A Lively Discussion Followed: The Rhetoric of Community and Collaboration in a Women’s Study Club

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Abstract

American women began to organize in study or learning clubs in large numbers in the second half of the 19th century. Though varied in location and membership criteria, these learning/study clubs almost unanimously shared the goals of formalizing further educational opportunities and recording the history of the club in the minutes and programs produced. Little is written about the status of these women’s learning clubs today; however, written rhetorical practices left by club members preserve the original intent of self-education and also document how the club members became active in philanthropy and political activity. The Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio is a women’s learning club with a 124-year history. The club’s minutes, and many of the programs, photographs, and other documents have been preserved and are currently held in the archives of the Hancock Historical Museum. This thesis examines the rhetorical practices, via the club’s minutes, of the Thursday Conversational Club over eight decades, from 1922-1993. These minutes are studied through a feminist rhetorical lens, in order to show that this particular club is representative of the broader women’s club movement, that the sense of feminist community and collaboration is evident in both the written and social rhetoric of the club, and that these minutes have feminist historiographic value.

Keywords: women’s learning clubs, women’s study clubs, feminist rhetorical practices, feminist historiography, club minutes, social circulation
For Mike
(you’re my favorite)

And Matthew, Emily, and Samuel
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CHAPTER I. – INTRODUCTION

Background and History

As half of the population of the planet, women have always been involved in the rhetorical tradition, but only gradually claimed a significant place in the traditional canons of rhetorical theory. When thinking of the “great” writers of the ages, male writers historically dominated the lists. One of the main reasons for this gender gap is that there have not been as many historical writings by women to study, mainly due to the privileging of public writing, usually performed by men, over private. Women’s writings are often tied to women’s experiences in the home and community. In order to find writings by women, especially pre-20th century works, it is often helpful to go looking in unusual places, as noted by Jarrett (1990), Glenn & Enoch (2010), Royster & Kirsch (2012), and Enoch (2013). One “unusual place” to discover writings by and for women is in the minutes and notes of the plethora of women’s study clubs that populated the American landscape from the mid-19th until the mid-20th centuries. Many of these documents are hiding in plain sight in libraries, museums, and collections. As Glenn and Enoch (2010) reflect, “By widening the scope of the sites for our historical research, we necessarily confront new questions about and new possibilities for archival recovery, archival methods, and historiographic intervention” (p. 18). In “widening the scope” to include documents produced by an individual women’s study club, those documents can be researched from a feminist perspective to provide an important addition to the historiography of writings by women and about women. These writings literally reflect how a group of women interacted and conducted club business in specific times in history, and thus also have the potential to explore
women’s rhetorical practices and how they recorded society at particular time periods. This thesis aims to provide an analysis of the rhetorical practices of a specific women’s study club, the Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio, as it relates to a general history of the women’s study club movement in America.

Many of the American grandmothers or great-grandmothers alive today can talk about her “club.” Perhaps she belongs to a bridge club or a book club, a church organization or lunch club. Or maybe she is one of the tens of thousands of women who belonged to an organized women’s study club\(^1\) – a group, with selective membership, which met to enhance their own education and to further the social, societal, political, and philanthropic goals of the community. These ladies’ clubs have been a part of the tapestry of American history since Colonial times, but reached a heyday in the 100 years between the Civil War and 1960 (Martin, 1987, p. xi). Though the lack of current literature might seem to indicate otherwise, these groups are not relegated to the history books — women’s learning clubs are still active in almost every part of the country today.

Little information would exist about any of these women’s clubs if the members had not chosen to leave written documentation of their individual club’s activities in formal bylaws, minutes, papers, club programs, and visual documentation through photographs. These written rhetorical practices give a glimpse into the lives of clubwomen over a large span of time. Surprisingly, not much scholarship exists on the rhetorical impact of these women’s study clubs. Tchudi, in her article “Women’s Education: The Rhetoric of History and Serious Purpose of the Naugatuck Women’s Study Club,” written in 1997, defines these club writings as examples of what Tchudi calls the “rhetoric of history” and the “rhetoric of serious purpose” (p. 5). Tchudi

\(^1\) The terms “women’s learning clubs” and “women’s study clubs” are interchangeable, as both are found within the literature.
illustrates that while the clubs did not have the goal or intent of publishing or practicing writing for public consumption, the members seemed to universally desire first to record the historical minutes of the club and, secondly, to keep the focus of each club “serious” — meaning that these women were organizing for a purpose.

Women’s learning clubs are as varied as they are numerous, both historically and in contemporary times. As Watson (1994) notes in her article “Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women’s Organizations to the Public Library Development in the United States,” many of these clubs were formed by women “interested in continued learning and broadened intellectual horizons” (p. 234). In other words, historical women organized to promote continued educational opportunities in eras where formalized education for women was often difficult to obtain. However, “broadened intellectual horizons” often resulted in club members becoming involved in community affairs, political activity, social welfare organization, philanthropy, or a combination of all of these things. While many clubs have similar goals, there is no set formula to guide priorities for an individual club.

While each club is different, the educational purpose – the “learning” or “study” component -- of women’s study clubs is well documented in Blair (1980), Baker (1984), Martin (1987), Campbell (1989), Tchudi (1994), Gere (1997), Taggert (2006), Clark & Gower (2015), Costello (2015), Fredlund (2016), and others. Some women’s clubs also had philanthropic or political goals right from the start. Sometimes, a previously local organization was absorbed into a larger state or national organization such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the National Organization of Women, the American Association of University Women, or the League of Women Voters (Martin, 1987). In such cases, membership became contingent on the goals of the larger body and those national organizations will not be discussed in this essay, as
they represent a broader organizational structure and have different criteria for club records. Additionally, many women’s clubs fall under the umbrella of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GWFC), which was organized in 1889 and still exists today. However, the GFWC is made up of individual, local clubs, each with their own charter, bylaws, and goals, so some reference to this organization is relevant to this study, especially since evidence points to the Thursday Conversational Club as having been a chapter of the GFWC for several years.

No known origin story for American women’s study clubs exists, though Martin (1987) attempts to give a thorough history in *The Sound of our Voices: Women’s Study Clubs 1860 – 1910*. Surely as long as there have been settlements, groups of women have organized time to work or socialize together. In the many books and articles available on the history and habits of the women’s study club movement, all agree with Martin’s supposition of the mid-19th century as the beginning of the era of these organizations. Martin (1987) proposes in her introduction that there was no apparent catalyst or event that led to the “springing up apparently from nowhere, women’s study clubs spread across the American scene in the late 1860s, gathering momentum and increasing in number through the early 1890s” (p. 11). Almost completely white and middle- or upper-middle class in membership, these “small, local groups” had various criteria for membership and a desire to meet “to study art, music, history, geography, and literature,” (Martin, 1987, p. 1). Martin (1987) emphasizes throughout her book that the original intent of these organizations was to further the education of the members, through formal readings and programs. Having a program and purpose for each meeting means that the clubs often produced written materials. These papers and minutes provide the source material for learning about women’s study clubs and also give a glimpse into the writing habits of the time in which a club was active.
Evidence of the serious purpose of women’s study clubs is found in other sources as well. Costello (2015), in her book *Smart Women: The Search for America’s Historic All-Women’s Study Clubs* adds to Martin’s description, as she states:

These small study clubs, literary societies, Shakespeare clubs, and fortnightly clubs, which limit their membership to women and which have no civic component or clubhouse, and which meet in homes or church parlors to hear original papers or programs, with an occasional speaker, can be found . . . in almost every part of America (pp. 11-12).

Costello makes clear that the women forming the clubs were concerned mainly with furthering their education on a variety of topics, and formalized that goal through written programs and papers. Without this written evidence, much of the history and purpose of the clubs would be lost. Costello goes on to note that historically, some of these study clubwomen “went off to form or join groups fighting for women’s suffrage or Prohibition . . . (but) the original literary societies . . . became focused only on continued or lifelong learning with a social component” (Costello, 2015, pp. 13-14). This “learning component” that Costello writes of was key to the organizations cropping up in the post-Civil War era. Activities varied from club to club, but included reading classical and contemporary literature and then writing about it; having debates about classical authors or theorists; staging tableaus to recreate historic moments or artistic pieces and investigating and reporting on issues of community concern. Through these activities, women were researching, writing, and creating both written and visual rhetoric (often recorded in photographs after the 1860s) of their activities. The women forming the clubs were determined to further their knowledge of history, literature, and practical matters. Each club was unique, but all had the same purpose – to provide a place for women to learn and discuss what
they learned (Tchudi, 1997, p. 2). As formalized educational opportunities for women were limited in the late 19th century, the idea of women organizing simply to further their own learning was revolutionary. Therefore, the fact that many of the clubs survive into the 21st century is proof of the power of the formal organizational structure and good record keeping, even though the originally “radical” nature of the women’s learning club seems nostalgic to 21st century readers today.

Women’s Study Clubs Today

So where are the women’s clubs in 2017? The General Federation of Women’s Clubs has a website and still claims 100,000 members in every state in the US and abroad. Undoubtedly, hundreds of women’s social, learning, philanthropic, and political organizations remain local and “off the grid” in cities and towns all over the United States, often with long and varied histories. Clearly, women’s study clubs are not merely a relic of previous generations, but little is written about how these organizations have changed over the years or of the community and collaboration the clubs engendered within their members. The commitment of purpose that these groups provided to their members has been well documented, especially as club documents are donated to public venues. Less documented are the roles of the clubs today, though thousands still exist. How has time changed the membership, traditions, and programs over the last 150 years? Specifically, how have these ‘members-only’ women’s organizations adapted to the roles of modern women? Are private women’s study clubs still agents of change in regards to politics, philanthropy, education, and social growth for women today? The gap in the current literature can be filled by examining the collected writings of a particular club.

Fitting perfectly into this description of women’s study clubs is the Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio. Organized in 1893 by 22 single women, the Thursday
Conversational Club (TCC) now holds an active membership of 40 women currently and continues to meet monthly between October and May each year. The club’s written records, in the form of minutes, programs, papers, photographs, and scrapbooks, are held by the Hancock Historical Museum. These documents provide an opportunity to study the works of an individual women’s study club in relation to the broader scope that these clubs represent in both the historic and contemporary feminist movements. Additionally, the documents themselves are important examples of the rhetorical practices of women over a broad span of time.

**Rationale and Significance of the Study**

Researching documents belonging to a women’s study club is the true definition of feminist rhetorical research and integral to the continuing development of feminist rhetorical theory. Royster and Kirsch (2012) suggest examining these documents through a lens of “critical imagination”, “strategic contemplation”, and “social circulation”, which helps to place these types of writings in the broader genre of feminist rhetorical practices. This particular sample of papers, gleaned from one club and which cover a large timeframe, is also helpful in understanding how the women’s study clubs have evolved over time, as well as being a previously unexplored source of information about historical women. As Kirsch and Royster (2010) state in their article “Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence”: “When we study women of the past, especially those whose voices have rarely been heard or studied by rhetoricians, how do we render their work and lives meaningfully?” (p. 648). Studying primary source documents written by the actual “women of the past” is a good way to begin to answer that question.

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2 Note: The author is a member of the Thursday Conversational Club.
As a member of the Thursday Conversational Club, I became interested in the club’s history and was intrigued to find that several similar clubs exist in Findlay, Ohio, all with long histories. This prompted the beginning of research that led me to read extensively about the large collection of women’s clubs, organized with a purpose for self-education, philanthropy, and frequently with political ambitions in terms of civic housekeeping. A common trend emerged within the literature: most of the writings about women’s study clubs suggested that they “died out” in the mid-twentieth century. As a member of one such club still active today, I wanted to look into the general literature available about the women’s study club movement and the records of the Thursday Conversational Club from a rhetorical perspective, to see if these writings could provide a clue as to why this particular club was still in existence.

I also believe that the minutes of the club, while following a set formula, are important additions to the historiography of writings by women and about women. These writings literally reflect how a group of women interacted and conducted club business at specific times in history. The earlier writings also provide examples of women’s writing from a time when few examples exist.

**Purpose of the Study**

Given that the women’s study club movement is an important piece in understanding the way feminist rhetorical practices have developed since the mid-19th century, I developed a research plan to analyze archival material belonging to the Thursday Conversational Club, a women’s study club located in Findlay, Ohio. Specifically, I examined the club’s minutes, along with any accessory items stored within the minutes, such as photos, newspaper articles, etc. To limit the scope of the study, I used one year from each decade from the years 1922 – 1992, for a total of eight samples. These documents are currently archived in the Hancock Historical
Museum, also in Findlay, Ohio. Using a feminist research lens informed by Kirsch and Royster (2010) and Glenn and Enoch (2010) to study these documents, I make connections between this specific club and the larger women’s study club movement that was prevalent in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. Studying the history and writings of these female-only clubs is an important addition to the historiography of women’s writing. Most of the current literature about women’s study clubs fails to address the clubs’ rhetorical practices, especially the theory of social circulation, which is defined by Royster and Kirsch (2012) as “a metaphor to indicate the social networks in which women connect and interact with others and use language with intention” (p. 101). However, through the literature available, it is evident that women’s learning clubs are an American institution, with a centuries-long history, and that the club members foster a focus on education, philanthropy, and political activity, though these focuses developed gradually over time.

Further, I evaluate the writings of the Thursday Conversational Club for evidence of language that indicates how this particular club dealt with the three focuses common to other women’s study clubs, as well as for evidence of language that shows that the club was used to build both community and collaboration. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study are as follows: a) how does the Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio fit into the goals of the larger movement of women’s clubs in the United States?; b) how do these minutes serve as a rhetorical practice within women’s historiographies?; and c) what rhetorical evidence is there in the minutes and programs that illustrate that this club functioned as a community, with collaborative efforts, and in terms of social circulation? In investigating the club writings to answer these questions, evidence shows the Thursday Conversational Club is an excellent example of how one club fulfilled the goals frequently documented about the women’s study
club movement. Therefore, writings such as the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club should be included as part of women’s historiographies, as they detail how a specific group of women lived during a specific time. Finally, within these writings is evidence that the rhetorical practices of the club helped members build a community based on collaboration.
CHAPTER II. THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Section A – History and Purpose of the Women’s Study Club Movement

A review of a sample of the literature available on women’s study clubs shows that much can be learned in investigating the history and writings of these female-only organizations. Through the literature available, it is evident that women’s learning clubs are an American institution, with a centuries-long history, and that the club members foster a focus on education, philanthropy, and political activity, though these focuses develop gradually over time. These three areas form the focus of the discussion both the literature on the general women’s study club movement and the approach to the study on the Thursday Conversational Club. However, most of the literature fails to address the rhetorical aspects of women’s study clubs.

Any study of the women’s study club movement is actually “a historical study of anonymous American women whose distinctive voices call for an audience today,” according to Martin’s (1987) *The Sound of Our Own Voices* (p. 1). These historical women organized with an original goal of self-education and advancement. For example, women gathered in groups to push against the constraints of womanhood as defined by the mores of the post-Civil War era. Even though clubs evolved, frequently to include educational, philanthropic and political goals, Martin (1987) notes, “the study club, true to its original purpose of self-and mutual education, remained on the scene to become a permanent part of informal adult education” for women (p. 4). While any gathering of like-minded women is bound to be a social occasion in some way, it is very important to recognize that women’s learning clubs had more serious intentions.

Stauffer (2011) offers an example of the serious goals of women’s learning clubs, focusing on clubs in the state of Utah at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries. In her article “A Good Social Work: Women’s Clubs, Libraries, and the Construction of a Secular Society in
Utah, 1890-1920, Stauffer (2011) relates that the women in learning clubs looked to “improve the reading tastes of the general public, promote universal literacy, supplement public schools, enhance community life, and ensure social order” (p. 137). This quote emphasizes the diverse, yet non-frivolous, nature of organized women’s clubs. Stauffer (2011) is one of several scholars who tie women’s learning clubs to the Progressive Movement of the end of the 19th century (p. 136). Women’s study clubs were also widely known and recognized. Stauffer (2011) comments that women’s learning clubs were so numerous and prevalent in late-19th century American society that the clubs became a part of contemporary fiction:

Novelist Sinclair Lewis endowed his fictional town of Gopher Prairie with the Thanatopsis Club, which ‘does do a good social work – they’ve made the city plant ever so many trees, and they run the rest-room for farmers’ wives. And they do take an interest in refinement and culture.’ (p. 136)

Stauffer illustrates again, through the reference to Sinclair Lewis’ fictional club, that the women’s club movement was not about socialization for women, but instead about furthering educational and community-related goals. The desire to educate themselves served as a catalyst for clubwomen to create opportunities to do so.

Continuing, as formal education of females was not yet widespread in the United States in the mid-19th century, one can surmise that it is the lack of access to educational opportunities that led women to form learning clubs. The literature suggests that the impetus can be found in the decades prior to the Civil War – specifically within the abolitionist movement. Interestingly, the movement to free blacks from slavery also gave rise to opportunities for women. In the book *Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric*, Campbell (1989) details how the abolitionist movement was among the first to feature female writers and
speakers. Women like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke became famous in their social circles for participating in what had previously been considered an all-male venue and can be considered among the small, but vibrant, community of 19th-century female rhetorical figures. Recognizing that women could be a persuasive voice in favor of abolition, in the 1830s the Grimke sisters were often asked to speak to members of the Female Anti-Slavery Society. They gave what were known as “parlor talks” – informal discussions held in women’s homes. Campbell (1989) remarks that soon, “So many women were eager to hear them however, that no private parlor was large enough; a minister offered them the session room in his church. The announcement of their first meeting caused consternation; the idea of women lecturing in a church was shocking” (p. 23). Here, Campbell illustrates how the abolitionist movement began to break barriers for women writers and speakers. With the sudden rise in all-women organizations after the Civil War, it seems that a few decades after the Grimke sister’s “parlor talks,” the idea of women organizing to form a club devoted to learning and education did not seem so outlandish.

Campbell (1989) is not the only scholar to note that women’s study clubs were developed as part of a greater movement of women to organize in like-minded groups from the mid-19th to the early 20th century. Similarly, Sharer’s (2004) book *Vote and Voice: Women’s Organizations and Political Literacy* begins by noting that there is much recent study on how women organized themselves prior to gaining the right to vote via the 19th Amendment. Sharer (2004) writes, “Prior to the Nineteenth Amendment, scholars have suggested, women formed extensive networks to explore political issues such as slavery, suffrage, temperance, and the conditions of labor in industry,” (p. 15). Sharer demonstrates how if the goal of a study club was to broaden the intellectual horizons of the members, those horizons might also include political activity and
thus a change in what was traditionally viewed as part of the sphere of women. Here, Sharer (2004) agrees with Campbell (1989) in the notion that engaging in writing and speaking together helped the women in these clubs to question why it was considered wrong for women to do so in the first place, and to eventually question the roles of women more publicly. Campbell (1989) credits club women with following in the footsteps of pre-Civil War women writers and speakers, creating the impetus for a women’s rights organization at a national level: “Individual women continued the tradition begun by the Grimke sisters, Maria W. Miller Stewart, and others in struggling for the right to speak, but such individual efforts could not, by themselves, create a social movement” (p. 49). Campbell (1989) and Sharer (2004) both share the idea that these women, in organizing for education and political purposes, were attempting a radical notion for the times. In gathering locally, women in the study clubs began to question not only gender roles but also community and societal issues. Small, local groups paved the way for larger congresses. Without the more formal nature of the women’s study clubs, and the writing and recording that this encouraged, it is doubtful that the merging into larger organizations would have occurred.

Similarly, Taggert (2006) details how one specific women’s club in Delaware follows the pattern established by Campbell (1989) and Sharer (2004) and argues that once this educational goal was met, the women turned to broader, community-wide agendas. In his article “Women’s Clubs as Educative Agencies” Taggert (2006) posits, “women were highly organized in women’s clubs that served as a major organ of change in our society, and that they had a great impact on education at all levels in the progressive era” (p. 57). Taggert (2006) implies the women’s clubs not only impacted women’s education, but served to promote literacy and higher educational goals for communities at large. The original clubs were so successful in “normalizing” the radical idea of education for women that subsequent generations of club members could focus on
other goals. Taggert (2006) claims, “The efficacy of women’s clubs became enhanced by the large increase in the number of educated women available to lead and participate in them… Educated women became adept during the progressive era in the methods and tactics of social change…” (p. 58). Here Taggert (2006) indicates, like Stauffer (2011) above, the tie between the heyday of women’s study clubs and the Progressive movement. Taggert (2006) also confirms Stauffer’s (2011) idea that once educated, women in clubs branched out to other areas of concern, including local community needs and broader political concerns.

Further, the women’s learning clubs of the late 19th century adjusted the focus to encompass not only personal growth, but also attempting to better the social and living conditions of their towns, cities, and states. Sometimes these broader goals were still focused on education. Taggert (2006) notes the “women’s clubs in Delaware took on the politically volatile issue of compulsory education in the mid-1890s” (p. 59). However, in addition to education, some clubs focused on sanitation, child welfare, or other community-wide issues. The available literature on women’s study clubs consistently notes that the clubs quickly became focused outwardly – on activities that benefitted both local communities and beyond – in addition to continuing to focus on personal development.

While individual clubs changed their focus, the entire women’s study club movement continued to grow throughout the 19th and into the 20th century. The first generation women’s study club pioneers impacted the future generations of members. As Martin (1987) notes, “For the daughters of these women, who had observed their mothers studying Chaucer and writing papers on Egyptian art, who had watched them enthusiastically learning to learn, college education appeared a natural and realistic option as well as a conventional aspiration” (p. 3). It is interesting that Martin specifically mentions the “mothers” writing papers. Martin (1987) echoes
other scholars in emphasizing the fact that the women in the clubs took the time to physically write papers as a legacy. The literature available on the history of the women’s study club movement leaves little doubt that the very fact that members took the time to formalize and document their purpose in writing had a considerable effect on middle-class women moving forward to more formal educational opportunities. The women founding these organizations were certainly ardently seeking knowledge, and making sure that their efforts were recorded for future generations of members to follow. Martin (1987) argues the formalization of priorities, through bylaws and membership charters, left the groundwork for traditions to be developed and upheld through generations of women.

However, the founders of the women’s learning clubs were not trying to change the roles of women all at once. The inevitable consequences of educating women (a desire to move beyond the boundaries of the traditional roles into a larger public sphere) came gradually, but the simple fact that the clubs organized and sustained was enough impetus for the gradual change to occur.

Susan Tchudi (1997) provides another example of how the learning or study aspect of the women’s study club created opportunities for wider goals through traditional women’s activities. Tchudi (1997) writes specifically about one club in the article “Women’s Education: The Rhetoric of History and Serious Purpose of the Naugatuck Women’s Study Club” and she reiterates the common historical background of this club, founded in 1894, noting the club “was quite typical in its inclusion during its early years of white middle-class women” (p. 2). In other words, the Naugatuck Women’s Study Club consisted of women who most likely had the means and the time to pursue organized self-education. The club focuses mostly on assigned readings and writing papers based on the reading. Tchudi (1997) remarks that in the club’s formative
years, “women would get together to enlarge their worlds through the study of books – primarily those focused on the arts, literature, and history” (p. 2). These topics – arts, literature, and history – were considered “womanly” topics and worthy of study by matrons of society in an independent setting such as each other’s homes. So the original “serious purpose” of the study club at first focused on the traditional role of woman as keeper of the house and the moral authority of the family.

The Naugatuck Women’s Study Club is typical of the study clubs founded between 1870 and 1920. Gender norms were firmly entrenched in 19th-century American life and the founders of these study clubs encouraged women to gain skills that would be seen to help women to become better “ladies.” Karen Blair (1980), author of The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined tells how well defined the 19th century ideal of womanhood was in everyday life:

An understanding of clubs demands a familiarity with the ideology of the ‘lady’: the belief that every woman was a moral and domestic creature who embodied the desirable traits of loving maternity, intuition, and sensitivity… the widespread acceptance of this ‘ideal lady’ ideology was ensured by the sermons and popular literature that justified and explained women’s role (pp. 2-3). In this quote, Blair describes how typical writings of the late 19th and early 20th century all advocate that a woman’s place was as the moral center of the home and family, a movement called the “Cult of Domesticity” or the “Cult of True Womanhood.”

While the women in study clubs desired to further their own education and often became advocates for equality, suffrage, temperance, and other more political topics, it is a disservice to assume that those were the

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original goals. Instead, looking at the writings of the clubs over a century-long span shows that
the more “radical” concepts of gender equality evolved over time, just as the individual clubs and
members did.

While much of the focus of material about women’s study clubs and the Cult of
Domesticity focuses on 19th-century life, there is evidence that the women’s study club
movement valued similar principles into the 20th century. In her article “The Pulse and
Meltzer (2009) writes about how even in 1954, Federation Clubwoman of the year Goldena
Howard “attributed her award to her life as ‘an ordinary housewife’ (stressing) that ‘I do my
housework and laundry, manage on an income somewhat less than average, and make time to
serve on the boards of all county voluntary organizations’” (p.58). Howard’s assertions, in
Meltzer’s (2009) article, illustrate that even in mid-20th century America, focusing on the home
and family were considered optimal traits in study club members. While women’s study clubs
did focus on self-education and other outward goals, even in the mid-20th century, clubwomen
were trying to live up to the ideal of “true womanhood” common in the social mores of the
United States.

However, even including Meltzer’s (2009) example above, the rhetorical practices of the
women’s study club movement trace how the shifting social roles of women in the decades
following the Civil War and into the 20th century. By leaving such excellent written
documentation of their clubs’ missions and programs, the club members themselves show how,
as Tchudi (1997) comments, “the way women value education, find ways to educated
themselves, and see their educations as part of their larger living in and contributing to the
world” (p. 3). Education is what propelled the clubwomen out of the sphere of home life and
into first their communities, and then as part of larger state or national movements. The catalysts for change can often be found in times of political or social upheaval, and many of the articles in this review reveal that the Civil War was a huge catalyst for changing the roles of women, and thus why so many women’s study clubs formed in its aftermath.

While a change in women’s roles did not happen overnight or even over decades, The Civil War disturbed the traditional ways of life on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. In its aftermath, women, who had been forced outside of the traditional gender roles during the war, sought to continue to increase their own knowledge, in both traditional and more academic ways. Women were doing more both inside and outside the home. Formal secondary education, such as at a college or university, was not the norm for middle-class women in the 19th century, as they were judged too “pure” for many institutions of higher learning (Tchudi, 1997, p. 3). However, if an “ideal” lady was the moral backbone of society, then women had not only the desire but the obligation to be educated about moral matters that might affect society. This resulted, Blair (1980) claims, in “Domestic Feminism” – the idea that “these were women who tried to be ladies but created, in the process, a new and broader role for women” (p. 13). Blair indicates that these women’s study clubs opened the proverbial Pandora’s box of knowledge-seeking, and thus began to slowly chafe against the bonds of the feminine ideals of the time. In trying to uphold the cultural standards of morality and ladylike behavior, and in trying to maintain a serious purpose for the study club, women studied history, art, and literature. These topics led to the study of modern works, which led to the investigation of social and political issues pertinent to the time. Not surprisingly, the origins of both the temperance movement and the suffrage movement are shown to have roots in local women’s organizations, because both of
those issues were highly discussed and contested topics during the heyday of the women’s club movement.

Women in those late-1800s clubs probably did not start out to be suffragettes or prohibition advocates, and in fact often wrote to specifically to say that club members were not espousing women’s rights. Martin (1987) quotes Jane Croly, founder of the women’s club Sorosis: “The radical woman has found no place in the women’s club” (p. 55). However, “radical” ideas like a woman’s right to work, to vote, and to have a greater say in societal topics like the prohibition of alcohol gained momentum in many of the clubs. The women’s club movement can be seen as radical, but in a slow and steady journey from traditional to progressive, with ties to more traditional social mores lasting well into the 20th century.

The learning aspect of the clubs, along with the formal organizational structure (often modeled after men’s clubs), helped women to be more confident in writing and speaking for the public, but did not necessarily advocate for rapid change in the role of women. The fact that women became more comfortable in writing and public speaking seems a happy side effect of the women’s study club. As Blair (1980) relates, “An examination of the details of typical literary organizations is revealing, for every aspect of the clubs pointed to women’s growth and reveals both the strength and limitations of their feminism” (p. 66). The “strength and limitation” of burgeoning feminism is a common thread in many of the women’s study clubs, noted not only by Blair (1980) but by Sharer (2004), Meltzer (2009) and Stauffer (2011). While education certainly promotes autonomy, in some cases the women in clubs seemed to be at cross-purposes with the desire to have a serious study and yet retain the traditional sphere of womanhood. Historically, the writings left by the club organizations and members show a more moderate approach:
In their failure to challenge the concept of ladydom or the myth of woman’s instinctive domestic and moral traits, clubwomen’s Domestic Feminism called for more moderate goals than the suffragists did. Yet its very moderation made it attractive to millions of women who were able to enrich the quality of their own lives while transforming the worlds of culture and reform. (Blair, 1989, p. 119)

Blair (1989) re-emphasizes what other scholars have written about the women’s study club movement – that the clubs were not in themselves promoting radical agendas for change, but the very focus of study and education and the commitment to formalize the activities and writings led the members to gradually espouse the greater women’s movement in the country.

“Gradually” and “moderately” seem to be the key words for change within the women’s study club movement. The cross-purposed feminism Blair writes about within the women’s study clubs was not limited to the 19th century. Some 20th-century women’s learning clubs seemed to want to revert back to the Cult of Domesticity in their goals and subjects of study and writing. Meltzer (2009) affirms Blair (1980), noting women’s learning club members charged themselves with upholding traditional American values, even during the Cold War. Individual clubs, under the governing umbrella of General Federation of Women’s Clubs, strived to be made up of women who “nurtured and educated democratic (and explicitly anticommunist) citizens; men may have made the policies that protected American values and interests, but women created grassroots support for those policies and put them into practice” (Metzler, 2009, p. 56). Metzler’s comment shows how, even 100 years after the Civil War, even after women gained the right to vote, and even after women were more active in careers — the women’s study club could still be a base for a more traditional ideal womanhood, organized around the cause of nurturing “American” values.
Women’s study clubs ultimately served as a bridge for women trying to blend a desire to be both the traditional woman and to also act for the betterment of the larger community. Emily Clark and Patricia Gower (2015) tie these two desires together in their article “Well, Bless Your Heart!”: Rhetoric and Power in Dallas Women During the Progressive Era”. Clark and Gower (2015) write of the enveloping nature of the women’s club:

Clubs, both literary and social, provided women with chances to speak in public while still struggling to retain their traditional roles. Many of these women did not want to violate cultural norms or admit that their activism reflected real change. Women’s clubs proved to be places where a broad range of women could participate at their comfort level. (p. 51)

Here, Clark and Gower (2015) show that club members were diverse, with some women adhering to traditional roles, while others promoted agendas of “real change.” As has been shown in much of the literature reviewed in this essay, however, educational goals, once met, were no longer enough for clubwomen. As Clark and Gower (2015) note: “As more women gained college educations, clubs for women could cease serving as surrogate alma maters and study became less central” leading to “the shift to concentrate on reform and social activism as opposed to literary study” (p. 52). Undertaking tasks that promoted bettering the community simply expanded the “home” outward, and thus could comfortably be considered in the genre of ideal womanhood. Therefore, Clark and Gower contend, the focus of women’s learning clubs slowly shifted from individual to community (and beyond).

Playing into the concept of what “ideal” women should do, philanthropy is a topic mentioned in almost every book and article reviewed and is another focal point of this study. Once organized, these groups of women often tried to make a difference in their communities
and frequently planned programs and activities around philanthropy. The oldest club writings on this topic seemed to focus on small issues like individual literacy and supporting the members through marriage, motherhood, adult children, and widowhood (Tchudi, 1997, p. 12). From these local concerns, however, quickly grew the desire to be of more concrete use to the community. Again, as with abolition, women began speaking and writing publicly to espouse topics of interest to the club or the community as a whole.

Individual clubs took different approaches to philanthropic activity. Barry M. Franklin (2000), author of the article “Women’s Voluntarism, Special Education, and the Junior League: ‘Social Motherhood’ in Atlanta, 1916-1968” details the activities of the Atlanta Chapter of the Junior League, a women’s study and service club that ultimately fell under the national Junior League parent umbrella. This particular club, Franklin (2000) writes, “followed a trajectory not dissimilar from those women’s clubs that embraced the practices of ‘municipal housekeeping’ … maintaining healthy and proper homes for their families could be extended to the improvement of community life generally” (p. 416). Franklin (2000) shows that the philanthropic origins of many women’s study clubs originated within the now-familiar framework of a woman’s place in the community being in the home. However, by the 1920’s, the Atlanta club was seeking a different focus. Club President Marion Sterns wrote in the 1922 annual report that the Atlanta League was looking for “‘some great work with which to identify ourselves’” (Franklin, 2000, p 419). Writings from the club over the next few years describe the ongoing search to find a focus for the club’s philanthropic purpose. Eventually, the Atlanta League became instrumental in founding the School for Speech Correction, which served deaf and hearing-impaired children (Franklin, 2000, p. 421). The school served children who were ordinarily left out of traditional public school curriculum. Over the next decade, the minutes and annual reports of the Atlanta
League give a detailed account of fundraising by members to support the school, in addition to the club’s normal activities, including the study of literature and presentation of papers to members. Franklin (2000) is quick to point out the club’s interest in certain philanthropic activities in the name of “civic betterment, however, did not lead the Atlanta League to the kind of political involvements that characterize much of the modern women’s movement” (pp. 427-28). In this comment, Franklin characterizes the philanthropic goals of the club as an extension of the educational component of the Atlanta League and not as a precursor to political aspirations. The Atlanta League’s historic purpose of self-education simply evolved to promote educational opportunities for the community, thus again showing how women’s learning clubs quickly became just as associated with philanthropy as self-education.

One particular area of philanthropic focus for women’s study clubs is the public library system, with several of the authors reviewed in this study making note of the contributions women’s learning clubs made to libraries across the country. Stauffer (2011) states boldly: “Women were central to the creation, maintenance, and support of public libraries in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (p.135). Clark and Gower (2015) also note that clubwomen in Dallas, Texas, united to form the Dallas Public Library Association in order to raise funds to establish a library system in that city (p. 54). Similarly, Watson (1994) credits the women’s learning club movement with philanthropy that spreads beyond the local community. Watson’s (1994) article “Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women’s Organizations to the Public Library Development in the United States” details:

A morning session of the 1898 biennial meeting of the General Federation was entirely devoted to libraries. In the report of the proceedings of that session, the chair summarized the widespread efforts for libraries already underway: ‘A very large
percentage of the clubs belonging to this Federation are actively engaged in library work: indeed, it seems to be common ground on which we all meet.’ (p. 238)

Watson is writing about the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, which serves as a mother organization for numerous women’s study clubs all over the world. Watson (1994) theorizes that the traditional goal of reading for self-education espoused in the women’s clubs led to a desire by the clubs for free libraries to exist in their communities (p. 239). It is again critical to note that without the written minutes and documents of the women’s clubs, no tie could be made to the growth of the public library movement and women’s learning clubs. That libraries, the ultimate source of free educational material for the public, should be a natural interest of women’s study club members seems natural. Interestingly, in this particular instance, a bridge between philanthropic and political activity is found. Watson (1994) notes, “There is little doubt that the … women’s clubs can claim credit for the passage of legislation in many states to establish library commissions” (p. 244). In this, Watson differs from Franklin (2000) and Clark and Gower (2015) and opens the door for the women’s club movement to actively seek political activity. There is no better example of how women’s learning club members stepped into the political arena than the suffrage movement, which culminated in the passage of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote.

Any review of the literature available on women’s study clubs would be incomplete without mentioning the club movement’s forays into political activity, especially concerning suffrage and the origins of the “equal rights” movement in America. Several sources in particular delineate the connection between women’s study clubs and political activity. Nancy Woloch’s (1994) *Women and the American Experience* posits: “But women’s clubs were a step toward politicization as well” (p. 289). This step presumably occurred because the club
members began to look beyond their own front gate and into other areas that concerned them as wives and mothers. Woloch (1994) argues women’s clubs “moved on to national issues, passing resolutions on those in which women, home, and family had a stake” with a culmination of an interest in women’s suffrage (p. 290). While the interest in these issues did not happen overnight, Woloch (1994) indicates that politicization is a natural progression of women’s study clubs, illustrating yet again the gradual evolution of club priorities.

Another example of the tie between the expanding definition of “home” and the political activity of women’s study club members is found in Paula Baker’s (2001) article “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920.” Baker (2001) quotes journalist Retha Childe Dorr: “Woman’s place is Home . . . But Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual house. Home is the community” (p. 632). If a woman’s responsibility to “home” included the entire community at large, it seems a natural extension that women’s learning clubs would choose to focus on “politics through organizations that worked to correct what they defined as injustices toward women and children” (Baker, 2001, p. 632). Many women’s study clubs became organizations that advocated both the temperance movement and women’s suffrage and equal rights. The blurring of the line between home and public politics happened gradually, but consistently, in the women’s learning clubs.

Similarly, continuing Baker’s (2001) ideas, Wendy Sharer’s (2004) book Vote & Voice: Women’s Organizations and Political Literacy, 1915 – 1930 gives an account of how the rhetorical practices of women’s study clubs made a foundation for the national women’s suffrage organizations. Sharer (2004) notes that these clubs created a “shared basis for discussion of important political issues and for influencing public opinion about those issues” (p. 21). In other words, becoming comfortable discussing controversial topics with one another lead to women
being more prepared to do so with a larger audience. Sharer (2004) also claims that the organizational practices of the study clubs, frequently based on Robert’s Rules of Order, made the members more literate on the way political legislatures worked (p. 22-23). Additionally, just the point of having a club devoted to speaking and writing in the interest of learning created an atmosphere where women, especially in the 20th century, began to challenge the status quo for women. The women’s study clubs also began to write more for broader publication rather than just for their individual members, including “…publications that taught women how to conduct successful meetings” (Sharer, 2004, p. 25). Sharer shows how the women’s study clubs worked toward establishing credibility for women engaging in public discourse. The progression of the rhetorical activity showing how the women’s study clubs moved from self-study to published works to political advancement is intentional.

However, sometimes the literature illustrates that the women’s study club movement unintentionally entered the political arena. The fact is that women’s study clubs were and are made up of individual women and sometimes those women take stands that, while possibly popular at the time, are definitely on the wrong side of history. An excellent example of women’s study clubs becoming embroiled in such a political conflict is M.J. Smith’s (2010) article “The Fight to Protect Race and Regional Identity Within the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1895-1902.” Smith (2010) details the integration of black women into the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. Interestingly enough, the situation was initially described as such:

the period between 1895 and 1902 represents a pivotal moment in southern white women’s integration into the national white women’s club movement… Georgia’s white
clubwomen believed they and other southern white women would be left out of the national women’s club movement at the beginning of the new century (Smith, 2010, p. 2).

In other words, the Southern clubwomen were trying to frame an argument in such a way that allowing racial integration (allowing black middle-class clubwomen in the Federation) would force these southern women to be excluded from the national organization, due to the Southern clubs’ policies of racial segregation. The writings of the local and national organizations highlighted in Smith (2010) show that the clubs were quite comfortable using rhetoric in the public venue and had significant rhetorical skills in doing so. Recognizing the great sphere of influence garnered by the GFWC and individual women’s study clubs, the press reported on the situation as though a second Civil War were occurring (Smith, 2010, p. 7). What the writings do tell is how seemingly very similar women – all middle or upper-middle class women who were members of learning clubs – had incredibly different views on race, mostly based on geography. Even though these club members had much in common, divisions are still apparent. The political conflict of racial integration did not spare women’s learning clubs and put them in the public spotlight in a negative way.

In contrast to this specific example in Smith’s (2010) article, much of the literature surrounding the political activity of women’s study clubs deals with the suffrage movement. The passage of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote seems to coincide with the end of the height of the women’s study club movement. While the books and articles available detail that women’s study clubs continue to exist in the 21st century, the number of new clubs steadily declined as the 20th century progressed. Additionally, the number of historical documents available relating to the clubs begins to decline by the mid-20th century. It is unknown whether
this is due to the demise of certain clubs or if it is because of changing club rules on keeping minutes and records. Some scholars, such as Sharer (2004) and Taggert (2006) suggest the decline in women’s study clubs lies in the success of their involvement in the suffrage movement. Martin (1987) notes that “a successful organization must answer a need” and that for the women’s study club movement, that need was education and, for some clubs, eventually advocating for the right to vote (pp. 177-78). After the “need” of suffrage for women was met, perhaps some of the women’s study clubs lost their purpose. Therefore, the clubs either found a new focus or petered out.

Another theory on the decline of new clubs forming after 1920 is also tied to the success of the suffrage movement. The study clubs did such a great job of uniting behind a common cause that Campbell theorizes the clubwomen moved from small, local study clubs to larger, national organizations like the League of Women Voters or the American Association of University Women (Campbell, 1989, pp.181-82). Instead of forming new local clubs, women instead created chapters of these clubs and the writings and purpose changed with the larger body. Blair (1980) offers yet another idea as to why women’s club formation began to stall:

It resulted from the increasing integration of women into the male domain of schools, professions, and public affairs. The traditional 19th-century feminist concept that woman’s sphere was as important as man’s began to fade as women had access to the male world. Now club members saw that women and men both had developed valuable characteristics and the ideal was to merge them (p. 107).

Blair advocates that the ever-changing “ideal” of womanhood, molded by the increased opportunities for women outside the home, made for a new definition of feminism that encouraged co-educational experiences instead of women’s-only clubs. However, all of the
articles reviewed do note that decline does not equal the demise of the women’s study club. Perhaps one of the reasons there is not as much literature available on modern clubs because those clubs are still maintaining their documents privately, and adding to those documents yearly with continued programs, philanthropy, and other activity. Martin (1987) and Costello (2015) especially make the effort to consider clubs that are in existence at the time of publication. Costello (2015) interviewed current club members and writes, “These busy women must work very hard to maintain their beloved clubs and to keep their bit of living history going” (p. xx). Costello’s (2015) book details many specific clubs, including their organizational format, mottos, and current practices. Costello concludes that there is a “formula” for clubs that have maintained membership for 100 years or more, and will continue to thrive. She asserts, “The groups that survive will almost certainly include those that are located in college towns, where learning and tradition are sacred, and in towns where membership in such clubs carries a certain social cachet” (Costello, 2015, p. 343). In other words, the women’s study clubs that survive into the 21st century are the ones who remain tied to the original goals of shared educational development within a similar social circle.

This brief review of the literature available on women’s study clubs shows that much is available about the 100-year period when the clubs were most active. Not as much exists for organizations founded prior to 1860, and very little can be found about the current state of women’s clubs today, though it is anecdotally evident that many still exist. I propose that one of the major reasons so much has been written about the “golden age” of clubwomen is because those women developed and kept very good records. By conforming to Roberts Rules of Order, taking and publishing club minutes, deciding on and printing programs, and encouraging members to write and present papers for study topics, a plethora of information has been
preserved about how these clubs functioned. The ones that can be followed into the 21st century seem to be the ones where the “traditional” record keeping still exists. The written rhetorical practices of the women’s study clubs are what make existing literature possible.

Section B – Feminist Rhetoric Builds Community and Collaboration

The first section of this chapter establishes that the women’s study club movement in America was so successful in part because of the written documentation of their activities. These minutes, programs, papers, and other writings are not just club memorabilia, however – they are examples of feminist rhetorical practices and feminist writing itself. Women’s study clubs are examples of how women build community and collaborate with each other in order to achieve common goals. The club writings, such as minutes and programs, also illustrate community and collaboration, not only because they reflect the goals and happenings of the club, but because they are examples of feminist rhetorical practices. Feminist rhetoric is by its own nature collaborative and community-building.

What is feminist rhetoric? Simply put, feminist rhetoric is the praxis of feminist discourse. Everything from writings from ancient Greek women to public speeches by female politicians to the found diaries of female suffragettes can fall under the umbrella of feminist rhetoric. Study of these texts and other communications form the theory of how feminist rhetoric shapes our entire rhetorical tradition. However, feminist rhetoric is not static; examples are created every day. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (2001) introduce their anthology of feminist rhetorics with this sentiment: “As with most feminist projects, Available Means is a collaborative work” (p. xii). Here Ritchie and Ronald (2001) attempt to show that feminist rhetoric exists as a field and practice because communities of women helped to make it so. While women have always been a part of discourse, their voices have not been preserved and recorded in the same
manner as men. Therefore, for many years the work of feminist rhetoricians has been to find and preserve examples of women’s texts. In *Available Means*, Ritchie and Ronald (2001) hope to “continue this work by gathering – always a women’s metaphor – primary works that both illustrate and, we hope, extend the work of reclamation, recovery, and reconceptualization” (p. xvii). Ritchie and Ronald (2001) visualize their collection as a place for female rhetors to be visible and accessible for reading and study but admit that even a large anthology is only one piece of the feminist rhetorical puzzle. As the concept of theorizing feminist rhetoric is a fairly new field, Ritchie and Ronald (2001) make a case for the idea that “women have purposefully sought to keep the context, the immediacy of experience, attached to theorizing rather than creating an abstract set of prescriptions disconnected from the contexts of stripped of the exigencies of everyday life” (p. xxvii). Ritchie and Ronald agree that feminist rhetoric is praxis – the combination of theory and practice — based on immediacy, and illustrates community.

The nature of community is inherently social, as is feminism itself. To admit there is a social component in both women’s study clubs and feminist rhetoric does not diminish the importance of either in the field of rhetoric. Susan Jarrett (1998) writes in the introduction to the book *Feminism and Composition Studies*: “From at least as early as Mary Wollstonecraft, some feminists have argued that the feminine takes shape through a social process” (p. 9). A social process is a different way of coming together than a grand generalization that women are inherently alike simply because they are of the same gender. Feminism occurs because women choose to build social networks with other women, thus forming community. Jarrett (1998) takes issue with the idea of a feminine “sisterhood,” as the metaphor of all women fitting under one umbrella “began to obscure more than it revealed, hiding differences under wraps, suggesting that *all* women had common experiences, goals, and languages” (p. 9). Instead, like-
minded feminists gather, collaborate, and build community networks through meeting, speaking, and writing together. The women of the study clubs certainly collaborated on their goals and activities, via a social atmosphere, and the minutes and programs reflect their success in doing so.

While Jarrett (1998) argues that the “feminine” is a social process, rhetoric itself is community-building and social in the very fact that it takes people to create rhetoric. Zarefsky (2010) writes in “Plenary Address: Reclaiming Rhetoric’s Responsibilities” of the responsibility of rhetoric, which is not just the familiar role of rhetoric in persuasion, argument, and public governance. Instead, Zarefsky (2010) argues that rhetoric is responsible for community:

People are naturally divided and fragmented; it is the task of rhetoric to unite them, to lead them to see themselves not as isolated individuals but as a community. Rhetoric brings a public or community into being. It accomplishes this task by enabling people to recognize common bonds, to see their interests, experiences, and aspirations as consubstantial (p. 16).

Here Zarefsky (2010) offers the counterpoint to Jarrett (1998). Jarrett claimed that feminism and feminist rhetoric results because women choose to find like-minded women to build communities, not simply because all women are alike. Zarefsky argued that it is actually rhetoric that brings people together, as a cause and not an effect. Both scholars agree that feminist rhetoric and communities go hand in hand.

Zarefsky (2010) continued the idea of rhetoric as a cause of community and not a response: “And when we ask to what end we nurture a sense of community, we are reminded of what else rhetoric can do. It can inspire; it can give direction to our thoughts and acts” (p. 17). Certainly rhetoric gave “direction” to clubwomen in building a community. The women’s study
clubs used rhetorical practices to plan out their goals and ambitions and to create permanent records for how those were accomplished. The continued practice of recording activities set traditions for future generations of club members to uphold and further develop.

Continuing the idea of rhetoric helping to form communities of women is the notion of community formed through collaboration. Once only available through face-to-face opportunities, collaboration in the 21st century includes the possibility of collaboration via the Internet. Gruber (2001) expands on Jarrett’s (1990) and Zafaresky’s (2010) ideas of feminist communities in her book chapter “The Rhetorics of Three Women Activist Groups on the Web.” Gruber (2001) cautions that interpersonal communities, based on shared values, often isolate themselves from other groups (p. 78-79). While Gruber does not comment on how face-to-face communities’ rhetorical practices reflect that potential isolation, she does offer examples of how feminist groups use different writing strategies online. Virtual, online communities lend themselves to rhetorical practices that supersede geographical constraints and focus on more global issues rather than local ones. Gruber (2001) contends:

These groups... have established an online presence to be heard beyond currently existing borders. Their sense of community arises from their belief in the rights of women, and although they acknowledge widely diverse value systems, their rhetorical choices... also emphasize the possibility of maintaining communities that require sensitivity toward and awareness of differences among members. (p. 80)

Here Gruber (2001) illustrates how rhetoric builds community through collaboration toward common goals, but also takes into account that not everyone comes from the same background or place. This harkens back to the ideas of the “immediacy” of feminist rhetoric that Ritchie and Ronald (2001) discuss in their introduction to *Available Means*. Feminist rhetoric evolves
because the women who practice and study it are constantly changing. However, there are consistent examples of collaboration and community throughout the existing scholarship.

Lunsford and Ede (1990) offer a different take on rhetorical collaboration: collaborative writing is usually considered to be several authors producing one text, but collaborative authorship can also develop over time. In “Rhetoric in a New Key: Women and Collaboration” Lunsford and Ede (1990) divide collaborative works into two “modes”: hierarchical and dialogic. The hierarchical mode is defined as conservative, linear, led by one individual in the group, and a “predominately masculine mode of discourse” (Lunsford & Ede, 1990, p. 235). Plenty of examples of hierarchical style of collaboration exist in rhetorical canon. However, Lunsford and Ede (1990) find their own collaboration to be structured differently. Instead of hierarchical, rhetoric was used in a way they called “dialogic,” meaning one that:

- is loosely structured, and the roles enacted within it are fluid; one ‘person’ may occupy multiple and shifting roles as the project progresses. In this mode, the process of articulating and working together to achieve goals is as important as the goals themselves. (Lunsford & Ede, 1990, p. 235-236)

Lunsford and Ede’s dialogic mode of collaboration illustrates the community built among the collaborators, and also reflects the method in which the women’s study clubs organized and completed tasks, with no one person completing all the tasks. Lunsford and Ede’s (1990) dialogic collaboration also offers the possibility of feminist rhetoric to be “multivocal”, which could mean both many authors writing one text, or many voices contributing to one rhetorical account, as in the minutes of a women’s study club (p. 240). The minutes and programs of a women’s study club are ripe for exploration into collaborative nature of feminist rhetoric, as defined by Lunsford and Ede (1990).
Another recent example of scholarship that expresses the notion of collaboration in feminist rhetoric actually uses women’s study clubs as a model and makes a case for using feminist research methods to analyze examples of feminist rhetoric. Fredlund’s (2016) “Feminist CHAT: Collaboration, Nineteenth Century Women’s Clubs, and Activity Theory” showcases how new systems theories, especially cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) can be teamed with feminist theories to create Feminist CHAT, which Fredlund (2016) described as “a method that can help feminist researchers recognize and theorize” their research (p. 471).

Fredlund (2016) posits that women’s clubs, especially the women’s study clubs of 19th century America, are excellent examples of feminist collaboration. Today’s researchers can see this because of the many written accounts left by these clubs. Fredlund (2016) elaborates, “Nineteenth century women’s clubs provide a unique opportunity for the study of collaboration because many of these clubs kept detailed records of their collaborations” (p. 481). However, Fredlund’s interest in these collaborations is not merely to document that they existed. Fredlund (2016) also notes that the impetus for many of these groups to organize into clubs and to write about their activities was due to the lack of “power” for women in traditional institutions (school, church, community). Collaborating with other women provided community empowerment lacking in the traditionally male-dominated world in which these women lived, which is well-documented in the literature about why these clubs came into existence in post-Civil War America (Fredlund, 2016, p. 481). This feeling of community empowerment may be one reason clubwomen chose to record their activities in rhetorical practices meant to be shared with future members. Thus, the collaborators attempted to ensure their efforts continued with future generations.
Fredlund’s (2016) ultimate goal is to show how by combining collaborative activities with documentation, women’s study clubs produced discourse aimed at showcasing the lives women lead. Recovering these writings is only part of the picture. Instead, current researchers must also interpret and value these texts as examples of women’s lives in history and as part of the growing historiography\(^4\) of women. The more examples of such feminist rhetorical practices that can be gathered, the more current scholars can understand how women lived, worked, and wrote within history. Fredlund (2016) notes, “Further, Feminist CHAT can help us continue to move from recovery to theory – recognizing women’s historical practices as worthy of meaning making for English studies at large” (p. 493). This statement sets up the framework for understanding how feminist rhetoric is both the action of discourse and the making of “meaning” about feminist research and rhetorical practices. To research both historical and contemporary feminist rhetoric further, a feminist research process is necessary.

Section C -- What Is Feminist Research?

Looking at the writings of a women’s study club from a feminist research perspective seems logical, but what is feminist research? More importantly, why should feminist research principles guide projects about feminist writing? Fredlund (2016) gives several reasons on the need for feminist research and rhetorical practices in the above article, but a more common definition of feminist research comes from Hesse-Biber (2104) in her book *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer. She argues that feminist research “positions gender as the categorical center of inquiry and the research process” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 3). Hesse-Biber (2014) further elaborates:

\(^4\) For the purposes of this study, “historiography” is defined as a body of historical writings and writing practices
One of the main goals of feminist research projects is to support social justice and social transformation... Researchers look at patterns and trends within the population of all women, and they draw conclusions based on the varied range of women’s unique circumstances (p. 3).

The idea that there is a “varied range of women’s unique circumstances” plays a large part in developing research strategies to uncover the histories of women whose voices had not yet been heard. The very nature of the diverse experiences of women makes it difficult to define a particular research style that can encompass all the needs of studying women throughout history. For example, the experience of a white woman in the Middle Ages is obviously different than the experience of an African-American woman in the post-colonial South. Similarly, the experiences of the members of a particular study club in Ohio are unique to that place and that time. The noting of how different these experiences are is why feminist researchers are more concerned with plurality rather than one cohesive concept of a “woman’s experience” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 7). Therefore, feminist research is, first of all, a place from which to begin – knowing that there is no one method that will work for all research on and about women.

Instead, Hesse-Biber (2014) encourages feminist researchers to “realize the many different ways that feminist research can serve as a vehicle for women’s empowerment” (p. 11). In reviewing scholarship that focuses on feminist research, clearly there are different ideas about exactly what constitutes feminist research practices. However, there are trends. Feminist research acknowledges its origins as a reaction to a male-dominated canon, attempts to give voice to women’s lives throughout history, and provides a lens through which to guide research that not only recovers women’s writing but also justifies its place within women’s historiography.
Echoing Hesse-Biber, Kelly, Burton, and Reagan (1994) caution researchers to come at feminist research from a gendered perspective, but they add the point that feminist research must admit women’s writings are a response to the male-dominated rhetorical tradition. In their chapter “Researching Women’s Lives or Studying Women’s Oppression?” Kelly, et al. (1994) argue feminist research must always look for the masculine influence on the women, even if it is not easily seen:

Whilst much feminist research rightly focuses on women, on creating knowledge about women’s experiences, if our concern is to understand women’s oppression we need to target our attention on the way it is structured and reproduced. Feminist research focuses on how women’s lives are constrained by the actions of men individually and collectively and the strategies girls and women find to resist, challenge, and subvert (p. 33).

As previously noted in the review of literature on women’s study clubs, the women could certainly be seen to organize those clubs to “resist, challenge, and subvert” the traditional roles for women in the 19th century. Therefore, to view the writings of one such club through a feminist method that considers the club’s actions as reactionary to male oppression is a logical approach. However, Kelly, et al. (1994) also reflect Hesse-Biber (2014) in cautioning against considering “feminism as an idealistic universalizing of women’s experiences” (p. 28), which means that feminist research should use a unique perspective for each situation, rather than trying to apply the same lens to every research project.

Jarrett (1990) also recognizes the male-dominated nature of much of historical writing. In her article “Speaking to the Past: Feminist Historiography in Rhetoric” Jarrett (1990) is one of the early feminist rhetorical scholars to advocate for feminist research practices for studying women’s writing. Jarrett (1990) writes, “The most obvious extension these processes of
positioning for feminist history is that women writing history in a male-centered tradition and academy seek female sources” (p. 200). Here Jarrett advises not to just “find” women in the already published histories and canons, but to search for new documents actually written by women and enter them into the historical context already written. Without locating and writing about such sources, Jarrett (1990) cautions, “...marginalization seems almost inevitable: history of rhetoric here, women’s history of rhetoric over there” (p. 193). Instead, Jarrett recommends looking at women’s writing as a piece of the overall historiography, rather than separately. However, to do this more historical writings about women, both public and private, must be found and analyzed, including “histories about women who spoke and wrote in the past” (Jarrett, 1990, p. 191). Feminist research is one that provides the opportunity for such writings to be brought out of archives in order to counter-balance the male-centric rhetorical canon already present.

The idea of a feminist historiography that includes as many original writings by women as possible is one that Enoch (2013) espouses in her book chapter “Releasing Hold: Feminist Historiography Without the Tradition.” Enoch (2013) criticizes the traditional rhetorical practice of merely rescuing and recovering women’s writing and inserting such pieces into established collections of writing. Instead, Enoch (2013) advises researchers to consider feminist rhetorical practices as part of the canon of memory, and to focus on how these writings reflect the way women lived, remembered events, and chose to record those events (p. 62). Doing this, Enoch (2013) claims, illustrates how scholars can

refigure feminist historiographic concerns by considering not how recovery allows for canonical revision but how the recovery (and remembrance) of women is itself a rhetorical practice that has critical importance for feminist studies. (p. 63)
In this quote, Enoch (2013) agrees with Jarrett (1990) that separation of the feminine in rhetorical canon is both unnecessary and unwise. The historiography of women must contain examples of women’s writing, but that writing must also reflect how women were determined to be a part of their time period, both publicly and privately. Thus, a feminist research lens is one that looks for examples of “...the rhetorical process of remembering as it explores how memories of women have been constructed, revised, and erased in and through public discourse” (Enoch, 2013, p. 67). Again, feminist research seeks to find evidence of the way women lived, and to present information in a way that reflects those women’s reality, while taking into account the gendered differences in the way women have been portrayed in rhetoric previously.

In further defense of the needs for a feminist research perspective, Poonacha (2004) provides guidance to researchers in her article “Recovering Women’s Histories: An Enquiry into Methodological Questions and Challenges.” Poonacha (2004) begins by noting feminist research may have been born in the women’s movement of the 1970s, but “some scholars have wondered whether there is a research method that is uniquely feminist” (p. 289). Poonacha (2004) agrees with Kelly, et al. (1994), Jarrett (1990), and Enoch (2013) in the perspective that feminist research practices developed as a reaction to a male-dominated historical and rhetorical canon, stating that inquiry about the way women lived in history usually focused on the “powerlessness of women in society” (p. 391). However, there is much to be learned from how women lived throughout history and finding examples of feminist writing is one window into those women. Poonacha (2004) offers the simple statement: “Feminist theories developed out of attempts to conceptualise women’s lived experiences” (p. 390). Certainly, the minutes of a women’s study club are examples of “women’s lived experiences” as they record the activities of women within a certain setting. As with previous authors, Poonacha (2004) argues that the only way to
adequately record women’s lives was to look at all aspects of life through a feminist, gendered lens. Therefore, Poonacha (2004) recognizes feminist research as not contained only to history or rhetoric, but also art, culture, and politics (p. 392). With such a wide base of study, feminist research is not limited merely to the scientific method and quantitative data, but more of a “way of knowing” that “aimed at changing the status quo, feminist research methods have emerged out of the various consciousness-raising sessions organized at the grass-roots level to enable women to make sense of their lives” (Poonacha, 2004, p. 396). In this, Poonacha (2004) agrees with Kelly, et al. (1994) that feminist research is usually more qualitative in nature, but requires the researcher to be flexible and use whatever methodology makes the most sense for the study in question (Kelly, et al. 1994, pp. 34-35). However, Poonacha emphasizes feminist research can be both objective and personal to the researcher. Everyone approaches a research project from his or her own personal bias, and feeling a sense of community with the subject of study does not invalidate the research. Poonacha (2004) summarizes her thoughts:

"Feminist research thus becomes an open, inclusive, accessible, creative and dynamic process between people, activities, and ideas. It has to be based on theories that do not devalue women’s ideas, experiences, or action strategies. It recognises that theory building should begin from women’s daily experiences and their informal articulation of such experiences (p. 397)."

Therefore, feminist research is more than just a reaction to male-dominated research and history; it is a different theory altogether. Feminist research practices instead focus on looking at women in the time and space where they lived, acted, wrote, created communities, and contributed to the historiography of women.
Section D – Feminist Research Methodology

If feminist research methods are more of a lens than a prescribed strategy to follow when investigating feminist historiographic practices, where does a study begin? Glenn and Enoch (2010), authors of “Invigorating Historiographic Practices in Rhetoric and Composition Studies,” urge scholars to move past attempting to find “objective truth” in rhetorical archival research projects. Instead, Glenn and Enoch (2010) urge scholars to embrace the fact that history constantly changes; new archival sources are awaiting discovery to prove that “there is no one history but instead many histories” (p. 12). These histories change as the demands for inquiry in each era evolve. Glenn and Enoch invite scholars to consider research projects that do not seek to find answers to questions already asked, but instead to find projects which ask new questions, and locate archival materials that highlight under-represented groups in current publications.

One specific suggestion that Glenn and Enoch (2010) make is to find archives that are out of the usual scope of rhetorical academia: “archives that don’t immediately promise insights into the practices or histories of our field” (p. 17). Glenn and Enoch specifically mention Historical Societies, like the Hancock Historical Museum, which houses the materials of the Thursday Conversational Club.

Once an archive of materials is identified, Glenn and Enoch (2010) urge researchers to find some common ground or personal connection with the subject of study. They write, “In the field of rhetoric and composition, it has become almost commonplace for researchers to devote space in their manuscripts to revealing their standpoint and interestedness in relation to their project” (Glenn & Enoch, 2010, p. 21). This “interestedness” is essential to being able to read and interpret archival texts in different ways. In essence, the personal value placed on the research is helpful in making it valuable to the field of rhetoric. Glenn and Enoch (2010)
conclude by acknowledging the feminist standpoint they advocate (for approaching unusual archival materials) must be based on sound background research, but ultimately will lead to being able to “rediscover some treasures among the written, visual, or material artifacts that our subjects have left behind” (p. 25). One might surmise these “treasures” will add more feminist voices to the rhetorical tradition.

Continuing with Glenn and Enoch’s (2010) ideas for finding primary sources in unusual places, what is the next step once a primary source has been found? Perhaps it helps to view the study of feminist rhetorical practices as the study of actual women living their lives, within the constraints of a masculine worldview. This sort of lens for research can help the researcher to look beyond the words on a page and into the lives of the subject. That personal connection, mentioned by Glenn and Enoch (2010), and once thought to make a researcher less objective, is exactly what many feminist researchers advocate.

In this vein, Purvis (1994) writes about her study of Suffragette women in early 20th century England in “Researching the Lives of Women in the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian England.” Through examining primary source documents including letters, testimonies, and autobiographies, Purvis acknowledges the personal biases of the authors but admits surprise at how closely she felt the lives of these “historic” women mirrored her own. Purvis (1994) immediately began to draw connections between the lives of the women she studied and the lives of women in her daily life, especially when faced with what she considered to be misrepresentations of facts:

what I was not prepared for was the way the consultation and interpretation of these primary documents became very much a ‘personal’ involvement for me. As my research progressed I felt (and still do feel) that I had a duty to read, and make public, the words of
women whose pain in the name of the feminist movement is so vividly related and whose experiences have been so misrepresented in most secondary sources. In trying to understand their lives, I reflect on my own and those of other feminists I know today. Our views too are often misrepresented, our demands for a more equal society not listened to, our full rights as citizens on equal terms with men still not achieved. (pp.178-179)

The goal of a research project that examines the writings of historic women is not to go back and correct past wrongs, but to instead try to understand how the women lived in their own space and time, and to draw connections to contemporary times. Purvis’ (1994) connection with the lives of the Suffragettes was the lack of equal rights in her own generation.

To do this, a researcher must attempt to see historic women in their own place, knowing full well that such a thing is really impossible. Admitting the limitations of the study is a good first step. Kirsch and Royster (2010) offer the article “Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence” as a guide for researchers attempting to study primary sources from historic women. Kirsch and Royster (2010) suggest this set of questions as a starting point to researching women’s history:

How do we transport ourselves back to the time and context in which they lived, knowing full well that it is not possible to see things from their vantage point? How do they frame (rather than we frame) the questions by which they navigated their own lives? What more lingers in what we know about them that would suggest that we need to think again, to think more deeply, to think more broadly? How do we make what was going on in their context relevant or illuminating for the contemporary context? (pp. 648-649)
Then, Kirsch and Royster (2010) lay out an inquiry model with which to approach the study of primary source archival material like the minutes and programs of the Thursday Conversational Club. This model consists of viewing the discourse through three “lenses”: critical imagination, strategic contemplation, and social circulation.

In their book, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Royster and Kirsch (2012) further develop these three lenses and offer them as a guide for the research process when exploring archival sources. Royster and Kirsch (2012) define critical imagination as a researcher being able to ‘fill in the gaps’ between the researcher’s life and the subject’s life in order to make connections. However, a researcher must take steps not to make “claims to truth, by clarifying the contexts and conditions of our interpretations and by making sure that we do not overreach the bounds of either reason or possibility” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 19). In other words, critical imagination is what a researcher uses to speculate about the life of the subject that isn’t explicitly documented. But, care must be taken to do this responsibly, so that we try to see life from the subject’s vantage point and not our own. Critical imagination is imagination grounded in historical evidence and context.

After attempting to look beyond the actual documents to the lives of the women who wrote them, strategic contemplation comes into the research. Strategic contemplation is the act of deliberately “taking the time, space, and resources to think about, through, and around our work” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 21). This approach is most useful when the source material of study is limited, as is frequent when studying women’s historiographic practices. Essentially, strategic contemplation is taking the time to really study and analyze the sources, using critical imagination to fill in the gaps, and to consider why those gaps are there in the first place.
Strategic contemplation is the researcher serving as both witness to these women’s lives, and conduit to the reclamation of their work.

Finally, Royster and Kirsch (2012) advocate using social circulation to explain how the “overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified from one generation to the next and can lead to changed rhetorical practices” (p. 23). The Thursday Conversational Club has the potential to be an excellent example of social circulation as several generations of club members are represented in the body of rhetorical material available to study. Social circulation also requires taking the context of the subject’s life into account. Of particular interest to this project, social circulation aims “to disrupt the public-private divide by suggesting a more fully textured sense of what it means to place these women in social space, rather than private space or public space” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 24).

While women’s study clubs like the Thursday Conversational Club were not organized to be only “social,” the community of the club was neither public nor private and thus falls into the divide suggested by Royster and Kirsch. Social circulation should take into account the groups in which women lived: the “social circles within which they have functioned and continue to function as rhetorical agents” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 24). Social circulation spans time and sometimes even geography so that we can see how traditions and goals are passed on from one generation to the next.

Taken together, critical imagination, strategic contemplation, and social circulation form a method of inquiry for examining archival rhetorical practices. Therefore, fully admitting my own interest and bias as a member of the Thursday Conversational Club, I propose to use Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) inquiry model to analyze selected archived minutes and programs over an 80-year span, looking first for evidence that the TCC follows the global trends of the
women’s study club movement in valuing education, philanthropy, and political activity. Additionally, the sample of feminist rhetoric from the Thursday Conversational Club has the potential to add to the historiography of women, and to explore both the ideas of rhetoric building community and the collaborative efforts of the clubwomen.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Assumptions and Research Questions

As noted in the Methodology section of Chapter 2, new examples of feminist rhetoric are regularly identified. Glenn and Enoch (2010) specifically suggest finding archives that are out of the usual scope of rhetorical academia: “...archives that don’t immediately promise insights into the practices or histories of our field” (p. 17). Following Glenn and Enoch’s (2010) suggestion to find examples of feminist rhetoric and women’s historiography in unusual places, the belief that the women’s study club movement in the United States is an underdeveloped example of these writing practices opened the door to a study on the minutes of one such club. The purpose of this study is to discover if the writings of this particular club followed the global trends of women’s study clubs most documented in the literature, while also serving as an example of feminist rhetoric and women’s historiography.

One of the assumptions of this study is that there is no set hierarchical value placed on one women’s club over another. The club chosen for the study, The Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio, is one of many that exists in that city alone and should be considered only as a representative sample. Additionally, the assumption was made that information recorded in the minutes of The Thursday Conversational Club is only as historically accurate as can be assumed from the context of the writings, meaning that the information is deemed to be “true” but only in the terms that these are minutes of a club and were not meant for outside review or publication. Finally, there was the assumption that not every activity, discussion, or event was recorded in the minutes of the club; therefore, the minutes contain most of the club activity, but not all of it.
With these assumptions, The Thursday Conversational Club has a long enough history and an adequate number of preserved records for a study. This study investigates how this particular club confirmed the three foci common to other women’s study clubs and for evidence of language that shows that the club was used to build both community and collaboration. Specifically, the research questions guiding this study are as follows: 1) how does the Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio fit into the goals of the larger movement of women’s clubs in the United States?; 2) how do these minutes serve as a rhetorical practice within women’s historiographies?; and 3) what rhetorical evidence is there in the minutes and programs that illustrate that this club functioned as a community, with collaborative efforts, and in terms of social circulation?

**Terminology**

This study is predicated on the understanding of the vocabulary used to identify both the subject and the terms studied. For the purposes of the study, I offer the following definitions:

*Club year* \(^5\) – A club year is from October through May. Therefore, the club year 1942 contains the months of October, November, and December 1942, and January, February, March, April, and May 1943.

*Philanthropy* – The term, “philanthropy,” indicates instances where the club or club members are noted to have donated money or goods, or volunteered time or service to individuals or organizations *outside* of the club.

*Learning/Study* – The terms “learning” and “study” are used interchangeably to denote the club practice of having a formal educational program at most meetings. Programs are frequently led by club members.

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\(^5\) A “Club Year” is the designation of the Thursday Conversational Club, not the author. This timeframe for a “year’s” worth of meetings has been consistent since the inception of the club.
**Political Activity** – The term, “political activity,” is used to denote instances where the club or club members participate in politics, have programs or discussion about current political events, have programs or discussions that deal with civic housekeeping, or engage in membership of larger organizations.

**Civic Housekeeping** – The term, “civic housekeeping,” identifies instances where the club or club members engage in activities that promote the welfare of their community or its citizens. Frequently, this term may coincide with philanthropy, though only in that the acts benefit the community as a whole and not organizations or individuals.

**Self-Philanthropy** – The term, “self-philanthropy,” is used to identify notations where the club members sent flowers, cards, or showed other types of care for members inside of the Thursday Conversational Club.

**The Study**

Using Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) inquiry model defined in the methodology section of Chapter 2 as a guide for examining the archived materials, a study of selected examples was undertaken. The archived minutes, and additional materials relating to club activities, including programs, photographs, obituaries, and other papers, are housed at the Hancock Historical Museum in Findlay, Ohio. However, the Thursday Conversational Club is still active in 2017, therefore, more recent club materials, including the current secretary’s journal (housing minutes from 1998 on) are not a part of the archive, but are kept by club members. The minutes in the archive are hand-written by the club secretary for the given club year, into bound journals. Each journal contains several years’ worth of club minutes. In order to have a reasonable sample size, eight years of minutes were analyzed: club years 1922, 1932, 1942, 1952, 1962, 1972, 1982, and 1992, or one per decade from the 1920s through the 1990s. These club years were chosen based
on availability (not every year is present in the archive) and to make a sample size that encompasses a large timeframe, without having two years too close together.

After choosing years to study, each sample was examined using Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) concepts of strategic contemplation, critical imagination, and social circulation. In terms of strategic contemplation, Royster and Kirsch (2012) define this as the act of deliberately “taking the time, space, and resources to think about, through, and around our work” (p. 21). In other words, strategic contemplation includes viewing the minutes where they are today, which is archived in the Hancock Historical Museum. Being able to see the historic documents today means that a researcher must go to the museum and view and interact with the artifacts there. Each club year’s minutes were examined as a whole prior to noting any instances of philanthropy, study, or political activity, with special consideration given to the timeframe of each sample, and personal notations about members. All information gleaned from the minutes was transcribed, either electronically or by hand, into separate documents. Strategic contemplation means that the researcher recognizes that these documents exist in a special place, and time and resources must be used to study them.

Moving beyond the idea of strategic contemplation, the minutes were examined through the lens of critical imagination. Royster and Kirsch (2012) consider critical imagination as a tool a researcher uses to speculate about the life of the subject that isn’t explicitly documented. For example, when reading the minutes for the year 1942, no mention was made of the United States’ involvement in World War II, but through critical imagination, I used my own knowledge of history to fill in the gap to understand that was written most likely had to do with the war effort. However, a researcher must take steps not to make “claims to truth, by clarifying the contexts and conditions of our interpretations and by making sure that we do not overreach the
bounds of either reason or possibility” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 19). In other words, while I can posit that the women were involved in the war effort, I can’t make assumptions as to their bias or motivations. The concept of critical imagination was crucial in evaluating the historical documents, as either certain assumptions were made or additional research was done to place club events, and club members, accurately in historical context. Critical imagination consists of “putting yourself into their shoes” in order to develop the fullest picture possible.

Finally, the minutes were examined in terms of social circulation. Royster and Kirsch (2012) define social circulation as “overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified from one generation to the next and can lead to changed rhetorical practices” (p. 23). Social circulation pertains to the longevity of the club, and the custom of using terms such as “annual” to note a reoccurring event, rather than describing it in detail every year. Social circulation is critical in evaluating the material and in answering the research question of how the club functioned collaboratively, as a community, through decades of club membership. Social circulation illustrates how the club members do not have to start from the beginning at each meeting, but rather have set parameters and social constructs that are continuously followed at each meeting. Therefore, the minutes were examined for evidence of how the club repeats certain events, how activities were designated to members, and how the members recorded their activities as being “...in social space, rather than private space or public space” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 24).

After examining each of the eight club years’ worth of minutes through the lens of Royster and Kirsch’s guide for examining examples of feminist rhetoric, the number of instances where philanthropy, study or learning, and political activity (as previously defined) occurred was documented, in order to illustrate that the Thursday Conversational Club is a common example
of a typical women’s study club. Through these quantitative notations, further qualitative analysis was performed to determine how the club’s written rhetorical practices illustrate that the body of the archived materials are an example of feminist historiography and that written rhetoric helped the club to function as a collaborative community, over many years of membership.

To record the instances of learning/study, philanthropy, and political activity noted in the minutes, I devised a code for each, and made a template for each year in the study where I could use tally marks for each mention of the focal points. The code for learning/study was “L/S,” the code for philanthropy was “P,” the code for political activity (and instances of civic housekeeping), was “P/CH.” Additionally, I noted some specifics on the template sheet for each year if it seemed like those would be relevant to my study. For example, if the paper or program at an individual meeting was named, I included that, with the date, under the section for “L/S.”

I quickly found evidence of an unexpected focal point, which I titled “self-philanthropy” and labeled as “S/P” on my modified template sheets. I also added notes to this section to aid in the development of my analysis. The coded templates for each year became the basis of the quantitative data in the study, and served as a guide for information used in the qualitative analysis. Finally, I pulled many direct quotes from the sample to use in my rhetorical analysis.

Limitations

Obviously, the minutes contain more information about activities and events than those that fall under the three categories used to collect data. However, as those categories were well-documented as being “standard” for women’s study clubs, the primary analysis was conducted using only those terms, and only as those terms were defined above. Other information noted in
the minutes, such as marriages, births, deaths of members, food served, locations of meetings, treasury reports, etc., are noted only if they coincide with one of the main research categories.

Secondly, the Thursday Conversational Club was founded in 1893 and is still holding meetings in 2017. Therefore, not every set of minutes was examined due to the sheer volume of material available. A choice was made to look at eight decades and pick only one year from each of those decades. Some years’ minutes are missing from the archive, so the sample set is based on the number of consecutive decades available for study (eight decades total).

Finally, the recorded minutes are only one artifact from the club. Unless additional artifacts were physically pasted or otherwise included in the minutes, no information was gleaned from the photographs, copies of papers and programs, or other written material included in the archive. Additionally, I was not personally a member of the club for any of the years sampled, nor did I interview any other member who might have historical memory of events recorded in the minutes studied. Only the material included in the club secretary’s journal of minutes is used for the study.

Findings

Overall Impressions

Writings by eight different women spanning a timeframe that encompasses most of the 20th century cannot be easily sorted into tables and quantitative data. While the Thursday Conversational Club certainly seems to fit in as a member of the women’s study club movement in America, simply checking for examples of common activities like philanthropy, a learning/study component, and political activity is only part of a much larger story. However, these three elements do form points on which to focus a broader rhetorical analysis of the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club. Before exploring writing specific to philanthropy,
learning/study, or political activity, however, some general observations about the body of work comprising the minutes is necessary.

The minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club are held by the Hancock Historical Museum in Findlay, Ohio. This archive also holds other documents and memorabilia of the club; the minutes are in bound books, stored in large cardboard museum boxes. While the guidelines for membership were not found in the sample years of the study, the archive contains the charter documents of the club, which outlines officer positions and the process for membership. Membership in the Thursday Conversational Club is by invitation; current members nominate and vote on proposed members. The club membership numbers fluctuate throughout the study, but the club consistently elects a slate of officers, including a secretary. Each journal book holds several club years’ worth of minutes, therefore each sample club year was paginated separately for reference during the study due to the large total number of pages in each journal. The secretary of the club enters the minutes of each meeting into the book by hand, using ink. The duty of the office of secretary is to record club happenings and practices that will be beneficial for future club members to know. Although the secretary is the author of the minutes, she is acting as a representative of her office and not as an individual. As secretary is a position held for the full club year, the same person records each year’s worth of minutes, unless the secretary could not fulfill her duties for one or more entries. Therefore, the secretary can be considered the author of the minutes, and the sample set contains eight authors/secretaries.

The genre of club minutes lends itself to certain rhetorical practices and patterns: notations of date and location, members present, club business, and notes on other activities. Each of the samples falls into this pattern, but there are some indications of individuality among the different Secretaries. Some years’ entries are sparse and concise, while others have more
details and include quotes of actual conversation. Some of the secretaries are humorous, while others try to avoid personalization. It can be assumed that these rhetorical choices were left up to the individual author. The names of the secretaries used in the study are listed in Table 1 (names are presented as they are written in the minutes).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Club Year</th>
<th>Secretary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Carrie Wetherald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Mary Lea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Gretchen K. Sherk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Jean M. Elsea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Margaret Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Mrs. William Slough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Mrs. Fred Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Peggy Lyon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. *Names of the secretaries in the sample*

One important aspect of the data is that the club changed meeting practices during the timeframe of the sample set. While the club originally met every two weeks, sometime between 1942 and 1952 the club switched to monthly meetings. This obviously has ramifications on the amount of material in the minutes. Another aspect of the minutes that must be discussed prior to any analysis is the use of club governing guidelines. The Thursday Conversational Club was originally organized under the guidelines of *Parliamentary Usage for Clubs* by Emma A. Fox, but by 1922, the first year in the study sample, the club used *Roberts Rules of Order*. Using *Roberts Rules of Order* to guide the club meetings leads to certain language use in the minutes as club business is brought forth to the membership, discussed, and voted on.

A third integral concept about club minutes is the idea of audience. Reading through the decades of records begs the question: for whom were these records kept? The most obvious answer is that each club year’s minutes were recorded so that the subsequent years’ members had a record of past activity to use as a guide for future activity. Before being archived, the club
secretaries keep the bound books of minutes, and thus recent additions are available to current members at each meeting. There is no evidence that the minutes were ever meant to be read by an outside audience, but there are elements that illustrate the writers had some idea that these documents also served as a record of the club’s place in a greater historical picture. The idea of an audience lends itself to certain rhetorical practices, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Following along with the idea of audience is the concept of purpose. As noted above, the purpose of club minutes in general is to provide future members with an account of past club activity. The Thursday Conversational Club follows that formula, but there are frequently additions in terms of specific notations about the program of the day that go beyond merely an account of what happened in the meeting. The addition of added notes or comments on more global topics may be reflective of the purpose of the women’s study club in general – to broaden the educational horizons of women or to illustrate the topic of the meeting in a context outside of the club. These additional comments are discussed further in Chapter 4.

**Quantitative Findings**

In keeping with the identified trends common to women’s study clubs like the Thursday Conversational Clubs, and using the terms philanthropy, learning/study, and politics as defined above, the number of mentions each term received within the sample set is noted in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Learning/Study</th>
<th>Philanthropy</th>
<th>Political Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952**</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*During club year 1942, presumably due to World War II, the club suspended most regular meeting behaviors in order to volunteer for the Red Cross.

**Meetings were held every other week from club years 1922-1942 and monthly from 1952 on.
Table 2. *Table of quantitative data*

Thus, a learning/study component is noted a total of 66 times over the eight sample club years; philanthropy is noted 53 times; and political activity is noted 15 times. An unexpected finding in the study, not illustrated in the table, was the number of times the club recorded activity routed in the idea that the club was a community – a group of friends who cared for one another. Examples of this “self-philanthropy” include sending flowers or cards to members who are ill, writing memorials for deceased members, and otherwise giving of time or goods to members. There were approximately 26 notations of such behavior in the eight sample club years, though an exact number is difficult to obtain due to the repetitive nature of this “self-philanthropy” and the fact that some mentions are only part of the treasurer’s report. After counting the instances of quantitative data, the remainder of the material pulled from the study sample was used for qualitative analysis.

**Qualitative Findings**

Much of the qualitative analysis comes from the specific language used to describe the instances of philanthropy, study/learning, and political activity, and how this language illustrates that the minutes detail the club’s community and its collaborative efforts. As there are eight year’s worth of meetings in this sample study, only quotes that support the research questions were pulled to use for analysis, and not every representative sample was used. Therefore, the language in the quotes focuses mainly on learning/study, philanthropy, political activity, or self-philanthropy, though some additional samples were investigated to discuss historical information or specific events. This language is analyzed and discussed in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 regarding the women’s study club movement in the United States showed that the majority of the clubs focused on three goals: a learning/study component, philanthropy, and political activity. While the specifics of each of these goals varied within clubs, those three focal points were consistent among clubs that began in the mid- to late-19th century and continued into the 20th and 21st centuries. As the quantitative data in Chapter 3 showed, the Thursday Conversational Club’s minutes reflect this particular club follows the trends of the literature. Using those three focal points as a guide, I now analyze and discuss how the rhetoric used in the minutes regarding learning/study, philanthropy, and political activity also illustrate how these minutes and programs show that the club functioned as a community, with collaborative efforts, and in terms of social circulation; and how these documents also serve as a rhetorical practice within women’s historiographies.

Section A – How do notations of learning/study, philanthropy, and political activity provide rhetorical evidence of community, collaboration, and social circulation?

As illustrated in Chapter 3, the Thursday Conversational Club’s minutes do provide written evidence that the club participated in learning/study, philanthropy, and political activity, all of which are hallmarks of the many women’s clubs throughout the United States. Learning/study, philanthropy, and political activity were valued enough by the club to be included many times in the written accounts of club happenings. Here, the Thursday Conversational Club follows the common trends of women’s study clubs set out in Chapter 2 of the study. However, the rhetorical choice by each secretary to include mentions of these elements not only gives a glimpse into what activities the club viewed as important enough to document, but through these three topics, readers can glimpse the timeframe in which the
minutes were written, and see how the club worked as a community. The collaborative work of
the eight secretaries, and of various other club members who filled in pro tem, through their
documentation of just these three areas, make the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club
an important piece of the larger puzzle of women’s rhetoric.

The largest number of mentions was of the club devoting some part of the meeting to the
learning/study component. As this educational aspect has been shown to be the impetus for these
women’s study clubs to exist, and, as noted by Costello (2015), the clubs that remain active into
the 21st century are those which continue to focus on shared educational opportunities, the fact
that the Thursday Conversational Club has kept a focus on an educational component to each
meeting is proof that this particular club is a women’s study club.

The learning/study element for the Thursday Conversational Club comes in the form of a
set “program” at meetings. After the business meeting is concluded, the “program of the day” is
presented. Club programs were usually prepared for and presented by members, though there
were occasional guest speakers. Rhetorical choices in the descriptions of the programs illustrate
the importance placed on this part of the club meetings, and the gratitude the members express to
those presenting information. Consider this notation from March 22, 1923:

At this time, Mrs. O’Brien presented Mrs. Carpenter who read the paper of the afternoon
on the radio-telephone. This very up to date subject is of keenest interest to everyone and
the paper was listened to with intense pleasure. There are new developments every day
and Mrs. Carpenter presented in her paper the newest and most interesting of these.

(Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1922-23, p. 16)

From this example the reader knows that a member prepared a “paper,” presumably by
researching the topic and organizing the information in a way to be orally presented to the group.
The secretary could have left the notation there, but instead continues further, using language like “keenest” and “intense pleasure” to show how the material was received gratefully and with interest by the membership. Finally, the secretary concluded the entry with a focus on “new developments,” which indicates that the club members are interested in learning more about new inventions.

Another example of the import placed on the club’s programs comes from the April 7, 1953 meeting. At this meeting, there was an addition to the reading of the paper:

The meeting was then turned over to Mrs. George Arnold, who read a most interesting paper on the Life and Works of Degas. Throughout the reading of the paper, live tableaux depicting the artist’s paintings were shown ... At the conclusion of this delightful program, tea was served with Mrs. James Child, Jr. and Mrs. Fred Elsea, Jr. pouring

(Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1952-53, p. 15).

The secretary again uses affirming language such as “interesting” and “delightful” to express both the priority given these programs, and the appreciation of the members for them. Members who plan or participate in a program are always noted by name in the program. It is the complimentary language describing the program, however, that really indicates how much value was placed on the educational aspect of the club meetings; notes on the treasury report, for example, are never referred to as “delightful” or “interesting.” Additionally, the complimentary language is juxtaposed against the more formal format of the minutes, where the meeting agenda is set according to Roberts Rules of Order. Thus, the inclusion of such wording seems to be a conscious choice on the part of each secretary.

The learning/study aspect is not limited to members merely listening to the program. Instead, the program frequently sparks continued conversation, as noted in this entry from
January 11, 1923: “They read from the play ‘DeClassee’ by Joe Atkins and played by Ethel Barrymore. The reading was listened to with great enjoyment and afterward a lively discussion of the play followed” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1922-23, p. 10). This entry describes the program consisting of members reading aloud from a popular play, as part of a program on dramatic arts. However, the key rhetorical term in this passage is “a lively discussion of the play followed.” Some notation of discussion is found frequently after the description of a program, according to the minutes. The deliberate choice of each secretary’s inclusion of these words indicate the importance the club placed on both the educational program, and the continued discussion among members. If the idea of a learning/study club was to broaden the horizons of the women attending, a discussion of the educational program is a way of furthering that education through the opinions of the members. The term “lively discussion” also reflects the aspect of community present in the minutes, as those who are not familiar with each other rarely engage in such conversation. Using “lively” implies that the conversation was animated and that many of the members participated. Thus, the learning/study piece of the minutes provides many examples of community.

Discussion is also a part of social circulation. The verbal communication that occurred at each meeting could not be transposed word for word into the minutes for lack of time and space. Therefore, the secretary is charged with recording enough information so that subsequent meetings can accomplish set tasks and so that future members have an idea of when and why certain traditions or goals were set. The social, or verbal, aspect is where details are developed and the nature of a women’s learning club is one that ensures that “old” members are present to instruct “young” members about the gaps in what is written in the minutes.
Social circulation also refers to the circulation of ideas both among the members of the club and in their greater community. While a reader cannot know exactly what was said after these programs were given, using both strategic contemplation and critical imagination, one can assume that the topics continued beyond the club meetings as women mentioned these programs to their families and friends outside the club membership. The Thursday Conversational Club, though it has a limited membership, does not exist in a vacuum. It is reasonable to assume that ideas presented in the club’s programs circulated throughout the social circle the members inhabited, and possibly even beyond that. Therefore, the minutes can be viewed as the primary source for researchers looking to see what sorts of topics women were interested in, and sharing with their communities, at specific points in time.

The passage of time over the course of the samples in the study creates another interesting find. While each meeting’s program is meant to be distinct, there is bound to be some repetition of subject matter within a club that spans three centuries. This notation of such program repetition by the secretary is another example of how the concept of social circulation (defined in Chapter 2) is evident in this body of written work. For example, on November 10, 1932, club secretary Mary Lea recorded: “Miss Mitchell thought it would be of interest to the younger members of the club to know that in years gone by, the Thursday Conversational Club devoted an entire year, instead of one afternoon, to painting – how times have changed!” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1932-33, p. 10). This notation follows the description of that day’s program, which was on American Paintings. In this sentence, not only is the passage of time and how it has affected club practices discussed, but also the idea of making sure that each generation is aware of the change without having to go back and read the entire club history. The writing down of this specific sentence, which was most likely spoken aloud at the
meeting, illustrates to the reader the “textured sense of what it means to place these women in social space, rather than private space or public space” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 24). The very fact that the club members were social with each other – meaning that they were meeting as a community with shared goals and ideas – lends itself to a set of rhetorical practices that is not “public” or “private” but instead meant to help ensure the continued existence of the group. In order for that to happen, reflection upon the past deeds is placed in the record of present deeds. Thus, these minutes help to guarantee the survival and continuity of the club.

Sometimes the learning/study element combines with another one of the recognized goals of women’s study clubs found in the Thursday Conversational Club. On October 2, 1952, the minutes indicate this as the program for the day: “Dr. Aletha Herwig was the speaker for the afternoon. Under the title ‘The Fuse of the Bomb,’ Dr. Herwig discussed the international crisis arising from the racial problems in South Africa” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1952-53, p. 4) In the “lively discussion” that followed the presentation of this paper, members conversed about world political activity. Using critical imagination to fill in the gaps in the minutes, the reader can assume this discussion included apartheid and race relations. Thus, the learning/study piece coincided with politics and political activity, as indicated through the rhetorical choices of the secretary.

Continuing with the goals of the broader women’s club movement in the United States, the second most common element recorded in the study was the club’s philanthropic activity. As defined in the methodology chapter, philanthropy includes instances where the club as a whole, or club members acting as agents of the club, have donated money or goods, or volunteered time or service to individuals or organizations outside of the club. While there are fewer notations about philanthropy than learning/study, this piece is the most consistent over the eight decades
spanned in the study – not a single year goes by without philanthropic activity by the club. In fact, the club focused on philanthropic activity solely during the 1942-43 club year, as noted in the first meeting on October 15, 1942:

The club decided to disperse with their regular programmed meetings for the coming year and to make surgical dressings for the Red Cross. The members are asked to work during the morning and meet at one oclock [sic] for lunch or to come for lunch at one and work during the afternoon or both. There will be a short business meeting during the luncheon hour. (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1942-43, p. 1)

Of course, common knowledge of United States history tells us that this timeframe fell in the middle of World War II, but it is the written evidence provided by the club secretary that gives readers in the 21st century an idea as to what women in Findlay, Ohio were doing as their part for the war effort. This entry also serves the added purpose of illustrating that the Thursday Conversational Club felt that during this particular time, their volunteer efforts to be so important as to supersede all other club activity. There was no other year in the study sample where the club suspended the learning/study component of the club for even one meeting. Finally, this entry also shows the collaborative efforts of club members to work toward a common goal of philanthropy, which is more evidence that the Thursday Conversational Club is an example of a typical women’s study club.

Global war aside, there is much rhetorical evidence indicating that philanthropy was an integral part of the Thursday Conversational Club throughout the years of the study and that the philanthropic efforts of the club reflected the community collaboration of club members. For example, in December 1932, the secretary recorded two distinct philanthropic efforts:
A report of the Charity Committee was given by Mrs. Donnell. Six dollars and thirty-three cents ($6.33) was spent for groceries for the Johns family. Shoes were bought for one of the boys. The taxes will be paid from the money given Mrs. Johns. Twenty-eight dollars and eight cents ($28.08) was the total amount given Mrs. Johns.

A discussion followed as to the wish of the club in contributing to the filling of the baskets for the needy families. It was moved, seconded and approved that each member of the club bring to Miss Jones’s home one pound of some kind of food as a contribution for the Central Xmas Basket Committee. Miss Turley, one of the guests, explained the meaning of the “Pound Baskets.” Miss Jones offered to assemble the basket and label it in the name of the Thursday Conversational Club. (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1932-33, p. 16)

This entry stands out for several reasons. First, reading it through in its entirety gives the reader a glimpse into life for those living in Findlay, Ohio during the Great Depression. $28.08 does not seem a great sum today, but in those times, it was enough of a donation that a family could pay taxes, and purchase shoes and groceries. Secondly, the secretary again mentions “discussion” among the club members. This indicates the collaborative efforts of the club to work together in both spirit (deciding what to do) and fact (contributing items to make one basket). The ideas of consensus and compromise are examples of how the club functions as a discourse community, as does the notation that the finished basket would be labeled in the name of the club indicates the members considered the community of the club to have precedent over the individual members. In all, this short writing reveals much about the women members of the Thursday Conversational Club in 1932, none of which would be evident without the rhetorical choices made by the secretary in recording these activities.
Some of the philanthropic activity of the club also illustrates the concept of social circulation. In November 1942, this short sentence appeared: “It was voted to make an assessment of $1.00 for our Xmas gifts” (Thursday Conversational Club, 1942-1943, p. 4). There was no other explanation surrounding this sentence, so the reader can infer that a similar assessment takes place every year, and therefore, the secretary does not need to document it further. The “social” aspect of the club (members talking with one another) would ensure that any new member is brought up to date on these sorts of practices, which means that only specific or unusual notations need to be recorded in the minutes. The specific notation about what became of the “Xmas” gift assessment came in the December 10, 1942, minutes, along with mention of additional philanthropic activity:

A discussion followed as to where our money should go this year. Miss Blackford moved that the money be given to the Associated Charities.

The members devoted the rest of the afternoon to the making of Soldier’s Kits and listening to Mrs. Westfall read a delightful story about Christmas in a small town.

(Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1942-43, pp. 4-5)

Thus, the reader and future club members know that in 1942 the Christmas donation collected from members went to the Associated Charities, following a discussion among the members. The social aspect of club membership both ensures members stay up-to-date and limits the amount the secretaries need to include in the minutes, though the minutes are the written evidence that the philanthropic activity occurred.

Some of the philanthropic activity is noted only by mention of specific committees. In 1922, 1932, and 1952, for example, the minutes of the first meeting of the club year detailed which members would be serving on the “Charity Committee.” On January 3, 1963, the
secretary, Margaret Thomas, records, “The Christmas Committee final report was presented by Mrs. Robert Gore who told of the different girls who were given clothing and toilet articles” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1962-63, p. 12). Minutes from the November 4, 1982, meeting also mention $100 given to the Christmas Committee for “needy families” and the December 3, 1992, minutes records $100 from the Christmas Committee, plus $72 in individual donations from members was given to a local shelter. Perhaps the “Charity Committee” eventually gave way to a “Christmas Committee,” as the minutes indicate that the club gradually focused their philanthropic activity around the Christmas holiday. These gaps in the records are examples of how a researcher must use a critical imagination to make guesses as to the motives and outcomes, but recognize that supposition about undocumented elements can never be verified. Once again, however, these gaps also illustrate the concept of social circulation – the idea that the club existed and continues to exist in a social circle where conversation and face-to-face interaction can take the place of written documentation. As Royster and Kirsch (2012) note, social circulation “can help us see how traditions are carried on, changed, reinvented, and reused when they pass from one generation to the next” (p. 101). As long as some membership is retained from year to year, there is always someone to explain club practices to new members. Therefore, the secretary has some discretion in deciding what specific elements to record in terms of the club’s philanthropic activity.

The final focal point for analysis examined in the study is politics, or political activity. With only 15 mentions in the eight samples, political activity is not as prevalent in the Thursday Conversational Club as it was expected to be based on the literature reviewed on the women’s study club movement in Chapter 2. Though the general trends about women’s study clubs indicate that many such clubs are politically active, the Thursday Conversational Club is limited
to activities that fall more into the range of “civic housekeeping” or ones that are political only in that they relate to a larger organization.

Many times, instances of political activity were combined with philanthropic acts. For example, in the November 3, 1922, minutes, secretary Carrie Wetherald records:

Mrs. Spencer presented a communication from Mrs. Kramer, Pres. Federation of Clubs to the effect that the Federation wished to work this year to do one of three things and wished an expression from our club as to which we would be most interested in. Namely, first to pay one tuition at the college for some deserving young person, either an arts course $75, or a business course $125, second to install a comfort station creditable to the city and county, third to work for a new library. A motion was carried to endorse a new house for library, altho [sic] the members expressed themselves willing to cooperate with Federation in any program they wish to carry out. (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1922-23, p. 2)

This passage is interesting for two reasons. The political activity mentioned is the fact that the Thursday Conversational Club itself held membership in a larger “Federation of Clubs.” This does not appear to be the GFWC, a national organization mentioned in Chapter 2, but most likely a local or state Federation of women’s clubs. Many entries in the archived minutes make mention of what seem to be two distinct “Federations” – perhaps one is the national organization and one is a state or local organization? The samples in the study do not provide the answer, but the Thursday Conversational Club held membership in both and made mention of paying dues, sending delegates to meetings, and donating time or funds to these broader organizations, as noted above. Minutes from the 1922, 1932, 1942, and 1952 club years all bear mention of paying dues to “Federation,” sometimes multiple times within club year, which is also indicative
of the Thursday Conversational Club belonging to at least two separate organizations. After 1952, there is no mention of membership in any “Federation.”

Another aspect of political activity via civic housekeeping is also found in the November 22, 1922 entry. Two of the options on which to spend collected funds are for the greater Findlay Community: a “comfort station” (using critical imagination and some additional research, one can assume this is a euphemism for a public restroom at the local train station as this term was typical for the era) and a “new library.” Both of these are locations that benefit the city of Findlay as whole. Both are also examples of how the Thursday Conversational Club follows the national trends set forth about women’s study clubs in using the collaborative efforts of their own organization, and of larger congresses of women’s clubs, to advance projects that benefit society and not only the club’s own educational efforts, as noted in Chapter 2 by Taggert (2006), Clark and Gower (2015), Watson (1994), and Baker (2001).

The fact that the club members voted to donate funds to a library in 1922 is just the beginning of the relationship between the Thursday Conversational Club and libraries. This focus on the local and national library system, illustrates how the club members were eager to be involved in what they believed to be an integral part of society – a free, public library system. On February 20, 1953, the minutes reflect, “It was moved and seconded that the Club pay $5.00 dues to the American Library Foundation” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1952-53, p. 10). This passage shows that the club, as a community of women, organized a membership to a national organization promoting libraries. It is intriguing that the club purchased this membership, instead of individual members purchasing their own (though perhaps individuals also became members). This small sentence in the minutes shows a club commitment to libraries through a national organization.
There are a few other examples of political activity through civic housekeeping found spread throughout the samples of the study. In 1942, during World War II, club members were designated to sell War Bonds at certain times and places. In October 1962, the Committee for Findlay’s Sesquicentennial Activities approached the Thursday Conversational Club to ask for assistance in performing duties and assisting with projects relating to that city-wide event. Both of these examples are only briefly mentioned in the minutes, but the mere fact that they were recorded at all indicates that these sorts of activities were important to the club.

Other examples of political activity are more specific to the club itself. The club is governed by a Constitution and Articles of Agreement and meetings are run according to Roberts Rules of Order. In club year 1982, notations were made in several months’ minutes that the club was considering amendments to the constitution and this note was made on April 7, 1983:

The President then read the proposed constitutional changes and after discussion the membership voted in favor of these changes, 23 yes to 1 no. The policy proposals were then read and distributed. Each policy proposal was discussed individually. (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1982-83, p. 10).

The minutes indicate that a copy of the “new Articles of Agreement is attached.” There was a folded copy of Articles of Agreement in the back of the journal housing these minutes, but no date to denote when it was written. Also in 1982, the club applied for and received a Federal Tax Number, which further solidifies the club as a registered and “official” entity. These records show that the Thursday Conversational Club considered itself to be a formal organization, bound by its constitution, and under the laws of the United States.

However, what is more interesting in regards to the Thursday Conversational Club and political activity is all that is missing from the minutes. While there are a few examples, noted
above, politics was not as noticeable a priority for this club as the trends found in Chapter 2 predicted. In the eight years’ worth of minutes used in the study, only 15 examples of any political activity are evident, and many of those are tied to philanthropic events. There is no mention of the club advocating women’s suffrage, equal rights for women, local or national elections, or any of the other many associations to politics. Perhaps this is because the first year in the study takes place after the passage of the 19th Amendment and the sample years do not fall during a presidential election year. Or perhaps the club members were just not as interested in politics as many other women’s study clubs were documented to be. Instead, the club focused more heavily on self-education through the club programs and philanthropic efforts to benefit individuals, charitable, and other organizations.

Sometimes, a mention of politics can be found in the records of one of those endeavors, as in this humorous note from February 3, 1983, when the program of the day featured foreign exchange students from Finland, Germany and Austria studying at Findlay High School:

They told about their own families and countries and discussed political organizations for youth that are part of political parties. They commented on food, exercise, drugs, the surprising conservative character of liberal America and the lack of school spirit in European schools. (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1982-83, p. )

A “lively discussion” followed this program. It cannot be determined if the discussion included political differences between the United States and the students’ home countries or was more general in nature. However, while the Thursday Conversational Club does not seem to include as much emphasis on politics as other women’s study clubs, the fact that the secretary, Mrs. Fred Phillips, chose to record this particular notation is suggestive that the members did not shy away from politics when given the opportunity to discuss them. Therefore, while the mentions of
political activity were more limited than learning/study or philanthropy, the minutes do provide enough evidence that the club did engage in some political activity, as is to be expected of a women’s study club.

While there is ample evidence in the minutes that the Thursday Conversational Club had common goals of learning/study, philanthropy, and political activity, in unity with the larger women’s study club movement, these documents also serve as a historical timeframe. This history showcases not only the club itself, but the lives of the women who were members. Therefore, in addition to focusing on the goals described above, some analysis of historical language, whether intentional or not, is necessary.

Section B - How do these minutes serve as a rhetorical practice within women’s historiographies?

The very existence of a group of documents that spans eight decades is evidence of written historical practices. However, the genre of club minutes is limiting in its format. The purpose is to ensure that enough of the activities of the club are documented so that future generations of the club can continue to fulfill the club’s agenda, but not every conversation or activity is set down due to space constraints. The Thursday Conversational Club’s minutes follow the formula common to clubs that use Roberts Rules of Order as their guide for meetings. First, the president or presiding member addresses the congress, then role is called, previous minutes are read, other reports, such as committee reports or treasury reports are read, old business is brought forth for continuation, and new business is brought forth for discussion and action. In the case of the Thursday Conversational Club, the business meeting is then concluded and the program of the day is introduced. The duty of the secretary of the club is to document all
the above information. Typically, the secretary of this particular club also records some notes about the program presented, the location of the meeting, and what refreshments were served.

If we define historiography as a body of historical writings and writing practices, then these minutes are the textbook definition of feminist historiography. Descriptions of current events and new inventions in 1922 have become history simply because they happened almost 100 years ago. Even the vocabulary and physical handwriting used in the minutes can be viewed through the lens of time as being out of step with today’s vocabulary and writing practices, most of which now occur with the aid of technology instead of pen and paper. In addition to the information the secretary must include in the minutes, there are also often literally pieces of history embedded in the text. These rhetorical practices are almost certainly unintentional in terms of recording “history” but now serve to give current readers a glimpse into what the lives of these clubwomen were like in a certain time and place. These historical glimpses can also provide further evidence of the club’s community and collaboration.

While the minutes do not necessarily reflect the circumstances of individual members at any given time, there are clues as to what the Thursday Conversational Club members were dealing with in the years of the study. This entry from October 27, 1932 is especially telling:

The program was in charge of Mrs. Harry Carpenter whose paper entitled “Chasing the Depression Blues” afforded much good food for thought. One could not help having a change of mind for the better after hearing this fine paper. (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1932-33, p. 7).

Here is a direct mention of the Great Depression that was gripping the nation in 1932. While the minutes do not indicate in any way that club membership was struggling with loss of jobs or financial hardship, the topic of the paper for this meeting indicates that the Depression and its
difficulties were a part of life for these women. Especially of interest to the notion of community is the sentence, “One could not help having a change of mind for the better after hearing this fine paper.” The Great Depression was a common financial crisis – a tie to bind the club members together – and that this club functioned as a community working together to make it through the hard times, again illustrating the ideas of community and collaboration even in discussing the current events of 1932.

Other mentions of history rely on the use of critical imagination on the part of the reader. As previously discussed, the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club do not explicitly mention World War II, but through general historical knowledge, a reader can guess that any work making surgical bandages or “soldier’s kits,” as noted in the minutes for club year 1942 are most likely a part of the war efforts by civilians at home during that conflict. The fact that the Thursday Conversational Club dispersed with almost all of their normal club activity in 1942-43 is another clue that the need for the members’ volunteer efforts was great, as it is the only year in the sample of the study where the members did not hold regular meetings with educational programs. While the War is not mentioned by name, members of the Thursday Conversational Club donating their volunteer efforts and suspending the normal meeting habits is a part of the local historical lore of the Findlay, Ohio, war effort, documented for future generations in these minutes.

While the Great Depression and World War II are both examples of “big” events in history recorded in the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club, there are other, smaller notations to interest modern readers, and add to the historiography of the club and its members. Notations of the club’s activities aren’t limited to only the secretary wrote down in some years in the study. For example, six of the eight meetings of club year 1962, and seven of the eight
meetings of club year 1972, garnered attention in the newspaper. Each newspaper column was cut and pasted in the secretary’s journal after the minutes for those meetings. While the name of the newspaper is missing from these clippings, one clipping has the headline “Club Roundup” above the article, leading readers to assume that reports of local clubs regularly appeared in the local newspapers during the 1960s and 1970s. What is unusual is the apparent frequency of the columns during these years – almost every meeting is documented in some way, which seems to indicate that the column appeared regularly. This shows the importance clubs like the Thursday Conversational Club held in local interest during that particular time and illustrates why these records are an example of feminist historiography.

Some historical references are humorous when compared to more contemporary times, but still serve as a rhetorical example of changes over the long history of the Thursday Conversational Club. Secretary Mrs. Fred Phillips added this to the minutes on December 2, 1982:

“Motion was made by Ivy Schatzel seconded by Mary Alice Brucklacher that we change our savings account at the 1st National Bank to a NOW account at the Diamond Savings and Loan paying 5 ¼% interest and no service charges. Motion carried” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1982-83, p. 7).

Readers in 2017 must indeed use critical imagination to contemplate a time when a savings account earned over 5% interest. However, notations to monetary amounts, whether they be exact examples of financial trends such as this one, or more general ideas about the costs of items in particular years, are all pieces of history that would remain unknown unless the secretaries decided to commit them to the minutes. These minutes offer glimpses into several
aspects of the historical lives of women, even if the authors did not purposefully mean them as such, and thus are a further example of feminist historiography.

One final example in the study of historiographic rhetoric is club year 1992. The 1992-1993 year marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Thursday Conversational Club and the minutes note the year was devoted to programs detailing “Findlay’s History” (though the first mention of the theme by name does not appear until the April meeting minutes). The year began with this program on October 1, 1992:

“Mrs. Hollington introduced Billie Blackford, who gave a most interesting history of our club from its original meeting in 1893 with 22 members to the present day. Following the presentation, Nancy Miltho suggested that the paper be made a part of the minutes. It will be kept in our history file” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1992-93, p. 6).

While the paper was not found in the minutes of the study, and thus its contents are unknown, one must assume that Billie Blackford researched this paper using the club minutes up to that date, therefore using past minutes to gather information for what is now another historical reference. Billie Blackford’s paper, documenting the history of the club, became part of the history of the club, which again illustrates social circulation – the idea that club traditions are recorded so that the club itself continues to exist generation after generation and why these documents are a continuing piece of feminist historiographic rhetoric.

Section C – Community and Collaboration in Self-Philanthropy

While much attention has already been placed in this paper about the ideas of the rhetorical practices serving as a collaborative community, there is one specific, unexpected category that serves as a specific example of how the Thursday Conversational Club fostered a community within its members and that community is evident in the rhetoric of the minutes.
Evident throughout the sample studied for this paper are mentions of “self-philanthropy,” or members of the club giving physical or verbal affirmations, via notes, flowers, memorials, or recognition in the club minutes, to other members of the club. Such activities were mentioned approximately 26 times over the years of the sample study. It is difficult to get an accurate count as some notations are repeats, sometimes the act of caring/community takes place over several months’ worth of minutes in one year, and sometimes the notations are so general that it is difficult to determine the nature of the self-philanthropy.

The most popular expression of self-philanthropy is noted when the club sends a member flowers, due to the fact that the bill for flowers is usually presented to the treasurer for payment at a meeting. For example, this entry from October 19, 1932, notes both a bill to pay for flowers previously sent and a plan to send additional flowers to another member:

The secretary presented a bill of $1.50 for flowers sent to Mrs. Gore. It was moved, seconded and approved that an order be drawn on the to pay this bill. ...The club voted to send flowers to Miss Baker, who has been ill for the past few months. (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1932-33, pp. 3-4)

In this particular example, the secretary recorded that flowers were being sent to Miss Baker because she had been “ill.” However, more frequently the exact reason for the club to send flowers to a member is not specifically mentioned in the minutes. This lack of information as to a reason for flowers being sent only solidifies the concept of community – members did not need a list of reasons, but could apparently simply suggest and vote upon each case, individually.

Sometimes, after voting or suggesting that the club send flowers to a member, the members decided to take another approach, as noted in this entry from October 27, 1932, “After the adjournment of the first club meeting it was decided that the members, instead of sending
flowers, would have a jelly and fruit shower for Miss Baker. This plan was carried out at this meeting” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1932-33, p. 7). This is a very specific note about the care provided by club members to a specific member. As it was noted in the previous meeting’s minutes that Miss Baker had been ill, readers know the exact reason why a “jelly and fruit shower” was given, but readers can’t know if Miss Baker was present at the meeting, or the extent of her illness. However, it is evident from the writings that members were concerned for this particular member and carried out much discussion as to how to best bring comfort to her situation.

Flowers are not the only expressions of self-philanthropy within the club; frequently the minutes will mention a suggestion that the club or individual members send cards to another member. Readers can assume that these cards were sent in sympathy, congratulations, birthdays, or for get well wishes; though specific details are lacking in most cases, occasionally the secretary is more specific: “Mrs. Blackford reminded club members to send cards to Mrs. Moran who is now home from the hospital recuperating” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1982-83, p. 10). As seen here, individual club members are urged to send their own card. It is unknown if the club sent flowers or a card as a unit, though there are other instances where it is noted that a card was sent from the club generally.

Surprisingly, birthday greetings are rarely mentioned and usually reserved for a landmark birthday. In a club like the Thursday Conversational Club where membership is held for life, unless a member moves away or asks to resign for some reason, there are members of all ages. On October 1, 1992, the club members celebrated one member’s birthday in this manner: “Before the meeting was adjourned Marge Thomas was presented with cards from the members celebrating her 90th birthday” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1992-93, p. 6). Using
critical imagination, it is easy to see that these birthday greetings are also a celebration of the member’s long membership in the club, and the reminder that all members are valued.

Occasionally, however, members do resign. A small, but important, rhetorical practice of the Thursday Conversational Club is to record these resignations as part of the official minutes of the club. Here, too, the choice of language is important and shows how the club functioned as a community. For example, at the same meeting where members celebrated the 90th birthday of Marge Thomas, this note appeared in the minutes: “A note from Cora Ward was read telling the members that she can no longer assist at our meetings. She is retiring with regret. Cora has been a faithful and loyal friend to all, and we shall miss her” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1992-93, p. 5). The secretary, Peggy Lyon, used very exact language in this passage that reveals the importance the club places on its membership as individuals within the community. First, the notation begins with the idea that Cora Ward “can no longer assist” the club. This is very different language than saying a member can no longer attend or participate; here the language is clear that a member is assisting, or contributing, to the efforts of the club. Secondly, the retiring member is recognized as an individual who is seen as “faithful and loyal” who will be missed by the community. As noted previously, this sort of language is especially telling when placed in the minutes of the club and compared to more formal accounts typical to minutes following Roberts Rules of Order. The community of the club, via the secretary, felt it important to document permanently how much an individual member would be missed. These are examples of rhetoric that reflects both the significance of the individual personality and the contributions of each individual to the community of the club.

Finally, a very important record of self-philanthropy occurs when a member dies. The minutes in the sample of the study note the Thursday Conversational Club has a specific ritual to
honor members when they pass away. While the death itself is not usually addressed in the minutes, there are several mentions of two distinct rituals observed after a member has died. First, a memorial tribute is written by a committee designated by the president, as noted in this entry from December 2, 1992: “The memorial to long time member Mary Heidtman will be written by her close friends Sara Galbraith and Pauline Phillips” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1992-93, p. 11). While these tributes are not placed within the journals containing the minutes, they are kept in a different location in the archive, so that almost every member of the club has a memorial stored with the club’s records.

Secondly, a book is donated to the public library in memory of the deceased member. This donation reflects both the learning/study focus of the club and its long association with the library system, and illustrates how the club desires to commemorate a member of its own community in a way that will benefit the greater Findlay community. Funds to purchase these memorial books are garnered from the club’s treasury, which is another indication of the importance placed on this tradition: it is a part of the budget. A typical record of this activity is found in the minutes of the October 4, 1962 meeting’s treasurer’s report, “Meg Kirk reported on the library books which have been placed in the Findlay Public Library as memorials and listed the flowers sent to members of the group during the summer” (Thursday Conversational Club Minutes, 1962-63, p. 3). This record does not contain the names of those deceased, nor the titles of the books donated, but instead is a matter-of-fact notation of the continuing collaboration and community within the club.

When viewed in one-year increments, the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club show that the idea self-philanthropy – the small acts of care given by members to members – is obvious, but when the eight-decade sample is viewed as a whole, these notations become a focal
point of the study, along with the focuses of learning/study, philanthropy, and political activity. The rhetorical choices of the secretaries to mention the names of those who write the memorials become more poignant to a reader when one can see how the writer of a memorial tribute becomes the subject of one several decades later. While new members are added almost every year, continuity occurs because the older members are there to ensure that traditions, whether explicitly noted in the minutes or not, are carried on. All of the focal points – learning/study, philanthropy, political activity, and self-philanthropy – show community and collaboration within the club. They also show how social circulation is an integral rhetorical practice in organizations, like the Thursday Conversational Club, where it would be impossible to record every event, activity, and conversation in full. Women’s study clubs owe their continuing existence to both strong organizational goals and good rhetorical record keeping.
CHAPTER V. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

This paper begins by noting that women’s writings are often tied to women’s experiences in the home and community, which is why there aren’t as many examples of historical writings by women for scholars to study: there simply aren’t as many examples available in the published canons. However, feminist rhetoric in the shape of documents such as the minutes of a club like the Thursday Conversational Club are literally hiding in plain sight, waiting to be discovered. These minutes, which are the written records of a social organization, are an important piece of the entire puzzle of feminist rhetoric, and perhaps more than any other genre, reflect that feminist rhetoric is both textual and social, and that both of these elements are equally important. The minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club illustrate the type of “evolutionary relationship” discussed by Royster and Kirsch (2012) wherein “the overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified from one generation to the next and can lead to changed rhetorical practices” (p. 23). As the “social circles” evolve within the club over generations, so does the written rhetoric, in that the minutes reflect only key aspects of the continuing efforts of the club and its members, written in words and phrases designed to spark memory or continued action instead of being a complete and detailed account. It is the social aspect that fills in the gaps left in the minutes.

In more modern times, the term “social” has somehow become synonymous with frivolous, with the implication that a social club is not as important as one with an educational goal or philanthropic purpose. However, Costello (2015) indicates that the women’s study clubs that remain active into the late 20th century and beyond are the ones with both educational and social aspects (p. 343). The very social nature of the Thursday Conversational Club is what fleshes out the written documents to an additional insight of the lives of the clubwomen.
Without a social component, club meetings would not hold the interest of members. It is in the social -- the discussion of club events, activities, and programs -- that the real work of the Thursday Conversational Club happens. The written minutes are where this work is recorded for future generations to see.

Further, in addition to the evidence of the rhetorical practices of the Thursday Conversational Club showing the actions and activities of the club, they are also a body of historical rhetoric. Just as Ritchie and Ronald (2001) note that feminist rhetoric is frequently based on the “immediacy of experience,” these minutes are feminist rhetoric based on singular events (the individual meetings of the Thursday Conversational Club), combined to make a larger whole. While there are frequent segues into recent past experiences and planned future events, the bulk of the written documents are concentrated on what happens in an individual meeting, making these minutes literal snapshots into a particular day in history, where a female author recorded the activities of a group of women. Taken together, the minutes of just this one club create an album of feminist rhetoric that spans three centuries.

The social function of the club also leads to a feeling of community, which is further evidenced in the written minutes. As Zarefsky (2010) notes, “Rhetoric brings a public or community into being” (p. 16). When the “community” is no longer active or as members resign or pass away, the rhetoric left behind serves as proof that these communities existed. This has been generally true since the first human histories were recorded and remains specifically true for the Thursday Conversational Club as each additional club year’s minutes are recorded. These minutes are the rhetorical evidence of the Thursday Conversational Club’s activities, necessary now that the club’s existence is greater than one human’s memory, even though the club is still adding to its own rhetorical history. The social and rhetorical practices are both
integral to the success and longevity of the club; it is doubtful that the Thursday Conversational Club would be here today without either component.

Following the thread from the social rhetorical activities – the discussion that makes up the bulk of the Thursday Conversational Club’s daily events -- to the written minutes that illustrate both the community in the club and the historical value of the documents, these documents as a whole are an excellent example of collaborative rhetoric. In this study, collaboration can be seen in two ways: the collaborative efforts of the group and the collaborative efforts of the secretaries to document the events and activities of the club. The minutes of a long-lived women’s study club, like the Thursday Conversational Club, perfectly embody Lunsford and Ede’s (1990) ideas on the multivocal nature of collaborative work, in that they are examples of many authors (the secretaries) writing one text (p. 240). However, the entire community of the club as a whole would not exist without the collaborative efforts of the members to plan and execute club meetings and programs, which are clearly documented in the minutes. Thus, these minutes reflect both aspects of collaboration: that of the club in its daily and yearly function, and of the secretaries adding to the collected minutes.

The minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club, taken as a whole, reflect the collaboration of over 100 authors, each acting within the scope of her office, but also leaving some of her own personality behind. Within the study sample, there are eight distinct voices, not including the secretaries pro tem who filled in when the designated secretary was unable to fulfill her duties. While limited by the format of meeting minutes, each secretary made rhetorical choices to denote what she felt were the most important pieces of the verbal meeting activities. Some of the secretaries were very succinct, others more verbose. Individual penmanship, vocabulary, and syntax all add to the variety of the collaboration. These minutes are true
examples of feminist collaboration: individual authors each providing their own written contribution to the whole rhetorical collection that documents the collaborative nature of the Thursday Conversational Club.

The minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club are written by women, about women’s activities, and provide a historical account of feminist practices over a large span of time. The documents also clearly show that the Thursday Conversational Club functions as a community for the members. Additionally, the minutes illustrate how this community creates the collaborative nature of the Thursday Conversational Club, both in the practices of the club, and in the individual secretaries adding to the body of the records of those practices. The notions of community and collaboration are cornerstones of feminist rhetorical theory, as noted by Lunsford and Ede (1990), Jarrett (1998), Gruber (2001), Ritchie and Ronald (2001), and Zarefsky (2010). Thus, documents like the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio, are the intersection of feminist rhetorical theory and feminist rhetorical practices and are deserving of further study by rhetorical scholars.

This particular club’s minutes are one of countless other examples of women’s study club minutes that could be studied individually or as a whole. Future research could include comparing this club’s minutes with those of another local club that spans approximately the same timeframe. Or, a study could compare this club with one in a completely different geographic area in order to see if the clubs’ focuses appear to be similar or different. Additional research might include a larger sample study of clubs, but a smaller focus, such as limiting the study to notations of only philanthropy, or only political activity. There are literally hundreds of ways that these minutes could be studied, either alone or as part of the larger women’s study club movement, to illustrate the importance of the writings within feminist rhetoric.
As with any completed project, there are always ideas for how the project could have been different or better. One suggestion for future research is to further limit either the sample size or the focal points. Even though this study was limited to eight decades and three focal points, the amount of material available was greater than could be adequately analyzed in full in the scope of this paper. Therefore, only representative samples were pulled for analysis, rather than every occurrence noted in Chapter 3. While these samples do adequately illustrate how this club both fit into the general goals of the women’s study club movement, how the minutes are part of feminist historiography, and also how community and collaboration are integral to the Thursday Conversational Club, there were interesting and valuable quotes left out due to time and space constraints.

Another idea that this paper does not address, but would be interesting in a future study, is the idea of the secretary as author. While each secretary is acting in the capacity of her office and not as an individual, every person has his or her own rhetorical style, even within a collaborative work. Even the individual handwriting of each secretary could be the focus of a study. There is much that can be explored when considering a body of work that is made up of so many individual voices. Essentially, it would be interesting to focus on the secretaries as individuals and not the community or collaboration.

In conclusion, this study examines eight years of a much broader compilation of women’s rhetoric. It is limited to three general areas of focus gathered from a large, national movement of women’s study clubs. This particular document pulled out pieces of those focal points to examine more thoroughly. While it is certainly true that the minutes of the Thursday Conversational Club of Findlay, Ohio, reflect the national trends of the women’s club movement, and are an example of feminist historiography, the real “find” in this study is how clearly these
minutes reveal the social nature of the community and collaboration within the club, and how that is rhetorically demonstrated in the minutes. These minutes are part of the continuing “lively discussion” about feminist rhetoric. If feminist rhetoricians seek an untapped source to add to the growing body of rhetorical works by and about women, the minutes of a woman’s study club provide a rich and fertile field from which to glean.
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