



- » JAAACS Home
- » Article Archive
- » Editorial Statement
- » Call for Manuscripts
- » Author Guidelines
- » Editorial Board
- » Review Board

- » Submit An Article
- » Contact JAAACS

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## **The Discourse of Educational Professionalization and Laura Bragg**

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In Louise Anderson Allen's self-described critical feminist biography, Laura Bragg is portrayed as a second generation New Woman who attained "political, social, and economic equality for herself on her own terms" (Allen, 1997, abstract) through sheer perseverance, personality and the righteous belief in a Progressive mission -- to make museums publicly accessible spheres and outreach centers of cultural history. This charge was born of the Progressive impulse to educate, enrich, reform and, hopefully, inspire the unaware and the impoverished to become educated about their condition.

Allen performs an important service in this biography. She interprets significant events and themes of Bragg's life from the lens of early feminist attempts to gain access to the public realm and have a voice in institutional settings. Allen renders Bragg's museum productions as a kind of prototype to the reinventing of museums as public educational domains where cultural history of various places and times could be taught and learned. We now take such social and educational functions of museums for granted.

However, Allen illustrates how difficult a task it was in the early 1900s for Bragg and others to contribute to the creation of an institution with such democratic and social reform intent. Bragg operated within heavy constraints, specifically as a northern educated woman in the South who positioned herself as a social Progressive at a time when Charleston, South Carolina, was not particularly interested in post-bellum national life. And, of course, Bragg's situation was doubly complicated: she was nearly deaf, and she carried on intimate associations with other women at a time when such relations were beginning to be scrutinized and defined by the medical community as abnormal and, as such, hazardous to the public health.

In educational history, there has been a dearth of scholarship about women involved in leadership roles within public educational institutions. Allen performs a great service by disrupting traditional history and biography. She reveals the complexities and tensions of the American past, so often dismissed by textbooks, by revealing how women, specifically Laura Bragg, struggled to prevail in a professional career on the public stage. As a biographer, Allen did not fall into the trap of creating a heroic caricature of Bragg, so often the case in traditional male biographies in which the author becomes too enamored with the subject and fails to achieve the right distance.

Combining the academic tools of history and certain psychoanalytic theories, Allen produces a picture of Bragg's personality as it developed early in childhood through a close relationship with her father, Lyman Bragg. Allen argues that this relationship generated within Bragg a strong, even stubborn, ego capable of withstanding patriarchal resistance of her efforts to increase public funds for the educational function of museums. According to Allen, Bragg employed every tool, from intellectual argument to flattery, to acquire the necessary funds needed to change the educational outreach and reform role of the museum.

However, it was more than individual will that enabled Bragg to succeed as much as she did. A broad and powerful discourse emerged during the early twentieth century that heavily impacted public spheres and institutions, and which coincided with social reform in a way that served to open doors for women educators, even as it created patriarchal constraints upon thought and action for those willing to walk through. This was the discourse of professionalism. While Allen directly focuses upon Bragg's personal characteristics and how those qualities played out in a particular historical context, she also indirectly tackles this discourse and its significance. I would like to follow this thread within Allen's biography to illustrate how Bragg is an example of how this discourse not only opened spaces for women to make inroads into professional careers, but at the same time severely restricted what counted as appropriate language and behavior for women within the public sphere. Allen states that between "1890 and 1920 the number of professional degrees granted to women increased 226 percent at three times the rate of increase for men" (p. 22). However, such opportunities occurred under considerable checks: professionals, both men and women, had to embody a discourse that privileged "male" rationalism and impulses toward technocratic control to be applied to all aspects of public, institutional life.

This discourse had the important effect of squeezing out traditional female institutions, such as Normal Schools, and situating all educational components into male dominated institutions, such as universities, even as those universities began admitting females. All who entered into public educational spaces beginning in the early twentieth century had to go through a rationalized legitimating process that included an adherence to male dispositions. This professionalization offered a certain amount of autonomy for the individual, even though it was and still is located within the impulse toward control. In other words, the dispositions provided a system of internal governance that made granting certain institutional freedoms a safe move.

I bring up this point because we live in a moment where the great Western impulse toward control is intensifying. Americans sense a loss of power and fear a loss of control over all that is "other," as well as that which is "other" within them. The response has been ever growing forms of institutional constraints upon the individual in an attempt to parse out, regulate and manage these impulses – all in the name of reform and the protection of certain dominant ways of thinking. In education, this desire has emerged in the form of the discourse of accountability, testing and sorting, which translates into a politics of blame against the teacher. In effect, a bit of irony is at work here. The Progressive, professionalistic dispositions and discourse that women, and in this case Laura Bragg, had to embody to succeed in getting a foothold in public life certainly created public

spaces by which to enjoy a career. But it simultaneously laid the foundation for the types of overly-rationalized, technologized thinking that now controls the destiny of our educational institutions. This form of technical rationalization has produced such legislation as No Child Left Behind. This discourse has been appropriated by national organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), which has infiltrated most all state departments of education and colleges of education. NCATE has embedded a process that focuses on the reproduction of professional knowledge, skills and dispositions as assessed through quantitative rubrics, which supposed to guarantee the professionalized, technicist behavior and thought of all being certified.

This is significant in terms of Laura Bragg, as NCATE dispositions and virtues appear to pull from an earlier point in American history, when state Normal schools prepared female elementary teachers and state universities prepared administrators. Allen identified well how Bragg bemoaned this existence of Normal Schools, as she believed that the female teachers coming out of these institutions in South Carolina were pedagogically deficient and needed her help in creating and teaching curriculum (Allen, see pages 48-52).

School administrators, all of whom in the early twentieth century were male, were the first to be successfully professionalized. These men [sic] were credentialed by schools of education, whose faculty – also male – struggled for academic legitimacy by creating a research model acceptable by traditional sciences and liberal arts within the university. The university approach to professionalism depended upon a basic assumption: an individual had to master the knowledge and skills, as determined through *scientific* research, that he [sic] would need for the workplace, a site occupied by certain inherent ideological assumptions about different groups in society, specifically that of gender differences (Gitlin 1996). Only those specially trained and credentialed are able to access this abstract knowledge, which had become the knowledge of most worth over the last few centuries due to its association with science. However, even more significant was the belief that males had some natural capacity for this form of rationality, and that it somehow defined the inherent male disposition. Women were considered to neither have the capacity for nor interest in such knowledge and so were forbidden access to it (Gitlin, 1996).

Schools of education were not immune to these university conditions. Education professors, in order to gain legitimacy and status within the university, appropriated knowledge approaches and dispositions associated with the male-oriented condition of academia. In doing so, schools of education reinforced the already powerful positions of school administrators, all of whom were male and who approached the institution of schooling as a management, bureaucratic problem in need of a top-down solution, which research appeared to justify (Gitlin, 1996; Labaree, 1992; Tyack and Hansot. 1982).

However, the dispositions and virtues provided by NCATE have historically been linked with gendered assumptions about how women naturally teach. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, such female-oriented dispositions and virtues comprised what Normal schools, which young women attended to prepare to teach before losing students to university schools of education, articulated as the right sort to become a teacher. This individual was to value commitment to serving and nurturing students, as well as privileging child-centered and experiential learning and a concern for student



welfare, rather than the mastering of a specialized form of abstract knowledge that led to a certification being granted. Universities did not value the “females” dispositions and virtues, in part because they did not fall into a professionalism inhabited by scientific measurement, sorting and control. The acts of measuring and sorting within the university reflected what many Anglo-Protestant, middle-class Americans had embraced during the late 1800s (White 1969; Wiebe 1967).

Gitlin (1996) argued that Normal schools wanted to create a different form of professionalization based upon the socially constructed female dispositions. However, Normal schools had to eventually compete with schools of education, which had evolved into the sites where school administrators received their professional credentials, although with a much different discourse. The university professional discourse further entrenched socially constructed gender differences between teacher and administrator, and gave power over the institutional sites to the administrator through the credentialing process. In other words, the administrator was rewarded with professional autonomy long before teachers attempted to claim such status. The professional discourse functioned to support the bureaucratic top-down method of running schools, and also generated policies that located control over teachers, curriculum and students within the administrator’s realm (Burbules and Densmore 1991; Labaree 1992).

An effect was the internalization of the socially constructed male virtues and dispositions, well established within a nearly 300-year-old American university culture. Abstractness, context-free knowledge and tasks, technical reflection, task orientations, disinterested application of skills in a technical manner, ethical behavior as a clearly delineated listing of behavior rules, competition, scoring and didacticism all became the most reasonable and virtuous dispositions (Labaree 1992). In time these dispositions became hidden and normative ways of thinking and feeling about the function of educational institutions. This is not to say that all such dispositions were privileged for their apparent “coldness.” Instead, they were believed to be the most adequate tools by which to achieve Progressive desires for reforming society: science, control, measurement, sorting all in the name of an efficient, linear society that could solve all the social ills and lead to the condition of happiness for all within specified social roles.

The Normal schools disappeared over time as women began to enter universities, taking with them the possibility of developing alternative professional dispositions and virtues aligned with the socially constructed female virtues and dispositions. The defeat of the Normal schools by universities is significant. Once teacher preparation was located within schools of education, teacher educators experienced pressure to appropriate the same scientific model of studying the act of teaching to develop the sort of legitimacy that educational researchers who prepared administrators received. The belief was that professional knowledge was scientific and, hence, quantifiable and measurable, which provided proof to the population at large that the profession possessed the skills and know-how to control outcomes. In other words, the movement began with the rationalization of the classroom (Labaree 1992).

This rationalization process has been governed by a faith that effective teaching can be neatly fit into quantifiable categories evaluated in terms of usefulness in producing some desirable outcome. The desired outcome for the reformers calling for further

professionalization of the field is ultimately student learning, which, in turn, is considered dependent upon the behavior of the teacher. To follow through with this logic, a teacher's behavior is dependent upon his or her disposition; his or her internal relation to the virtue at hand. Hence, if the rationalization process is to be followed, then the disposition must somehow be identified, measured and explained. Bringing the discussion back to the timeframe that involved Bragg, viewing the professionalization of teachers from this lens was evident even in the early 1900s. Gitlin (1996, p. 600) quotes University of Chicago Professor Charles Judd's 1929 remarks to this end:

We measure the results of schoolwork today with a precision far beyond anything that we hoped for two decades ago when the measurement movement was in its infancy . . . . I hold that teacher education institutions of this country have it as their major duty to study educational problems critically and scientifically and to make available for the whole teaching profession the best results of such study. (Judd, *NEA Proceedings*, 878-879)

An effect of this perspective of analyzing the act of teaching through the lens of science was the ideological assumption that for a teacher to become a professional, he or she must embody the virtues of measurement and rationalization. In the dichotomous thinking associated with Western rationality, female dispositions would be unprofessional. Even though teachers who possessed female dispositions could be good teachers, they were not professionals as defined by the socio-cultural framework of the university. And though calls for the professionalization of teaching continued, for the most part professionalization resulted in the expectation that a female internalize dispositions socially attached to male thinking and feeling: "Apparently thinking of teaching's femaleness as unprofessional, the professionalizers seem to be trying to reshape the female schoolteacher in the image of the male physician" (Labaree 1992, 133).

Such professionalization served Laura Bragg well as she struggled to make inroads into museum education. In terms of Bragg's life, all the components of the discourse are evident. Allen identified Bragg's father's early influence. Whereas most fathers during this era would have treated Laura either as a non-entity or would have hoped to marry her off, he instead treated her as a son, so to speak, by encouraging and even demanding that she be tough and educated, a condition that Allen shows was common for early feminists' relations with their fathers. Allen writes:

As the first man in Bragg's life, her father strongly influenced her psychological development. Many fathers of early feminists rejected conventionality for their daughters and encouraged their intellectual growth..... Through the closeness with the father, the daughter developed what were viewed as masculine interest and attributes....Bragg was able to construct a sense of herself with an ego strength that typically only boys had the opportunity to develop, allowing her to become a more independent being. (13)

Bragg entered Simmons College library school, as this was beginning to open to women, where she received a professionalized curriculum. According to Allen, after graduating and moving to Charleston, South Carolina, Bragg carried with her a sense of museums as a cultural educator that not only allow for "self-improvement" (p.48) but

improvement of the uneducated and impoverished, two conditions that existed widely in South Carolina at the time. This sense of mission, coupled with the professionalized means to organize and control, gave Bragg a certain powerful presence within the museum and educational community. As mentioned above, Bragg viewed teachers from the state Normal schools as lacking any real “pedagogical training” (p. 52) and, hence, they were unprofessional: “Because the professionalization of education came later to the South than to the North, educational reform presented women without college degrees in education an avenue to practice their reform activities unhampered by those who were more highly trained” (p. 52). From Bragg’s perspective, it was a perfect place for her to step in and take over as a professional, a reformer, a New Woman and as a museum educator/curator. From this ideological milieu emerged the Bragg Boxes, traveling educational materials that served as resources, curriculum and pedagogical model for those teachers who lacked such essentials.

Allen identified the inherent ideology at work within the exhibits when she stated that the Bragg Boxes served the desires of the Progressive professionals from the North, who saw southerners as a type of immigrant, not much different from those entering the ports in the Northeast. Allen writes, “Since the goal was to Americanize immigrants, the information presented and the language used were specific to that goal. All of this was part of the growing professionalism of museum work, one of the hallmarks of the Progressive era” (215).

Bragg’s training in this discourse of professionalization gave her the power to view the boxes as the correct means and tools by which to reform and save others from themselves by improving them and helping them to think “correctly,” meaning to think as professionals do. The Bragg Boxes were the ultimate symbols of that aim, as Allen aptly identified: “The boxes represented progressive social reform, as a means of educating and socializing rural and immigrant families to the prevailing American social values. She was even invited to speak at the PEA (Progressive Education Association) in 1932. Her boxes were displayed at the meeting” (p. 171).

Yet, even as women took on the professional discourse, gender still created obstacles. In fact, in South Carolina, because such a discourse was still one among many, women professionals still struggled mightily.

Bragg’s adherence to and comfortableness with the discourse of professionalization became most noticeable when she developed a course for Columbia University to train other museum curators. This course was firmly entrenched with the ideological assumptions that museums were reform minded, cultural institutions that followed a rationalized, formalized process. For the course, Bragg developed curricular aims not only to guide the course but to organize how students should think upon entering into the profession (p. 143). The aims ranged from a general ideological framework of the new purposes and scope of museums as cultural educational institutions that reached out to the poor and uneducated, to the bureaucratic information meant to rationalize and technologize these ideologies in terms of practice. Objectives included:

To make clear the ideas of the modern museum and the potential scope of its activities and influence; to outline the nature of museum public instruction work: first within the museum and second, carried



outside to schools, libraries, clubs, etc. of town, of city, count and state;" as well as "to give training in approved museum methods of administration, covering organization and reorganization; financing and bookkeeping; staff ethics; cataloguing and care of collections; publications, publicity; cooperation with other institutions (p. 143). This course was the most explicit articulation of Bragg's embodiment of the discourse of professionalism.

Bragg's success as a museum director and educator helped solidify the role of women within the profession as others followed in her footsteps. Her efforts in museum education mirrored efforts in teacher education and illustrated how many obstacles women had to overcome to enter into the public realm, though at the same time how, too often, they could do so only if they possessed certain ways of thinking and acting that suited the patriarchal society within which they labored and within which we still labor.

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