a judgment. By not presenting the other side, he is making a public statement about his views on abortion in a place that is sacred and beyond the political opinions of one person. Post secret is a place of acceptance. Where was the balance? Where was the understanding? EDIT: I formed a new account just to express these thoughts because I felt so strongly about it.

These comments show that the amount of postcards posted by Warren that seemingly relate to abortion and pro-life beliefs sparked conversations about Warren’s personal intentions.

Some PSC members see this particular instance of postcard selection as Warren’s way of sending
a pro-life message. Atzlan, however, calls for PSC members to practice reflexivity and recognize that their interpretations likely reflect their biases not those of Warren. Every week, Warren’s postcard selection impacts how the public views the PostSecret project, Warren, and the secrets that people seemingly possess. When postcards related to women’s ‘personal’ issues are displayed on PostSecret the consequential discourse reflects individual and societal beliefs. There is potential for critical discourse that challenges that status quo to stem from postcards that are realized to be political in nature rather than only personal. Collectively generated knowledge that challenges social norms can empower women.

**Evidence Supported Comments.**

In some instances, members provide evidence that supports their claims regarding abortion including book references, statistics, and urls. For example, RC, a PSC member, claims that the issue of abortion is not ‘black and white’ and recommends that others read the novel, *The Abortionist's Daughter,* which RC seemed to find insightful. LoadedAndAlone, a PSC member, seems to believe that most women who have abortions do not regret them.

LoadedAndAlone There's a HUGE portion of mothers who regret ever having children. I saw something on the Dr. Phil show about it ... about how people who have children unplanned and unwanted are fairly likely to continue to believe it was a bad decision.

In this comment, LoadedAndAlone references a popular contemporary talk show that he or she viewed in order to support his or her claim. Some PSC members also reference online resources. Igobymax provides the url where he or she obtained the statistics stated in his or her comment. 13kimber provides another statistic from the site cited by Igobymax.

Igobymax Most women who have abortions have had no previous abortions (52%) or
only one previous abortion (26%)
(www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5109a1.htm).
The CDC reports that about 7% of women have had three or more abortions.

13kimber I found this, from that link .... "A total of 861,789 legal induced abortions were reported to CDC for 1999" I think that is the number they mean ... and 7% of that is a little more than 60,000.

These comments show how PSC members support their claims with media sources. PSC members also share their resources with others. 13kimber’s comment provides evidence of a PSC member utilizing another member’s posted reference. Through shared individual contributions, PSC members build collective resources and knowledge, and challenge interpretation of “facts” such as statistics.

**Online Dialogue: Changes or Reaffirms Beliefs (PostSecret’s Potential Function as a Transitional and Empowering Space).**

As a result of reading others’ posted comments, a PSC member’s opinions and beliefs may be changed or reaffirmed. PSC member, Purslane interprets the fifth postcard and ShadesOfInsanity changes his or her opinion due to Purslane’s interpretation, which seems to clarify the first postcard’s message for ShadesOfInsanity.

Purslane Actually, I think this one was pro abortion, meaning that if her mother hadn't had an abortion, she would not have been born. I know a girl who had an abortion but then got pregnant again 4 or 5 months later and had that kid. He wouldn't have been born if not for that first abortion, because she would have still been pregnant with that baby at the time that second one was conceived.

ShadesOfInsanity OH! This is the second time I have misunderstood something very easy to understand tonight. I missed the word "didn't". Haha.

When RC questions ShadesOfInsanity about his or her beliefs. ShadesOfInsanity admits to viewing some postcards differently, but maintains his or her claim that Warren is pro-life.
Shades, out of curiosity, do you still feel now that there is a bias towards pro-life in this week’s secrets? I’m wondering because that point seems to be left standing in favor of yet another abortion debate. All of the threads this week seem to have disintegrated into pro-life vs pro-choice arguments rather than a focus on the secrets.

I did misread some of them, and I can see how they are much less biased than what I thought when I originally read them. Overall, I still think Frank is probably pro-life and it shows in the secrets he often chooses (just like he is most definitely pro-gay rights and it shows in the secrets he chooses), but I can see how this week isn’t the best illustration of that.

PSC members who read the chat discussion threads are impacted by others’ comments. After interpreting a comment posting’s message and reflecting on its meaning, PSC members may reevaluate their own understandings, positions, and prior claims. PostSecret functions as a transitional space when it leads a participant of the PSC to envision/make positive personal/social change. ShadesOfInsanity admits that she misread some of the postcards and now seems to have changed her original claim that all the postcards are pro-life. One may feel the urge to continue arguing a claim if the claim is reaffirmed by others or admit his or her change of perspective due to others’ statements.

Informally Learned Multiple Perspectives on Socio-Cultural Issues (Collectively Generated Knowledge is Empowering).

Socio-cultural issue-based themes emerged in my analysis of the postcards posted on PostSecret during the month of April 2010 including abortion, body image, drugs, suicide, infidelity, depression, abuse, sexuality, and falsification. By reading others’ comments that stem from Warren’s postcard selection, individuals learn multiple perspectives on socio-cultural issues, in the case of the abortion threads regarding a debated issue women may face, which may
deepen their previous knowledge of this subject domain. PSC members commented specifically on the abortion process.

colelizper  I am pro-choice, but I would never have an abortion. I watched a video on how abortions were done ... maybe they have changed it, maybe not. But it made me cry because the baby was living, and it was torn to pieces by the tools used in the abortion. I can't see how anyone could want to do that to their baby, but I refuse to decide what is right for someone else simply because I don't believe in it. Abortion is the choice of the woman, and always should be.

Addiekins  Thats propaganda video, and it's BS. IF its a late term abortion (over ... 7? months. maybe 6 months.) The fetus is euthanized and then, yes, a two-day surgery is performed which require the fetus to be removed in a rather unpleasant looking way. If you have an abortion before 2 months, you take a series of pills that force miscarriage. In between are basically varying degrees of that. Edit: also, late term abortions are illegal in most parts of the US unless of medical emergency. Also; it makes me really mad that pro-life propaganda tries to make it seem like this heinous evil thing, like they're trying/are hurting the fetus while removing it. It does not feel anything. It doesn’t experience pain and is not tortured to death.

PSC members may informally learn about the process of abortion from other members’ comment postings. In this instance, Addiekins seems to try to disprove colelizper’s statement about the abortion process by providing his or her own knowledge/perspective on abortion. PSC members may build on their previous knowledge of a subject domain such as women’s issues including abortion by learning new domain-specific content from others. Collectively generated knowledge gained through online dialogue is empowering (Foster, 2007; Lather, 1991). PSC members may learn: how others’ interpret art, others’ beliefs and values, and domain-specific content related to socio-cultural issues. Others’ informally learned multiple perspectives on socio-cultural issues may influence and form a PSC member’s beliefs, perceptions, values, knowledge, and identity.
PSC Participation Constructs PSC Member Identity (Identifying with a Supportive Online Community is Empowering).

Through continuous participation in the PSC, individuals may develop identities as PSC members that are proud to identify with this online community and contribute to its discourse. Warren held a 3rd annual PostSecret Community picnic on July 17 in Germantown, Maryland. This year, he held a PSC T-shirt design contest for the picnic (PostSecret chat administrator, personal communication, May 10, 2010). Members that attended the PSC picnic and purchase/wear a PSC T-shirt likely identify with the PSC. Warren claims that a PSC member showed him his or her PSC tattoo (PostSecret chat administrator, personal communication, May 3, 2010). Tattoos tend to be symbolic, meaningful, and may symbolize a commitment. The act of getting a PSC tattoo shows evidence of an individual that likely is committed to the PSC, identifies with it, and finds it to be a meaningful cause and supportive community. These instances demonstrate that participation in PostSecret constructs identities as community members.

Findings Indicate Potential for PostSecret Feminist Activism.

My critical content analysis findings lead me to believe that, despite site monitoring, PostSecret offers a potential virtual space for politicizing the personal through tactical actions and interactions. In the case of the display of individually submitted postcards that seemingly relate to abortion, 124 PSC participants engaged in discussion about abortion, a women’s issue. The discourse that stemmed from these postcards raised larger socio-cultural issues related to abortion, rather than focusing on individual cases. PSC members also questioned Warren’s intentions by critiquing his postcard selection in order to reveal his biases. Feminists and others
may utilize PostSecret as a site for consciousness-raising and politicizing the personal when
gender-based artwork and comments are intentionally submitted as a form of activism.

**Significance of Study: Agency and Empowerment via Critical Online Social Network Participation**

Online social networks afford positive and negative actions and interactions. The Internet can foster acts of hatred and violence against women and those marginalized in society (Kennedy, 2007). Acts of hate in virtual space can range from intentionally harmful representations and slanderous acts to destructive behavior and interactions. These forms of hatred are socially acceptable in physical space and therefore extend to virtual space. As a result of feminist efforts, women representations are slowing changing to represent women that are independent and confident (Gill, 2007). My proposed research study derives from the critical theory paradigm of feminism (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lather, 2004). Through my study, I will enable disenfranchised women to make their experiences of gender-based violence/hatred visible in physical and virtual space. Like Macueve, Mandlate, Ginger, Gaster, and Macome (2009), I believe that women can benefit from Information Communication Technologies.

Focusing on the need of socially marginalized groups for equality, "an emancipatory, critical social science develops out of the social relations of the research process itself, out of the enactment of research praxis that uses intellectual effort to work toward a more just society" (Lather, 2004, p. 208). Critical emancipatory research is both pedagogical and political. It involves people examining their beliefs, their history of living in an oppressive culture, and how they can transform "the relations of power that constrict people's lives" (Simon & Dippo, 1986, p. 196). Through this research study, I hope to support disenfranchised women to envision
positive change in their lives (Lather, 1986) by guiding their development of a feminist consciousness that leads them to critically reflect on their lives and experiences, and to transform particular patriarchal habits that prevent their agency (Fischer, 2010; Lather, 1991).

Summary of Proposal

My overarching study goal is to empower disenfranchised women by engaging them in strategic participation in the community art project and online social network PostSecret, which is an information and communication technology in order to positively impact their lives. Through my qualitative critical emancipatory case study, I aim to identify: how participation in the PSC constructs disenfranchised women’s identities as PSC members with agency, if PostSecret can function as a transitional space for disenfranchised women, and how art educators can facilitate empowering online activities. My proposed dissertation encompasses research that I see as relevant to addressing my research questions and reaching my overarching study goal (see Appendix D).

I aim to start my research study in January 2010 after I confirm my study participants. All participants will be required to sign the IRB approved consent form (see Appendix E). I expect to collect qualitative data while conducting my critical emancipatory case study during the spring 2011 semester. I plan to start analyzing my collected data and writing my dissertation in April 2011 (see Appendix F).
References


Redfern, C. (2001). The personal is (or) isn’t political (or is it?). *The F-Word: Contemporary UK Feminism*. Retrieved from http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2001/05/the_personal_is_or_isnt_political_or_is_it


Appendix A: Pedagogical Approach Plan

Empowering New Media Curriculum


Week 1
Provide materials; Create Google account & pseudonym; PSC introduction/guidance; Visual communication/representation discussion

Week 2
Mail postcards to NAEA WC

Week 3
Introduce my blog:

Week 4
Comment on my blog:

Week 5
Use postcards in my Cultural Conversations exhibition (see Appendix C)

Week 6
Use postcards in my Cultural Conversations exhibition (see Appendix C)

Week 7
Comment on my blog

Week 8
Attend Cultural Conversations, February 23-27

Week 9
NAEA WC Voices blog introduction:
Comment on NAEA WC Voices blog

Week 10
Week 11
Comment on my blog

Week 12

Postcard Prompts:
Week 1: “A time when you felt negatively stereotyped or discriminated against because of your gender”
Week 2: “A time when you defied a negative gender-based stereotype”
Week 3: “A time when you felt powerless”
Week 4: “How could did you turn the negative experience that you represented in your previous postcard into an empowering experience?”
Week 5: “What does the Global War Against Women mean to you?”
Week 6: “A time when you did not feel in control”
Week 7: “How could did you turn the negative experience that you represented in your previous postcard into an empowering experience?”
Week 8: “A time when you or another woman you know was violated”
Week 9: “How could did you turn the negative experience that you represented in your previous postcard into an empowering experience?”
Week 10: “A time when you or another woman you know felt threatened”
Week 11: “How could did you turn the negative experience that you represented in your previous postcard into an empowering experience?”
Week 12: “A time when you felt empowered by making a positive personal choice/change”
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Dear 5 Women in Pennsylvania,

I am an art educator working on a graduate degree at Penn State. Would you be willing to give 1 hour of your time each week for 12 weeks to create postcards to understand and envision change in your current situation. I will provide materials, guidance, a place to work, and transportation as needed. I will also provide a $25 gift certificate to a store of your choice in appreciation for your help for my reflection on how to improve the art activities of postcard creation. No artmaking experience is needed.

Sincerely,
Jennifer

Jennifer Motter
Doctoral Candidate, Art Education
Penn State University
(XXX) XXX-XXXX
Appendix C: Cultural Conversations Postcard Exhibition

Penn State Downtown Theatre Center (Left Side of Lobby Hallway)

Table with materials for postcard making

Artist statement

Women survivors of gender-based violence postcards

Cultural Conversations attendees’ comments

Cultural Conversations attendees’ postcards

Postcard prompts

2’ 6” W x 3’ H

2’ 6” W x 3’ H

2’ 6” W x 3’ H

66’ 8”
Appendix D: Working Chapter Outline for Dissertation

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Acknowledgments
Abstract
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  Background of the Study
  Statement of the Problem
  Purpose of the Study
  Research Questions
  Significance of the Study
  Limitations of the Study
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature
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    Thick Description
    CyberConfessional Identity Exploration
  The Personal is Political
    Feminist Online Pedagogy
      Curriculum
      Virtual Consciousness-Raising
    Informal Learning
      Communities of Practice
      Distributed Communities of Practice in Virtual Space
Feminist Virtual World Activism

Cyberfeminism(s)

16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence in Second Life®

The Guerrilla Girls Broadband

subRosa

Critical Emancipatory Case Study Methods

GRACE (Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment)

Lather & Smithies (1997) *Troubling the Angels.*


Summary of Literature Review in Relation to the Study’s Problem Statement

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Research Framework

Critical Emancipatory Case Study with Qualitative Data

The Researcher’s Role

Data Collection

Data Analysis

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Art Educators’ Pedagogical Approach Generates Empowering Art

PSC Member Identity Construction

PostSecret’s Function as a Transitional Space for Disenfranchised Women

Art Educators’ Facilitation of Empowering Online Social Network Participation
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussion, and Suggestions for Future Research

Summary

Conclusions

Discussion

Suggestions for Future Research
Appendix E: IRB Approved Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Politicizing the Personal: PostSecret Feminist Activism

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Motter, 187 Wissinger Hollow Rd., Johnstown, PA 15904 Phone: (724) 422-6204 Email: jennifer.motter@gmail.com

Advisor: Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd, 207 Arts Cottage, University Park, PA 16801 Phone: (814) 865-6570 Email: ktk2@psu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to empower women through introduction/guidance in strategic online social network participation. Women's disempowering and empowering experiences will be made visible through creation and online display of postcards and comments that verbally/visually represent these experiences in an effort to raise awareness of women's issues and stop acts of gender-based violence/hatred.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to:
   (1) deeply reflect on disempowering and empowering experiences,
   (2) make postcards that visually represent these experiences,
   (3) submit the postcards to me for digitization and online display on my blog, NAEA WC Voices, and PostSecret or display in Penn State Downtown Theatre Center during Cultural Conversation, which occurs February 23-27,
   (4) attend Cultural Conversations, February 23-27, at Penn State Downtown Theatre Center, if possible,
   (5) create a PostSecret (http://postsecret.com) online account using a pseudonym that you will share with me,
   (6) post online comments using your pseudonym regarding your interpretation of the postcards that are of interest to you on my blog, NAEA WC Voices, and PostSecret (I will document your online comment postings),
   (7) create a weekly sketchbook entry that verbally/visually represent your experience participating in the PostSecret online community, and
   (8) return your sketchbook to me at the end of the study.

3. Discomforts and Risks: There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Some of the postcard prompts are personal and might cause discomfort. Sharing your artwork and comments with the public may be considered a risk to reputation but please be assured that your name or other identifiable information will not be linked to your postcards, sketchbooks, and online comments.

4. Benefits: You may develop a sense of empowerment, and learn more about yourself and your experiences. You may positively change your life/others’ lives. You may also form a supportive community with others that may share your experiences as a result of participating in this research.
study. You will gain experience using computers and online social networks for information and communication purposes.

5. **Duration/Time:** You will be required to participate in this research study for approximately 1 hour per week over a 12-week period.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at my home in a locked file and password protected computer. Pseudonyms will be used to label data to ensure confidentiality of all data. Jennifer Motter will be the only person with knowledge of your identity. The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Jennifer Motter at (724) 422-6204 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by Jennifer Motter. If you seek counseling and psychological services and resources, you may contact: the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE, the Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE, and the National Center for Victims of Crime at 1-800-FYI-CALL.

8. **Payment for participation:** In appreciation for your help, you will receive a $25 gift certificate to a store of your choice for your full participation in this study.

9. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____________________________________________  ____________________
Participant Signature  Date

_____________________________________________  ____________________
Person Obtaining Consent  Date


## Appendix F: Proposed Timeframe for Dissertation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2, 2010</td>
<td>Submit proposal to committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 21, 2010</td>
<td>Proposal meeting with committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2010</td>
<td>Submit form to IRB for data collection 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2010–January 2011</td>
<td>Find and confirm research study participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January–April 2011</td>
<td>Conduct my critical emancipatory case study and collect qualitative participant data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2011</td>
<td>Analyze my collected data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>Submit Chapter 1: Introduction to chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>Submit Chapter 2: Review of the Literature to chair, revise Ch. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2011</td>
<td>Submit Chapter 3: Research Methodology to chair, revise Ch. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2011</td>
<td>Submit Chapter 4: Research Findings to chair, revise Ch. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>Submit Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussion, and Suggestions for Future Research, revise Ch. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2011</td>
<td>Revise Ch. 5, format all chapters and submit to chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>Submit all chapters to committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2011</td>
<td>Individual meetings with committee members</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2011</td>
<td>Defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
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