HELP! I DON'T LOVE MY HUSBAND" Advice Columns as Teaching Resource for Gender and Sexuality: Experiences from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the use of teaching materials that are salient to students' life experiences, hold their interest and facilitate transformatory learning and critical feminist thinking about gender and sexualities. Based on the experience of the use of Ghanaian advice columns as part of the curriculum in a gender and sexuality course, some of the challenges of teaching for transformation in the university classroom are presented and discussed. The paper shows that the students displayed a basic grasp of gender dimensions of the social construction of sex. They could easily relate to the issues raised in the letters published in the advice columns, which provided ample examples and spaces for exploration and discussion on gender and sexuality in the classroom. However, the issue of critical self-reflection, a crucial goal of transformatory learning, proved to have eluded the class. Creating evaluation methods that facilitate transformatory learning remains a challenge.

KEY WORDS: Gender, Sexuality, Teaching Resources, Transformatory Learning, Mass Media

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to share my experiences in selecting and utilizing teaching resources expected to hold the interest of students and facilitate critical feminist thinking about gender and sexualities. The theoretical underpinnings of my teaching methodology are influenced by critical, constructivist and feminist pedagogical perspectives (Freire, 1970; Maher & Tetreault, 1994), which place less

¹ This was the heading of a letter that appeared in the advice column of 'The Mirror', March 20, 2008. An earlier version of this paper was presented at an international conference on Gender, Law and Sexuality, Faculty of Law, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda in October 2007

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emphasis on the teacher as the 'knower' and main source of knowledge, and focus on the experiences of the student as well as dialogue as the basis of learning. These perspectives expose systems of domination, question the social construction of knowledge and seek to create critical thinking and action (Chow, 2000). Teaching becomes an interactive activity that occurs within a space created by the teacher and student, which empowers the student as a knower and respects all experiences.

The teaching of gender-related courses using feminist, critical and constructivist perspectives can facilitate transformative³ learning by freeing students from previously acquired ideas, leading to a deeper understanding of the complexities and contradictions of the gendered social world, and deeper self reflection about commonly accepted knowledge. In this way, students can begin to explore alternative ideas, perspectives and ways of taking action differently. Teaching for transformation requires innovative pedagogy, curricula and classroom culture. In the context of educational systems that tend to be conservative and authoritarian, coupled with teaching about sexuality, a topic that many young Ghanaians prefer not to discuss outside their peer groups, the teacher is faced with challenges which need to be thought through carefully. Using the experience of the use of Ghanaian advice columns as part of the curriculum in a Gender and Sexuality course as a case study, I make an attempt at presenting and discussing some of the challenges of teaching for transformation in the university classroom.

The Gender and Sexuality course at the University of Cape Coast is an undergraduate (400 level) course offered within the Department of Sociology. It was introduced about ten years ago through my personal interest in the subject matter. Gender and Sexuality is an elective course, which means that class sizes are relatively small, generally with a maximum of 25 to 30 students.

Two years ago, a Gender Studies concentration was introduced in the Department and the current trend is that it is usually those students who have taken gender-related courses during their third year who are attracted to the Gender and Sexuality course. Before the Gender Studies concentration was introduced, students who enrolled for the Gender and Sexuality course had wider interests. Now the pool of students from which students of the course are drawn has narrowed. This raises questions about the merits and demerits of packaging clusters of courses as concentrations and offering students a 'free' choice. That discussion however, falls outside the scope of this paper.

³ I use the term 'transformative learning' following Habermas' (1971) distinction between three kinds of knowledge acquisition which is here admittedly interpreted in very simplistic terms: technical—which helps us in problem solving; practical knowledge—which through the vehicle of language equips us with information about the norms, values and knowledge needed in order to function in the social world, and emancipatory or transformative learning which occurs through critical self-reflection and frees us from previously learnt ideas and opening us up to alternative perspectives. See also Mezirov (1991), and Cranton (2006).

Apart from the problem of how to achieve the full participation of students in a course that brings to the fore issues regarding sex and sexuality, subjects that they are not socialized to discuss openly, one of the biggest challenges I have faced in teaching Gender and Sexuality has been locating relevant teaching resources that are African. I am happy to say that today there are many more books, scholarly articles and websites available that can be used as teaching resources than there were when I began to teach the course about six to seven years ago.

In a country like Ghana, where income levels are relatively low and students not likely to have much spending money at their disposal, the selection of teaching resources presents a challenge to the university teacher in the sense that in addition to an appraisal of the content in terms of its pedagogical value and its suitability to the needs of the students, some reflection on the cost is required. It is necessary to consider what costs can realistically be borne by the students. If required reading materials are expensive and not available in the library, there is a good chance that they will not be widely read by the students. This problem is very often resolved by making photocopies of chapters or sections of books that are required reading available to the students and having students make their own copies. Copyright laws notwithstanding, a great deal of photocopying of texts is done on our campus due to the exorbitant cost of books, particularly imported ones. Questions regarding cost of books and other required resources have to be posed alongside pedagogical issues and balancing these poses a challenge.

The selection of teaching resources is dependent on the aims of the course, which in turn, are closely linked with the discipline, in this case sociology. In addition to the demands of the discipline, there is space for other, more political and personal interests of the lecturer to be accommodated. My course aims at transformative learning, although I do not explicitly say so. The course description states the following:

In this course the focus is on sexual behaviour as socially developed rather than as a biological given. It examines the way we become sexual beings and shows how this process is gendered. Theories on the acquisition of gender identity will be examined. The course also explores ways in which societies both limit and exploit sexual expression, with a specific focus on feminist and other critiques. It discusses the sexual careers of women and men, and the growing variety of sexual expression found in the world today, within the context of social change. The course also seeks to explain how location structures personal experience and understanding of sexuality and identity. Trends in sexual behaviour in contemporary Ghana will be examined, with reference to modern methods of contraception, the influence of religion, changing roles of women and men and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

(Course Description, Gender and Sexuality, Department of Sociology, 2005/06)

The course objectives read:

The course aims at promoting a critical and analytical approach to issues regarding human sexuality and also seeks:

- ♦ To promote a critical understanding of sexual behaviour as gendered and socially developed rather than a purely biological given
- ♦ To promote an understanding of the historical contexts in which sexualities have been constructed in Africa
- ◆ To promote an understanding of the intersections of gender, sexuality, identity and culture (structured by location)
- ♦ To encourage students to view all issues with gender sensitivity
- To promote healthy and responsible attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviour.

(Course Description, Gender and Sexuality, Department of Sociology, 2005/06)

For teaching resources, I selected texts that had an African context and also offered the opportunity to question previously acquired constructions of sexuality informed the choice of teaching resources. The list of resources included Signe Arnfred's edited volume (2004), Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa, which features a range of articles that discuss sexual experiences and social constructions of attitudes towards sex and sexual actors, Julius Kaggawa's, From Juliet to Julius (1997), the autobiography of an intersex person from Uganda, and a film by a Ghanaian film director Yaaba Badoe titled: Without Walls: I Want Your Sex, about Western attitudes and constructions of sexualities of racially Black peoples. 4:

Since the focus of this paper is not on all the teaching resources utilized in the course, I will, in the sections that follow, concentrate on the advice columns I use as a segment of the teaching materials. I discuss why I use them and show ways in which I have used them with students.

THE ADVICE COLUMNS: 'OBAA YAA' AND 'NANA AMA ADVISES YOU'

The advice columns 'Obaa Yaa' (translates literally as 'The Woman Yaa') and 'Nana Ama Advises You' are regular features of the weekly newspapers, *The Spectator* and *The Mirror*, respectively. *The Spectator* is a weekly published by *The Ghanaian Times* group and *The Mirror* is published by The Graphic. Both papers have the highest and widest circulation in Ghana. The advice columns that the two weekly papers feature cover a variety of problems emanating from intimate (heterosexual) relationships. People send in letters to the 'Agony Aunts,' detailing problems, predominantly

⁴Almost all the teaching resources listed were identified through my participation in the Gender and Women Studies in Africa workshops organized by the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town. The following website, created as a result of that initiative, is useful for identifying African resources: www.gwsafrica.org/teaching/charmaine/s%20essay.html

those relating to intimate relationships, for solutions and advice. The problems deal with issues such as heartbreak, young women's relationships with older, married men or 'sugar daddies,' problems arising from partners belonging to the so-called 'wrong' ethnic group or religion and issues relating to maintenance or communication difficulties. Examples of headings of letters that appeared in "Obaa Yaa" and "Nana Ama Advices You" in August 2007 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Headings of Letters in Obaa Yaa and Nana Ama Advices You: August 2007

Obaa Yaa	Nana Ama Advices You
Can I report this bad teacher?	→ Help! My Heart is breaking
₩ want him as a friend	→ My past still plagues me
₩He doesn't call me	→ She does not trust me at all
★She says I should find another lad	→ I've lived in hell for two years
Should I allow him to marry for papers?	

Source: Media Survey (August 2007)

The advice given as well as its silences, namely what does not appear in them, are also debated in the classroom.

The choice of advice columns as a teaching resource in the Gender and Sexuality course is based on the fact that the problems appear to be real and salient, with a Ghanaian context; the age range of those who send in letters is from 13 to 25 years; students' ages fall within that age range and it is likely that they too, face similar problems. In addition to this, discussing the advice columns offers opportunities to illustrate a number of issues pertaining to gender in Ghana, well documented in the literature (Awumbila 2001; Fenrich & Higgins 2002; Duncan 2004; Allah-Mensah 2005; Cusack & Coker Appiah 1999), such as the unequal balance of gender relations in favor of men, as well as the discursive constructions of gender and sexuality, the norms and silences that are linked with the social construction of sexuality, sexuality as a gendered process, issues regarding women's rights in marriage and intimate relationships, and violence against women. In the section that follows, I discuss when I introduce the segment on advice columns, how I enlist students to study them, and then finally discuss the efficiency of the approach taken by presenting and discussing examples of students' assignments in 2005/2006.

Introducing the Segment on Advice Columns

Although it would be possible to introduce the segment on advice columns at any point during the course, I have found it useful to launch it in the middle of the semester, when the class had the opportunity to discuss theory, which is expected to enhance their analytical ability. In their analysis of the advice columns, I encourage them to use a theoretical framework that brings out the complex and dynamic nature of the social construction of sexuality.

One approach that I have found to be accessible to the students and useful for their analysis of the advice columns was developed in the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) by Geeta Rao Gupta and her colleagues, and is neatly summed up in her paper, "Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS: The What, the Why and the How" (2000).

We read and discuss Rao Gupta's position that sexuality is distinct from gender yet intimately linked to it. The students learn that it is the social construction of a biological drive, and that an individual's sexuality is defined by whom one has sex with, in what ways, why, under what circumstances, and with what outcomes. Sexuality, they learn, is more than sexual behavior and is a multidimensional and dynamic concept. We make clear the fact that explicit and implicit rules imposed by society as defined by one's gender, age, economic status, ethnicity and other factors influence an individual's sexuality (Zeidenstein & Moore 1996; Dixon Mueller 1993, cited in Rao Gupta 2000: 2). The next part of the theoretical framework, which Rao Gupta calls the 'P's of sexuality', is introduced to them. I have always found the 'P's of sexuality framework' a good and effective mnemonic aid that helps students unpack sexuality as a concept.

Rao Gupta's framework lends itself to relatively straightforward memorization, a teaching method which appears to be completely at variance with the acquisition of emancipatory knowledge. And yet, it seems logical to use methods already known to students and learners as steps in the process of acquiring knowledge. It would be completely objectionable if the students were merely exposed to the 'P's of sexuality framework' without being led to look beyond the framework and examine its short-comings as an analytical framework. The merits and demerits of the framework are discussed in class, and in a recent final examination, I set a question that required the students to discuss the merits and demerits of the 'P's of sexuality framework' as an analytical tool.

According to Rao Gupta, the ICRW talks about the components of sexuality in terms of 'P's'- practices, partners, pleasure/pressure/pain, and procreation. The first two refer to aspects of behavior, how one has sex and with whom, while the others refer to the underlying motives. For her, there is another important P that underlies all sexual interaction be it heterosexual or homosexual, and it is power. Power determines how all the other P's of sexuality are expressed and experienced.

Rao Gupta (2000: 2) writes:

Power determines whose pleasure is given priority and when, how, and with whom sex takes place. Each component of sexuality is closely related to the other but the balance of power in a sexual interaction determines its outcome. (...) Power is fundamental to both sexuality and gender. The unequal power balance in gender relations that favors men, translates into an unequal power balance in heterosexual interactions, in which male pleasure supersedes fe-

male pleasure and men have greater control than women over when, where, and how sex takes place. An understanding of individual sexual behavior, male or female, thus, necessitates an understanding of gender and sexuality as constructed by a complex interplay of social, cultural and economic forces that determine the distribution of power.

As a result of previous class discussions held with other cohorts of students who had taken the course earlier around underlying motives of sexual behavior as presented in the letters to the 'agony aunts,' we added two more P's to Rao Gupta's original 'P's. They are 'poverty' and 'pecuniary motives,' which are linked, but not necessarily dependent on each other.⁵ [4]

When gender and sexuality have been unpacked in an accessible manner as described, and students have been exposed to other theoretical analyses described in the course outline, then I consider them ready to examine the advice columns. At the beginning of the semester, the class is divided up into groups of a maximum of four students each, and each group is assigned a different topic which it has to present each week. The analysis of the advice columns is one of such assigned topics. The students are asked to randomly select the 'Mirror' and 'Spectator' weeklies from any two months of the year and conduct a content analysis of all letters to their advice columns that they would classify as concerned with intimate relationships. They are required to use the "P's of Sexuality framework" to conduct a critique.

Students' Analysis of the Advice Columns: Examples from the 'Gender and Sexuality' Class, 2005/2006 6

The examples of student's attempts to analyze the advice columns presented here are taken from a class presentation done in the 2005/2006 academic year. I present some excerpts (in unedited form) but in general have attempted to summarize their ideas and arguments. The quality of analysis and the language are not considered here,

⁵I am extremely grateful to the participants of the International Conference on Gender, Law and Sexuality (held in October 2007 in Kampala, Uganda and organized by the Faculty of Law, Makerere University) for pointing out to me the possibility of adding many more 'P's' to the framework and suggesting the following 'P's': places, paraphernalia, publics of sexuality, political, patriarchal, performance, parts (of the body), and poetry. Some of the conference participants also took issue with the notion arising out of my presentation of the 'P's of sexuality framework' that power is a negative force, pointing out that the acquisition of power can alternatively be perceived to be an enabling factor rather than one that dis-empowers people. Power, they argued, needs to be seen in terms of 'I can' (enabling). Patriarchal structures and some feminist critiques present power as 'the power over' when it can be perceived as the 'power to do'.

⁶. I am very grateful to the students of this class who graciously granted me permission to cite their class work.

although they could form the basis of a discussion of quality of work produced by students in Ghanaian universities, a topic that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The first excerpt shows how they used the 'P's of Sexuality Framework':

The first story we considered in the agony section of The Mirror is about a lady of twenty-three years who is in a relationship with a man of twenty-two years. According to the lady the man supports her financially. However, the lady has other guys who also support her financially, yet she does not love these other guys. Moreover, she is not comfortable with the fact that she is a year older than her boyfriend: even her father had warned her against such relationship.

From this story, we observed that pecuniary motives, poverty, practices and pressure as P's of sexuality come into play. We can deduce that the lady's motive for entering into all the relationships was for money. This is evident from her admission that they provide her with money. Poverty can also come into play. The lady might be taking the money from the guys probably because she has financial problems at home. Moreover, the warning from the father to the lady not to enter into a relationship with a guy who she is older than is mounting pressure on the lady to end her relationship with the first guy. If not, she could probably have stayed with him alone. In our part of the world, the practice is that women should be younger than the man. It is believed that since the man is the head of the house, he must be older than the wife.

The students continued their presentation by describing more letters and then presented what they called 'general trends,' which I summarize here as follows:

Demographic Characteristics of Advice Seekers

The ages of those who wrote to the advice columns range from 13 to 25 years, the average ages lie between 19 and 22 years. The students surmised that people who fall within those age ranges are likely to be beginning to be sexually active and are thus more likely to encounter problems in their sex lives.

The educational level of the contributors to the advice columns ranged from the Junior High School to the tertiary level. The majority were in the Senior High School. To the students, the advice seekers were obviously literate. They assumed that those who cannot write do not send in any stories. They also assumed that people with an appreciable amount of education do write to seek help from advice columns.

Geographical Locations Cited

The students found that the issues raised by the advice seekers had occurred in various parts of the country, and cities and towns such as Takoradi, Accra, Kumasi, Bechem, Tamale, Agona Swedru, Konongo and Cape Coast are examples of locations of the advice seekers.

Gender of Advice Seekers

Another important trend identified by the students was the high ratio of women who wrote to the advice columns. Only five out of thirteen letters were written by men. The students felt that this was due to the fact that women in Ghana are likely to be more open about their sex lives than men. They attributed this to the fact that women follow the sexual script of being emotional and 'weak hearted'. Men live according to social and sexual scripts that require that they are 'strong-hearted,' which makes it more difficult for them to share their personal problems. According to the students, men who go against these norms are regarded as effeminate and are ridiculed, making them vulnerable.

The Content of the Letters Seeking Advice

The students found that about 90% of the stories were about sexual or romantic relationships. Interestingly, most of the relationships had been in existence for only a few years, and others were just beginning. None of the letters in the sample were about married couples. The students concluded then, that married people are less likely to openly express issues about sexuality.

To the students, when married people do experience marital problems, they tend to seek help in other sectors such as the church and not in the media. They thought that unmarried people have fewer avenues for seeking advice on issues involving their sexuality.

Non-disclosure of Identity

The final trend which the class identified was the fact that most contributors tried one way or another to disguise their true identities or names. Only a few people produced their names. The rest used abbreviations such as AZ, YM, JK, and AW. The class thought that this was due to the fact that openly discussing matters of sexuality is not encouraged in the Ghanaian society. They argued that people who talk or express their sexual lives openly are seen as deviants and most often regarded with a lot of scorn. To them, the Ghanaian society happens to be a highly moralistic one and because of that people prefer to be silent about sexual matters. The class thought keeping silent about sexuality amounted to hypocrisy.

Students' Conclusions

In this section, the concluding analysis by the students is presented verbatim:

First and foremost, we can confidently point out that the Ghanaian society is very patriarchal. Male dominance in every aspect over females is very rife. This imbalance can be seen in institutions, employment set ups, social arrangements, etc. Education wise, (until recently) men have had the upper hand in all spheres. This brings

us to the very important issue of sexual harassment. The natures of our norms have left the notion that a woman's body is entirely for the man. This erroneous belief transcends to the employment sector where female secretaries (who are quite numerous) are seen as the sexual preserve of their bosses. They are abused and harassed with impunity all over the place. This harassment is most often unaddressed hence its perpetuation. An extension of this argument can be seen in the story of the 13 year old girl who by virtue of her parents' inability to properly take care of her is living with her sister. Her sister's husband keeps harassing her sexually if the sister is not around. This he does with the use of the threat of starvation if the girl does not give in since he happens to be the "bread winner of the house." The question we will like to ask is should men always be the bread winners? Obviously not!!!

Another thing which can be inferred from the stories is that Ghana is a very heterosexual oriented nation, just like most part of the continent. Heterosexual affairs or marriages are seen and regarded as the only ideal form of sexual orientation. Homosexuality though it exists in this country is seen as a deviant act which is westernoriented. From all the stories analyzed, none of them involves issues concerning same-sex problems. It is always "my male or female partner". Thus heterosexual relations appear to be the best and the only sexual orientation that fits Ghanaian society hence it is institutionally sanctioned. Thus one's choice of a sexual partner is greatly influenced by our social and cultural settings. However due to modernization/globalization, some of these norms are beginning to loose ground to some very flexible sexual norms. But this turn of events is slow and on the small-scale.

Marriage was, or can be identified as a very important social ideal in the Ghanaian society. Marriage is an important social ideal in the Ghanaian society. Marriage is much cherished among all ethnic groups in Ghana. A lot of emphasis is placed on marriage mostly because it serves as a basis for legal sexual behavior (because the country is quite a religious one). All the people who sent in their complaints had marriage as their main or their ultimate aim. Thus the final destination of the numerous romantic relationships being discussed was marriage. Sex outside marriage is seen as very bad act and most often not encouraged under any circumstance.

Attached to marriage is motherhood. Though westerners see this concept as suppressing, Ghanaian women rather see it as a useful source of power and they view motherhood with a lot of pride. Hence almost every Ghanaian woman wants to procreate: at least one child.

Again we found out that multiple sexual partners are regarded with a lot of disdain. Having more than one sexual mate is not a good thing. Cheating results in such circumstances. Though some of the people admitted to having multiple partners, they were advised by the adviser against such practice claiming that it wasn't a safe thing to do considering health (Aids, STI's) and emotional let cown that rises as a result of it. In Ghana, people with multiple sex partners especially ladies are regarded as prostitutes but that of a man is seen as normal.

Another conclusion we arrived at was that other countries world wide including Ghanaian societies hold incest taboos in high esteem. Incest taboos are enforced to the letter in this country. Incest is discouraged and it is even an offence punishable under the law. In the stories, one person sought advice for the fact that due to the availability of a cousin he had engaged in incest. That fellow was advised to stay away as much as possible.

Another interesting thing we can say from the stories is that most relationships have financial or monetary connotations playing a greater role as compared to the emotions involved. A lot of the stories talk about money gifts and other financial rewards. By extension, even on campus, financial matters play an enormous role in the sustainability of students' relationships. Imbalance in the flow of such rewards leads to strains and consequent sexual partners and practices.

Finally, age serves as a very important factor in the choice of partners for sexual or romantic relationships. These stories contained issues about age differences among partners. Most people either want sexual partners either younger or older than them. It is a maxim that most ladies want guys who are a few years older than them. This is because they feel that they age faster than men hence the differences in age are necessary. In one of the stories, a 65 days difference in age between the girl and the boy friend threatened the existence of the relationship. There is this issue of sugar daddy' and' sugar mummy' syndrome. A guy wanted a 'sugar mummy' because according to him he has had a bad experience with a younger partner. Older women also find young men youthful and sexually fulfilling. The same can also be said for older men who go in for young ladies.

CRITICAL SELF-EVALUATION AND ITS CHALLENGES

The passages above, excerpted from a 2005/2006 class presentation, show that the students had a basic grasp of some dimensions of the social construction of sex and also that they could discern some of its gender dimensions. However, it is difficult to tell to what extent they express thoughts that they think 'go down well' with the lecturer. In the ideal world, for transformative learning, it is necessary to involve the students in self evaluation (Cranton, 2006). I have tried in some years, to encourage the students to discuss the work of their peers and even grade their own work. However, the pressures of competition and students' focus on grades were real obstacles to any meaningful discussions that would move the class forward and I decided to rather follow the approach of discussing my grading criteria and laying bare the steps towards grading instead of leaving the grading to them. Where students have been socialized in more rigid educational systems based largely on technical and communicative learning approaches as is the case in Ghana, transformative learning approaches are a departure from the norm and therefore could be alienating for students. Such approaches may need to be taken step by step.

To their credit, the students recognized the patriarchal nature of the environment that frames sexuality and sexual relations, and also recognized the strong, heteronormative societal position of the society and the contributors silence about alternative sexual lifestyles. Unfortunately, the voices of the "agony aunts" and their role in enforcing norms and stereotypes were not fully explored by the students. The theoretical framework was also not adequately employed in the presentation. This may be indicative of the fact that the transformative learning approach could not be fully employed. It could also be a reflection of a difficulty that the students have in utilizing theory fully in social analysis, a problem that has often been discussed in the Department of Sociology of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. More comprehensive evaluations will need to be based on the work done during the entire semester; looking at a single segment of the course may not give us all the answers to the efficacy of teaching methods.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

The value of the use of resources from everyday life such as advice columns on people's sex lives in the teaching of courses on gender and sexuality cannot be disputed. At the same time, it is important to note that advice columns cannot be subjected to further probing, also the content of the letters are filtered by the newspaper publishers. However, the letters people write to advice columns reflect actual problems that people face. Students can easily relate to the issues raised, which provide ample examples and spaces for exploration and discussion on gender and sexuality in the classroom.

Advice columns can also be successfully employed as a basis for transformative learning, but it in the university setting it is important to address the challenge of creating evaluation methods that will facilitate learning for change and fulfill the requirements of the institution.

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