During the session break before I presented this paper, I spent a couple of moments setting a few items on the tables in front of where each person might be sitting. As traditional for an academic talk, I distributed handouts from the PowerPoint slides I presented. I decided that since I would be talking about menstruation I really should provide some chocolate, so I had a few wrapped chocolate Easter eggs for each person. And then, in front of each person I placed either a feminine hygiene pad or tampon. When it was my turn to speak, I began by drawing attention to “the goodies” I had left on the desks, suggesting to the audience that they would be “probably able to identify my contributions quite easily.” The feminine hygiene product was a reminder that “for women, menstruating is ordinary. Women menstruate on average, just under one week per month; thus, approximately one-quarter of all fertile women are menstruating at any given moment” (Fingerson, 2006, pp. 15-16). Menstruation is ordinary—so why did talking about menstruation and providing artifacts that represent menstruation in an academic context feel so strange and even slightly rebellious?

**Talking About the Taboo**

I had three objectives when I placed the pads and tampons prominently in the physical space of the Faculty of Education Graduate Symposium. My first reason speaking so openly about the products was simply to name the elephant that would be present in the room as I shared my research. Menstruation is not the easiest subject to talk about—quite frankly, even as adults, it is a little bit squirmy to talk about periods so openly—especially in a formal, mixed-gender, and academic setting. In the public realm, there remains a relative hush about this regular

> It is odd that such an integral and routine event in women’s lives, which has significant implications for women’s health and well-being over the life course, not to mention the salience it holds in adolescence, has generally been ignored in social research. (p. 4)

I am a menstruating woman, mother, and researcher. Stories about menstruation from the private and the public realm matter to me both personally and politically. So I named the elephant by gifting my audience with a feminine hygiene product and I continue to name the elephant by writing about the experience in this paper.

My second objective was to allow the pad or tampon to act as a mediator, symbol, or pivotal artifact (Holland et al, 1998, Rogoff, 2003, Vygotsky, 1978) to move us from what the object is used for to what it might represent to individuals living in and through our cultures or figured worlds (Holland et al, 1998). Feminine hygiene pads and tampons are not neutral—they have sets of meaning and significance that come from personal experience and social expectations. In school settings, we have unwritten but carefully observed rules that these objects will remain hidden and concealed. Just as I challenged my audience to look at the physically-present mediating symbols in a different light as they listened to some of the research surrounding menstruation in the educational context, I similarly urge the readers of this paper to reconceptualize these products and symbols.

My third objective was a preliminary, albeit timid, attempt to bring action to my research. Kissling (2006) states, “The so-called feminine hygiene industry—at less than 100 years old, a
relatively recent development in the history of menstruation—annually exceeds $2 billion in US sales (MarketResearch.com, 2001)” (p. 1). The feminine hygiene industry has been both aggressive and innovative in its approaches to marketing their products. One of the earliest and most successful pitches came through education. The “femcare” industry began to distribute “instructional materials,” which gradually shifted menstruation from “its role in fertility” to “primarily a hygiene issue” (p. 11). The marketing worked: the industry is profitable and, as Kissling writes, “marketers and manufacturers have discovered that brand loyalty . . . is strong and that a customer attracted in adolescence is likely to remain a customer for the next 35 years” (p. 111). The femcare industry’s influence continues to be felt in education, as I discuss later.

When we consider that there are currently many countries in the world where girls miss school every month because they do not have the means to access products, it becomes difficult to deny that the feminine hygiene industry has increased accessibility to education (Kissling, 2006, Nalebuff, 2009). However, the convenience of disposable products negatively impacts the physical environment and Kissling reports that “more than 170,000 tampon applicators can be found along US coasts in just a single year” (p. 85). Rosenthal (2003) encourages the reduction of “period trash” through two means: “reducing back-end garbage and improving front-end cleanliness, which involves reducing the amount of chemicals used in the initial manufacture of menstrual products” (p. 38). At the Symposium, I chose to hand out “green” products that are available at health food stores—my first small step at menstrual activism.

However, upon further reflection, I realized it was not just giving the products that was a step of activism. Giving the talk in a public forum and writing this paper are also political acts of agency. Bringing menstruation out of its usual shame-filled and concealing silence and presenting it is a legitimate topic for educational dialogue and research is an active and needed
step. For the remainder of this paper, I describe the process I worked through to conduct this literature search and offer some of the context for menstrual research in education. Next, I explore one of the most striking themes I see emerging from the literature and I conclude by considering the implications and “next needed steps” for further research.

The Literature Review: Not Drawing Back Curtains, But Creating a Picture

I have a complicated relationship with the literature review—it is sort of a love-hate relationship, yet it is more complex and compelling than that simple dichotomy. As a graduate student, I have conducted quite a few scholarly reviews of the literature. I struggle each time I approach a literature review, because I question how to position myself and make sense of the vast amounts of knowing that exist in any given field. I find that often readers and writers approach a literature review attempting metaphorically to “see a picture” of a defined topic or issue. Yet, I am consciously aware that I am not drawing back curtains to reveal a realistic or objective view that exists beyond a window, but that I am subjectively creating that picture through choices I make in all stages of the research process. As a writer, I explicitly or implicitly limit and create the research picture and the reader or listener works with me to co-construct how meanings are interpreted.

Dr. Fiona Green, a mentor from the University of Winnipeg who is guiding me through this current project, suggested that articulating how we approach research and writing is incredibly important for all scholars, but especially those of us new in academics. It is in this articulation that we begin to understand how we work and explore why we have come up with our current findings. I do not claim that my process is exemplary and in fact I share so openly because I am still seeking ways to improve.
Methods

Here is what I did: I began by hitting the databases and with the key term “menstruation” as a starting point for my search. ERIC is a database that is often suggested as a starting point for literature reviews for educational researchers. I thought menstruation would likely have to be narrowed many times, but only 51 refereed journal articles appeared when I used the term. From this fairly manageable number of articles, I began printing the online accessible articles to get a sense of the field. I sorted through my big stack of papers by reading abstracts and trying to group articles that I felt were somewhat alike in topic. Using my sorting piles as headings, I used the computer to compile notes on each article. I recorded bibliographic information and how the study was conducted, and then sorted significant or provocative quotes into “theme” headings for easier cross-article comparison.

I have limited my search thus far to four data bases: ERIC for its known educational focus, CBCA for Canadian content, Anthrosource for a wider cultural view of the topic, and Child Development and Adolescent Studies for the focus on research of puberty. I also broadened my search beyond the articles that appear on the databases by locating books and articles from the bibliographies of other articles.

From the piles of articles that I sorted as I searched the databases, I began to determine several broad categories in which menstrual research is being conducted in the educational context:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Menstrual Research in Education</th>
<th>Representative Articles or Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact or Timing of Puberty</td>
<td>Barsom et al., 2008; Coleman &amp; Coleman, 2002; Haq, 1984; Short &amp; Rosenthal, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Wellness</td>
<td>Barsom et al., 2008; Cauffman &amp; Steinberg, 1996; Fontana &amp; Rees, 1982; Hillard, 2008; Lee, 2002; Pomerieau, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes and Self-Concept</td>
<td>Lee, 2009; Roberts, 2004; Tang, Yeung, &amp; Lee, 2004; Van Boven &amp; Ashworth, 2007; Yeung, Tang, &amp; Lee, 2005</td>
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Watt: Her Moody Time of the Month

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<tr>
<th>Disability Studies</th>
<th>Chou et al., 2008; Mason &amp; Cunningham, 2008; Rodgers, Lispcombe &amp; Santer, 2004; Rodgers &amp; Lipscombe, 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Dilorio et al., 1996; Koch, 2006; Lee, 2008; Marvan, Morales, Cortes-Iniestra, 2006</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The research in these areas demonstrates and influences who gets taught (and who teaches), what is taught about menstruation, when it should be taught, and why it is important to conduct that teaching sensitively for the particular sociocultural contexts of learners.

**Menstruation as a “Text of Culture”**

In the first term of my doctoral studies I conducted a broader examination of menstruation in feminist literature, focusing on the complex social, political, and cultural environments in which women negotiate the meaning of embodied experiences. I began to understand how, as Lee (1998) states:

> Menstruation is a biological act fraught with cultural implications, helping to produce the body and women as cultural entities. The body is a “text” of culture; it is a symbolic form upon which the norms and practices of society are inscribed. (pp. 82-83)

If menstruation can be understood as a biological activity that helps produce women and girl’s bodies as cultural entities or texts in which much of our society’s practices become inscribed, it seems important to me to explore how and what our formal educational systems teaches about this socioculturally embedded and embodied act. School settings are social institutions where men and women, boys and girls interact during menstruation and where they explicitly and implicitly learn what menstruation is biologically and what it means personally, socially, and culturally. What is taught or not taught, researched or not researched about menstruation may reveal a great deal about what, how, and why experiences get told in our education systems.
Menstruation as it is Taught in Schools

As I further focused on “Menstruation as it is Taught in Schools,” I delighted in research that was rich in a variety of approaches and perspectives. Analysis of experiences teaching menstruation in Mexico (Marvan, M.L., & Bejarano, J., 2005), New Zealand (Diorio, J.A., & Munro, J.A., 2000) and to immigrants from Somalia learning in Ontario (Omer-Hashi, K., & Silver, J., 1994) showed both the curricular context and the mixed perspectives of the teachers and learners. The role of nurses in teaching menstruation was the focus of another article (Swenson, I.E., & Foster, B., 1995). Educational booklets provided by the Femcare industry for nearly 80 years were analyzed for what and how they teach girls about menstruation (Erchull, M.J., Chrisler, J.C., Gorman, J.A., & Johnston-Robledo, I., 2002). Fingerson (2006, 2005) and Kissling (2006, 1996) explore the overriding themes of shame and embarrassment that most adolescents feel about menstruation. They discuss the role of advertisements, curriculum, and relationships with others in perpetuating the disempowerment or agency that is possible in menstruation. Mainella’s (2001) article, “A Systems Approach to Sexuality Education,” offers an alternative vision of how menstruation could be taught.

Beyond the Biological: Teaching “Lived” Experiences

From almost all of the articles I identify a collective cry for teaching to extend beyond the biological aspects of menstruation to acknowledge the “lived” experiences of women and girls. Currently, most of the research describes school teaching to focus on the scientific and reproductive aspects of menstruation. Diorio and Munro (2000) analyze New Zealand curriculum and suggest, “School materials present menstruation . . . as a topic in developmental physiology and reproductive biology, and implying that it is a technical matter to be understood purely in terms of objective science” (p. 350). Marvan & Bejarano (2005) describe menstrual education in
their culture: “All students in Mexico have the same book of Natural Sciences (Biology), and the menstrual cycle is explained in a chapter entitled “Women are Different Than Men,” which focuses exclusively on the biological perspective” (p. 86). If and where menstruation is taught in schools (and it is still not a world-wide phenomenon), it is very often taught by explaining how phases of hormones create the cycle of fertility. Often there are charts, graphs, and explanations using clinical language to ease the embarrassment of talking about such an intimate and hidden topic. Diagrams are presented, but sometimes these visuals show anatomical parts dangling in space, a problem noted by Erchull et al. (2002) in their analysis of feminine hygiene educational booklets:

The diagrams of the female reproductive organs that are separate from any bodily reference present a particular problem, as it is impossible for a girl to imagine the scale of her reproductive system if she is not given a body outline to help her understand where the organs are located. (pp. 469-470)

So, we teach the science of menstruation but we try to keep the body, the girl or woman herself, out of the picture.

When the human body is presented in biological language and diagrams, it becomes abstracted from the integrated embodiment that an individual experiences. The woman or girl can distance the scientific information as if it is experienced by an “Other” body rather than lived by the self. Marvan and Bejarano (2005), the authors of the Mexican study, state:

This tendency to focus only on the biological and hygienic aspects of menstruation creates a disconnection between knowledge and a girls’ own body experiences. Girls must relate the abstract information they receive about physiology to themselves and their
body . . . biological knowledge needs to be combined with the psychosocial aspects of menses. (p. 88)

By combining biology with the emotions, thoughts, and social constructions of menstruation, and possibly providing narratives of the lived experiences of real women, girls can connect to the knowledge and to their own embodied experiences.

Kissling (1996) writes, “Menstrual education is typically regarded by instructors as an intellectual activity; experiential and emotional aspects of menarche and menstruation are absent from curricula” (p. 500). One of Kissling’s research studies, in part, involved interviewing adolescent girls about their preparation for their menstrual experiences. She explains that her interviews clearly indicated that the “experiential and emotional aspects of menstruation are often what girls are most eager to learn about” (p. 500). The young women in Kissling’s study wanted to know the specifics of menstruation: what would the first blood look like, how much could they expect, how often would they need to change their pad or tampon, where exactly did the pad go in the panties, how to dispose the products, and how much pain and discomfort would they be likely to experience. This is not the usual focus for curriculum, but Kissling suggests that “when these issues are ignored and girls are left to discover it on their own, it can increase their feelings of shame and disgust for their periods” (p. 500). By not teaching the lived experience of menstruation, our omissions instead teach shame, silence, and disgust.

Is shame and disgust about menstruation, and in turn about the female body, really what we want to teach girls and women, boys and men?

As a final example of the call from the literature to teach beyond biology, Diorio and Munro (2000), from the New Zealand study argue:
If educators wish to care effectively for developing girls, they need to transform their presentation from a “factual” account of a reproductive function to a perspective, which includes the experiential, emotional, and sexual aspects of menstruation as it is lived by women. (p. 362)

When I read this quotation I was struck by the word care—teaching beyond the biological is not just about offering more knowledge, it is about caring for the girls we teach. The question then arises: How do we make this transformation to teaching the lived experience? I am intrigued by this question because I believe this is an area that urgently needs collective consideration.

**Offering an Alternative: A Systems Approach**

I felt hope-filled when I read the article “Sexual education: A systems approach.” This article written by OISE scholar Lisa Mainella (2001) calls for a new approach to sexuality education in Canada. Although Mainella includes menstruation as one example of a topic covered by curricula, her description encompasses the larger approach to sexuality education. She states that topics such as menstruation “are often examined through a narrow biological lens,” and suggests “The ‘systems thinking’ perspective . . . offers an alternative to the mainstream. . . This approach has the potential to transform the way educators think about and teach sexual health within the classroom” (2001, Para. 4). She elaborates: “To teach sex education using a systems thinking approach means to pay close attention to the dynamic process which links the individual to the social, economic, and political factors in his/her life” (Para. 6).

Mainella (2001) outlines five principles behind the systems thinking approach. The first principle looks at the collective versus the individual. She states: “A systems thinking model supports sexual health education as a collective responsibility” (Mainella, 2001, Para. 8). The second principle acknowledges the reciprocity of influence. To understand “the self within
society and the connections that maintain and influence our system will provide us with valuable information on ourselves” (Para. 9). Principle three calls for building reflective and critical thinking skills to “assist in empowering students within their process of decision making” (Para. 10). Principle four demands reality-based representation because, “sexual health education can no longer be taught without using the specifics of the lives of students” (Para. 11). And the fifth and final principle Mainella presents is the need for collaboration and partnerships: “Education must focus on each student in relation to other students, the family, the teacher, and the community” (Para. 12). I believe this article provides a holistic framework for re-thinking menstrual education to bring it beyond the biological in order to address the lived experience in our complex social and cultural worlds.

Loud and Proud: Asking the “What Next” Questions

Now I ask, what is next for me? What do I do with this literature search? Inspired by the studies that carefully analyzed and explored the curricula and resources available in their contexts, I would like to do a similar review of Manitoba Curriculum and the resources that are used in the delivery of menstrual education here. I would like to further explore how a “Systems Approach” could be applied to the development of menstrual education programs and resources. I feel drawn to the work I have read about home and school connections. I find myself asking what can we learn from mothers? How can we encourage community partnerships? I also continue to ask the questions of critical pedagogy—how is power at work within all of this? How do institutions and systems of power affect how we experience menstruation in schools and in our personal lives? How are the positions of gender, age, class, and culture influencing the lived experiences of menstruation in educational contexts of teaching, learning, and research? I want
to use these questions to guide me as I eventually move towards my dissertation work that will explore teachers’ perspectives and narratives about menstruation.

I conclude with a thought from Kissling (2006) that provides perspective on what I am trying to be part of and inspires me to keep reading, writing, and talking about the squirmy stuff: “Of course, being loud and proud about menstruation will not solve all of women’s problems, nor will it end war and injustice. It will, however, advance gender equality by helping to reduce the secrecy, shame, and stigma associated with menstruation” (p. 125). I certainly hope both the presentation and this written reification will contribute to help reduce some of the secrecy, shame, and stigma associated with this topic within our research community. As readers continue to encounter feminine hygiene products or advertisements or when they listen to or tell stories of menstruation, I encourage them to think critically about how menstruation is talked about or silenced in our lives and societies. How can a critical lens and active voice lend to greater gender equality for women and girls in the embodied experiences of their lives?
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