Women and Leadership in the Social Era: Engaging Community through New Media

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Auburn University’s Women’s Leadership Institute has reshaped its teaching methodology to inspire community engaged learning through democratic and collaborative new media projects that rely on creative participation and community formation. The Institute seeks to apply twenty-first century social era and post-heroic leadership concepts to social media-based civic engagement projects that illustrate a feminine and relational means of engaging community. The purpose of the projects is to more equitably distribute power among the participants and allow for the co-creation of value among students and the communities that their projects serve.

To begin, let us start at the end, or more precisely as Barbara Kellerman titles her most recent book, at The End of Leadership. According to Kellerman, leadership as it was known up to and throughout the 20th century is dead. Kellerman begins The End of Leadership with a brief romp through history that indicates the tearing apart and turning asunder of the notions of hierarchy that stood as the framework of traditional leadership. She shows that by the Enlightenment signs indicating the end of leadership were everywhere: both the American and French Revolutions, for example, were “transformational events in which followers came to the fore, while leaders came under attack” (xvii). In America, resistance came to be seen “as a virtue and obedience a vice” (14).

By the mid-1960s, Martin Luther King was shifting the power relationships between white and black Americans at the same time that Betty Friedan was empowering women. The powerless challenged the powerful through rights revolutions from campus protests, to anti-Vietnam War activists and on through the 70’s with gay rights, disability rights, animal rights and so on until the balance of power between leaders and followers was upended (Kellerman xvii).

Leaders were under siege. The Kennedys and Martin Luther King were assassinated. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were forced out of politics, and “Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter lost their respective presidential elections” (Kellerman 21). Throughout the last decades of the twentieth century
Americans not only lost faith in political leaders but also in corporate leaders. The hierarchical principles of top-down corporate governance began to dissipate into “bottom-up” “corporate democracy” (Kellerman 22). As Kellerman concludes,

Once upon a time we simply obeyed orders issued by our superiors, our leaders and managers. Now we incline more to challenge them, emboldened to do so by the spread of democracy, by the rhetoric of empowerment, and by the practice of participation. The evidence of the decline in respect for authority is everywhere—and everywhere are leaders who labor to lead. The change is cultural and contextual. Norms are now such that followers demand more—and leaders succumb more often. (29)

We see this same upending of hierarchies daily, not only in politics and business but also within the family structure, which is no longer as hierarchical and authoritarian as it once was. As Vineet Mayar notes, parents now seem to want to be friends and mentors to their children—not authority figures.

“Because of the ‘knowledge economy’ and changes in the ‘global IT landscape,’ it is critical that organizational structures, like the family structures they are said to mirror, adapt to the changing times (qtd. In Kellerman 43).

We also see this same upending of authority and hierarchy within the classroom. Those of us who teach find ourselves caught in a tidal wave of change. Everything related to instruction—from classroom etiquette to the way students perceive, grasp, store, and appreciate knowledge—has changed. To my mind, the main change is in the way that content, culture, and technology have reconfigured knowledge. I think of this as an epistemological curveball that asks us to reconsider the manner in which we pitch content if our students are to make contact with it. Since content deliverable as basic facts is easily accessible to all, there is no need to store it and little cause to appreciate it. The driving force behind the epistemological sea change is, of course, technology and its attendant abilities to provide ongoing conversations. Participation in these conversations has become the core of engagement. To appreciate knowledge, one must engage with it. Engagement of knowledge is coming to mean participating in its creation and enjoying ownership of its effect.
The good news regarding such an epistemological shift in learning and engagement is that, because it is technologically driven, it presents the opportunity to be democratic. Technology provides a platform on which all people, in principle, have an equal opportunity to participate in the creation of knowledge, as well as in leadership. Through this knowledge economy, leadership is most usefully shared as people collaborate on what actions need to be taken, and how.

If technology—or more specifically, social and new media platforms—in fact have created equitable and shared leadership possibilities, then leadership itself is becoming more collaborative and more relational. In practice, leadership is becoming more feminine, answering Marie C. Wilson’s call for an era of post-heroic leadership. In Closing the Leadership Gap: Add Women, Change Everything, published in 2004 and re-issued in 2007, Wilson, the founder of the White House Project, argues that we “need to move far, far away from” what she called “heroic leadership,” in which “one person is seen as the source of all change and good, leaving everyone else’s contribution largely invisible. According to Wilson, “We need what Joyce K. Fletcher of Simmons College terms ‘post-heroic’ leadership, whose mission is relational and collaborative (read female)” (113).

Today we find ourselves in a world of post-heroic leadership, not by means of moving more women into positions of power as Marie Wilson envisioned, but rather as a result of a sweeping cultural shift, which Nilofer Merchant has termed “the Social Era.” By “era” Merchant refers to an epoch or an age, such as the industrial age; so the cultural shift she defines has broad implications.

In a recent blog post titled “Traditional Strategy is Dead. Welcome to the Social Era,” Merchant distinguishes among the industrial era, the information age, and the social era by suggesting that we have moved through phases of valuing the institution itself, to valuing data that could aid the institution, into a new age of honoring the act of co-creating value itself. She writes that “the industrial era primarily honored the institution as a construct of creating value. The information age (inclusive of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 phases) primarily honored the value that data could provide to institutional value creation. It allowed for greater efficiency to do the same things that were done in the industrial era. The Social Era honors the value creation starting with the single unit of a connected human.” In the past, an entity’s
value may have come at the expense of humans, but in the Social Era, according to Merchant, seemingly disparate individuals can participate in the creation of value. This opens up the possibility of distributing power broadly and equitably. The relational, collaborative, and co-creative nature of Social Era power relies on characteristics traditionally attributed to feminine leadership qualities. Put another way, the Social Era allows us to value something that the heroic leadership of the past did not usually value in women—that is, the collaborative, cooperative, and relational nature of creation. Valuing co-creation of knowledge empowers women.

According to Barbara Kellerman, Americans who traditionally have not held “power, authority, and influence” now use “the Internet to defy, or at least circumvent, those who do” (62). However, this social media dispersion of power is not only useful for acts of defiance; it is similarly effective in cooperative community building and action. Where governments and institutions have failed repeatedly to address comprehensively the problems that collectively ail us, social and corporate entrepreneurs are using new social media tools to step in and fill needs (Kellerman 92). As an example, Kellerman quotes a New York Times Magazine in which Elizabeth Scharpf, founder of Sustainable Health Enterprises (SHE) is quoted as having said, “Why wait for governments or established charities to assist rape victims, orphans or impoverished women when you can start an NGO [Non-Governmental Organization] in your basement and do it yourself? . . . It’s not only presidents and United Nations officials who can chip away at global challenges. Passionate individuals with great ideas can do the same, especially in the age of the Internet and social media” (qtd. in Kellerman 93).

Social media tools have opened up democratic forms of leadership through co-creation of value at the same time that epistemological shifts in the value of knowledge co-creation have affected learning. These fundamental shifts are occurring simultaneously at a moment in history when cultural and civic challenges abound, and students are often compelled to address them. For these reasons, Auburn University’s Women’s Leadership Institute has reshaped its teaching methodology to inspire community engaged learning through democratic and collaborative new media projects.
The goal of our recent group project models—used in both our Women and Leadership for-credit 15 week course and as the centerpiece of our four-day NEW Leadership Residential Intensive Training Program—is to provide the experience of a feminine and relational means of engaging community that distributes power among the participants and allows for the co-creation of value among students and the communities that their projects serve.

The reshaped team projects for both the class and the intensive training move away from classic group-project protocol by reconsidering the nature of intellectual property. In both cases, students are asked to step away from old models of knowing, organizing, deciding, and owning intellectual property. Students are asked to co-create knowledge by coming up with the topic of their work together instead of relying on a presumed leader. The groups are organized by self-selection instead of by the instructor, and leadership of the group is determined as much by the ability to follow as to lead. Each member is asked to contribute her individual strength to the project even if, and especially in the case that, her strength is in the ability to follow. In deciding the theme, the action to be taken, and the means to take that action, students are asked to share democratically and relinquish the urge toward certainty, embracing the vulnerability inherent in the lack of certainty and control.

The pilot project was conducted in a traditional classroom setting. The class, Women and Leadership, is taught as part of the Community and Civic Engagement minor in the College of Liberal Arts. Made up of twenty women between 18 and 22 years old, the class undertook a fairly traditional study of classic leadership learning models, including exercises in personal mission statements, evaluations of personal strengths, passions, and values, teamwork, and a study of seminal texts in women’s leadership such as Marie C. Wilson’s *Closing the Leadership Gap: Add Women, Change Everything*. Once these foundations were set, students began self-selecting the members of the team with which they wanted to work and the civic or cultural challenge that their team would address.

The following are the directions for the team assignment:
• For this assignment you will select team members with whom you would like to work. You may work with one other person, or a group. Together you will determine a topic of pressing civic and/or community relevance to all of the members of your group.

• Once you have decided on a topic, you will begin an in-depth social media exploration of the topic. Explore the topic on Google, Facebook, StumbleUpon, Pinterest, Tumblr, Wordpress, and any other social media platform that you wish. Your goal is to become as informed as possible about who is discussing the topic, what they are saying, how they are saying it, and which means of participation in the conversation are most interesting to you.

• Next you will decide together which social media forum you would like to enter together as a group in order to make a public act of leadership and engagement. You may choose to blog, tweet, Facebook, YouTube, or you may select another media tool to make your public act. You will decide with your group and act as a group to make an action in a social media forum of your choice.

• For your presentation you will prepare a one page handout and make copies for the class. The handout should cover 1) how you came to your topic 2) the most significant things you learned through searching the topic 3) how you decided on a social media forum on which to speak 4) the process you went through to decide on the (speech) act and what the act is. During the presentation you will go to the computer to show us the public act(s) of leadership that you and your group have and are taking and persuade us to become interested in your project.

• Everyone in your group will receive the same grade. You will be graded on 1) your ability to cooperate as a team (respecting the leadership and followership within your group) 2) the depth of thought and exploration behind your topic choice 3) the considerations involved in the social media outlet you have chosen 4) the effectiveness and response to your public social media voice.
The results of the pilot run of this assignment were stunning because they pointed up not only the end of leadership as Kellerman suggests, but the beginning of a new perspective on teaching, a means to embrace the not-knowing involved with teaching in the Social Era. As a university teacher for over twenty years, I had been in the habit of teaching by leading, but this social media project forced me to let go of the same knowingness that the assignment asked the students to relinquish. It required me to take a leap of faith.

First of all, I could not possibly know what issues of civic and community importance students would take enough interest in to conduct self-motivated and self-shaped public responses. Secondly, I am a non-native speaker of Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr--little more than a bystander in the social-media-driven world that most students inhabit. A student project that resulted from this assignment illustrates what I learned by embracing my condition of not-knowing and not-leading, purposefully putting aside the basic assumption of all-knowingness that I thought my profession had always required.

A project called “Trend 31” was undertaken by two seniors in the pilot class. Student-S and Student-R both exhibited a few signs of senioritis as the class made its way through the more traditional parts of leadership study; they appeared a bit bored and certainly unmoved. Both separately expressed to me concerns that they were not sure that their personal religious leanings aligned them with the concepts of Women’s Leadership that I was espousing. Both seemed relieved when they learned that they could choose their own group and topic for the class project. They seemingly shared nothing with each other but their class status as seniors and their religious faith. Student-S was outspoken and articulate; Student-R was quiet and thoughtful. One seemed a natural leader, the other a follower. Their project, however, illustrated perfectly how social-era co-creation of value distributes power and extends it beyond the individual.

Team Trend 31, made up only of Student-S and Student-R, went far beyond the directions of choosing a single topic and publically engaging with it on a social media platform (as did all of the groups in the pilot class). I could not have anticipated that the students would simultaneously engage with a host
of social media platforms to accomplish the assignment. Trend 31, for example, used a combination of Facebook, Twitter, Prezi, and YouTube. They expressed their mission on Facebook, saying that it was to empower women to reach out in their God-given potential. By connecting women to the outreach opportunities they are passionate about, we can change the world. Although certain causes can be half-way around the world, we understand that they are always close to your heart. Let us help you bridge the gap. There are needs in every community on this planet that are waiting to be tended to. Let us know where you’d like to work and what type of ministry you’re passionate about and we’ll do our best to find something for you. (Trend 31 Facebook)

After publishing their mission to Facebook, they immediately received over 1900 visits to their page, which they then connected to a Twitter account. As of this writing, the students are still tweeting through this account, beginning 2013 by reinvigorating their followers with a message reading, “The best way to start out the new year? Serving others! Let us help you get connected. Message us and we’ll get you started! #trend 31.”

To expand on their mission, its context and purpose, Team Trend 31 created a Prezi, which they posted to YouTube. Within the YouTube video, the team incorporated most of the leadership premises of the class, but they expanded far beyond them by co-creating a universally visible call to all women asking them to respond to their passions by putting them to work for others. The team offers to connect anyone with the work of community engagement she would like to do by collecting and scouring social media sites and providing recommendations for collaborative possibilities. To watch the video, visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up1uZQt3NJk.

This is a wildly ambitious project, and I am not advocating for its content or its scope. However, it usefully serves as an example of the extent to which our roles as leaders have been completely upended at the same time that our collaborative leadership potential is infinitely expanded by the Social Era. Whatever limitations Trend 31 may have, it equitably distributes power among all the community engagement sites that wish to participate in it. Those same partners have the potential to co-create
whatever value they decide, and any person within range of the Internet can be a member of the community the project seeks to create.

I could not have anticipated that students would choose to incorporate their religious convictions into a social media project, nor could I have known how groups would use combinations of social media tools to create networked communities that are keyed to their own interests. But because the pilot assignment did not set limits that discouraged these possibilities, students willingly set out to undertake exponentially massive projects that have the potential to continue to grow in size and over time, long after the class is concluded. More importantly, the projects illustrated the possibility of students teaching those of us who are not fluent in the tools of social media what the next generation of leadership might actually look like. To me, it looks quite feminine in its collaborative, relational co-creative capacities.

Thus, it seemed quite logical to shift the team projects of our NEW Leadership Residential Intensive Training (RIT) into the Social Era as well. The Women’s Leadership Institute was one of the first members in the southeast to participate in the Center for American Women and Politics’ NEW Leadership Network. As such, the residential training had always focused specifically on a politically oriented team project, usually asking pre-arranged teams to work together to write a bill and present it to members of the Alabama legislature. I had always been disappointed in our ability to keep students in the RIT interested in their topics once the training concluded; so I was eager to test a new model that had the built-in capacity to extend the relationships started in the training beyond the short period of time that the women stayed with us on campus.

We tested the Social Era model in May 2012 when 30 college-aged women from all over the southeast came to Auburn for the RIT. I set out the following objectives for the team action project:

As a team you will exercise leadership and followership skills to create and move an action plan forward. Your action plan should 1) bring together the passions, values, and strengths of your team, 2) focus specifically on a realistic, doable objective on which you all agree, 3) initiate a real action through a social media outlet, and 4) bind your team together for future discussion and action.
Knowing that the students would only have four days to get to know each other and complete the action project, I offered the following as examples of possible actions that could realistically be undertaken: create a Facebook page; plant the seeds to start a nonprofit; create and distribute a Youtube video for advocacy; write a newsletter and decide how to distribute it; create a public service announcement and decide how to distribute it; create a blog or engage with a preexisting blog, or be creative and come up with a combination of these items or something completely original.

Next I explained that the main objective of their team projects was to decide together in a democratic fashion on an action that needs to be taken and collaboratively devise a plan to take that action. I asked the students to begin by considering the rhetorical elements of their project: What is an important and realistic issue that you agree needs to be addressed? Why is this so important? How can you realistically address it in the time you have (and shape a plan to continue to speak to each other after you part ways)? Who is the audience that you need to reach?

Students spent the first day of the training exploring their own passions, values, and strengths as well as considering the passions, values, and strengths of the other students. By familiarizing themselves with each other’s leadership and followership styles, students were able to arrange themselves into teams.

The second day of training included several outside speakers, many of whom are activists themselves such as Lilly Ledbetter, the namesake of the Fair Pay Act, and Jessica Brookshire, founder of the nonprofit KARMA. The newly formed teams were instructed to take note of what interested their team members most and to look for intersections of topics about which they as a group felt passionate. They were asked to create a list of very specific topics in which team members shared interest and to spend downtime discussing topics that group members were already involved with including clubs, associations, and projects. Together they needed to determine a few topics that the entire team could agree were important.

The teams spent a good portion of the third day in the computer lab exploring social media sites, looking specifically at Facebook, Twitter, StumbleUpon, Google, Pinterest, and Tumblr as examples of massive networks on which they could explore and enter the universal conversations regarding the issues
that interested their team. Teams were asked to work together to begin moving forward into their topic by responding to a blog, joining a network, or liking a page. By discovering useful ways to enter the conversation regarding their topics, teams were able to narrow their topics and determine how these topics were already being publically addressed through social media venues. After a long period of social media self-discovery, teams were given downtime in a quiet and reflective space to absorb what they had experienced. Then they were sent back to the computer labs or out onto the campus with flip cameras to begin co-creating their actions.

By the afternoon of the fourth day, the NEW Leadership Residential Intensive Training teams were ready to present to each other what they had collaboratively created. The following are the directions for the final presentations of the team action projects:

- The presentation should cover the what, why, how, and who of your issue;
- Tell us what your topic is;
- State clearly and definitively what action your group has taken and intends to continue to take;
- Let us know who specifically you are targeting;
- Walk us through how your group exercised leadership and followership to determine your topic;
- Illustrate what social media and internet sites you explored to determine what knowledge is readily accessible to all;
- Show us the page, blog, video etc. that you have created and indicate how you will continue to move forward after you part ways;
- The presentation should convey the passion that inspires it and encourage us to be involved, to act, and to LEAD.

The results of this assignment were impressive, especially given the very short amount of time that these women were given to co-create their team action projects. Just as the students in the Women and
Leadership class had done the semester before, the six teams that the RIT students organized themselves into exceeded my expectations in terms of the potential reach of their productions and the blending of a variety of social media tools to accomplish their missions.

According to their mission statements, Team Activism co-created “Hands Across the South” to empower local youth to reach out to national nonprofit organizations and to become civically engaged; Team Education co-created “The Beautiful Women Campaign” to help women build confidence and accept themselves as they are; Team Military co-created “Straight Up Media” to pare down today’s media to the basic unbiased facts in the state of Alabama; Team Nonprofit co-created “Chick Chat” to make a positive difference in the lives of young women by encouraging them to achieve their fullest potential; Team Politics co-created “Why We Vote” to raise awareness about voting and why it is particularly important for women, and Team Technology co-created “Women Empowerment Building,” or WEB, to empower and inspire women to reach their full potential through the use of technology. All of these projects are accompanied by multiple social media presences including Facebook, blogs such as Tumblr and Wordpress, and websites. As of this writing, all of them can still be engaged with in some realm in the blogosphere, and all present the potential for students to return to the work and their group at any time. All of the groups also incorporated the possibility to expand their teams infinitely if they choose to do so.

I will elaborate on one example, “Hands Across the South,” or HATS because its scope and premise is strikingly similar to Trend 31’s in its effort to create a network of networks that, if engaged, could have an infinite reach. Like Trend 31, HATS also aspires to create an exponentially massive network of existing community and civic engagement projects. Also like Trend 31, HATS began with a Facebook page that helped them create a conversation that would lead them to another level of social media engagement. From there, they expanded the Facebook page to a website using weebly.com, and the website remains active at http://HandsAcrossTheSouth.weebly.com/

On the homepage of their website, HATS states their mission: “to empower our local youth to reach out to national non-profit organizations and to become civically engaged in their communities.”
They reach out to their audience, whom they identify as local youth, by echoing Elizabeth Scharpf’s sentiment that we need not wait for the government to address our problems, saying,

Volunteering helps to get the community engaged in solving their own problems, rather than relying on federal aid. Through volunteerism, connections with other people are made which helps to make the community as a whole much stronger. These connections can lead to developing a sense of purpose, finding a true passion for a cause, and even opening up leadership and employment opportunities.

One of the most impressive facets of this mission statement is the way that it both incorporates and expands on the leadership tenants that had been reviewed in the days leading up to the action project. Participants in the residential training who engaged in the social media action project not only absorbed the concepts of traditional leadership training—such as strengths, values, passion, and engagement—that the Women’s Leadership Institute had been teaching; they acted on them by reaffirming the necessity for passion that proceeds engagement and by creating a template for engagement that their audience can use. They write, “We want our youth to be able to reach out to us so we can link them with organizations that encourage their own interests and allow them to get involved with causes that they can feel passionately about.”

Under a tab titled “Who We Are,” HATS goes on to express the urgency for young people to use their internet savvy to become involved early in life with the challenges that face their communities and that will ultimately affect them directly. They write that

Our organization seeks to connect local youth of Alabama, Georgia and Florida to national non-profit organizations in order to get involved in their local communities. Members that visit our website or Facebook can find organizations that interest them and find important information about the organization, as well as contact information, local events and how to get involved with the organization. These volunteer initiatives open up endless opportunities to the local youth, which could lead to developing important
interests in the community, development of valuable skills and knowledge, and possible employment opportunities.

The purpose of their project is stated clearly, and backed up with a tab titled “Why We Chose This Mission” that spells out with statistics some of the civic challenges that young people in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida should consider, such as that 1.3 million students fail to graduate from high school, statistics on homicide rates among youth, nonfatal victimizations, drug abuse, and birth rates among women aged 15 to 19. The statistics suggest not only that action is needed, but that young people themselves need to get involved immediately to help alleviate the problems.

The call to action is followed with a tab titled “Where the Resources Are” that lists live links to 13 different community organizations including KARMA (Kids Against Ridicule Meanness and Aggression), an anti-bullying nonprofit developed by an Auburn student that has garnered national attention. The participants in the residential training had heard the founder of KARMA, Jessica Brookshire, speak during the training, and they had been given opportunities to work with Jessica throughout their stay with us on campus.

HATS concludes their website with a final tab that outlines the benefits of engaging in the community through the organizations that they list and with which they promise to assist in the creation of an ongoing network. Benefits include academic, employment, and personal benefits in addition to the benefit to the community.

HATS, like Trend 31, demonstrates cooperative community building and action that equitably co-creates and distributes power in an ongoing conversation. The conversation itself is the core of engagement that extends beyond itself to allow exponential engagement infinitely by others.

These projects proved to be quite instructive for those of us in the Women’s Leadership business. They illustrate that in the Social Era, leadership is already feminine in its collaborative, relational, and co-creative capacities. These projects also have the capacity to teach the instructor something about the value of knowledge as well. The technological fluidity of the Social Era is infinite. While we once believed that we could master certain fields or certainly the technology that we had at our disposal to learn them,
today’s students must embrace the vast uncertainty of ever-changing technology. Embracing this uncertainty may lead to useful and productive engagement beyond our wildest dreams.

Works Cited


Merchant, Nilofer. “Traditional Strategy is Dead. Welcome to the Social Era.”

