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Wesleyan Conference Considers How to Evaluate Women's Studies

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A NEW INSERVICE TRAINING MODEL: SF CONFERENCE/COURSE ON SCHOOL SEXISM

A conference/course, "The Hidden Curriculum: Discovering and Overcoming School Sexism," was offered through the University of California Extension Division, San Francisco, in the spring of 1973. The course, two intensive weekends with intervening work weeks, was planned and administered by Wendy Roberts and Miriam Wasserman. Thirty-five resource people ran the workshops, and many of them helped to plan the course. Sixty-five female and male educators, parents, and concerned others attended.

The course was given through an established teacher-education institution for a number of reasons: it provided a guaranteed, though small, amount of money for running the course and the facilities and contacts of a university. Most important, a course with credit has the legitimacy in a teacher's mind that a conference lacks, and the university's publicity reached those an independent women's conference could (continued on page 10)

FEMINIST PRESS HOLDS WORKSHOPS FOR TEACHERS OF INSERVICE COURSES

A group of Long Island teachers, counselors, and school psychologists has been meeting with Feminist Press staff members in a series of summer workshops aimed towards organizing a fall program for prospective teachers of inservice courses. Ten evening sessions plus two Saturdays are planned to begin early in October on the campus of the State University of New York/College at Old Westbury, in Nassau County.

The program will aim at providing women and men with information about sexism in education; with insights into their own practice as teachers, administrators, and parents; and with skills useful for changing attitudes about sex-roles. Those interested in registering should phone or write to The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568 (516-876-3086) by September 20. There will be a small registration fee to cover the cost of materials.

WESLEYAN CONFERENCE CONSIDERS HOW TO EVALUATE WOMEN'S STUDIES

What is the general impact of women's studies? Is our investment in women's studies courses the best way to improve the higher education of women? Concerned and curious about these questions, a group of Wesleyan University faculty began in March 1973 to look into the possibility of evaluating women's studies. After preliminary discussion and research, the group decided to invite teachers of women's studies to meet with social scientists knowledgeable about evaluative research to raise the question of evaluation. With the assistance of the Ford Foundation, which made a small grant available for preliminary conferences, a meeting was held on the Wesleyan campus, June 14-17, 1973.

Fifty-two persons attended, of whom 13 stayed the entire weekend. Of the more distant participants Sacramento State, Alverno College, Case Western Reserve, Southern Illinois, Delaware, and Cornell were represented. Among the specialists called in to inform the group were Esther Westervelt, co-founder of the National Coalition on Research in Women's Education, Herbert Hyman, on evaluative research, and Marcia Guttentag, on Bayesian evaluative systems. Of note was the five-woman team from the Clearinghouse on Women's Studies. Given the size of the conference, no attempt could be made to have a truly balanced group either regionally, ethnically, or in terms of types of courses. However, the group did represent, in roughly the same proportion, fields which offer women's studies, namely the humanities, history, and sociology.

In an atmosphere of informal good feeling, the group dealt with the following issues the first two days: What are the benefits and the risks of any kind of evaluation at this time? Whom would the evaluation inform? Is it for ourselves, the Movement, the administrators and faculty who make curricular decisions, women in general, or posterity? What are the ethics of evaluation? Who should do the work? How can we have objectivity if we do the research ourselves? How can we have any understanding of the issues and consent of the participants if we do not do the research ourselves? How can we articulate the goals of women's studies where politics, con- (continued on page 11)
There was a good deal of criticism of traditional social science consciousness-raising, cognitive styles, increasing self-esteem, as well as increasing knowledge are all entwined? What should be the subject of the research? Should we look into “feminist pedagogy” (if we can define it) or courses and programs? And should we include noncredit courses in and outside the formal university structure? Should we examine the other courses taught by women’s studies teachers, for example, to compare their impact with that of the women’s studies course? And, finally, what kind of evaluative mechanism is appropriate to measure such goals and such programs?

There was a good deal of criticism of traditional social science modes of inquiry, particularly where an outside researcher, coming in with his or her own preconceived notions, administers a paper and pencil test, which is then scored and analysed by a computer, providing direct feedback to any particular class. What the group found more desirable were ideas such as videotaping classes for later review, content analyses of personal journals that students and teachers keep during such courses and in-depth interviews which include impressions as well as formal information. Could this be enough?

At this point, the group heard from Marcia Guttentag, Visiting Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard, who introduced a more human approach to evaluation. The system she described is based on “decision theory” and permits groups of participants to formulate goals, weight their importance relative to one another, and to determine personal probabilities as to the feasibility of reaching those goals. Using this system, researchers can be participants (and participants researchers), and the examination can provide immediate feedback on each course for every value it established. Moreover, the system is “iterative” which means that the testing is not one-shot, but can be done and done again over time. Finally, we were told, the instruments in such a system can be classical social-science research tools (questionnaires, projective tests) and/or other, newer measurements developed by us to answer our particular questions.

During the last two days, the group digested the ideas that had been presented and concluded: An evaluation of women’s studies will be worthwhile if, indeed, women’s studies teachers and students can control what is done. The primary audience for any evaluation should be the teachers and students of the courses to be studied and only secondarily should the audience be other groups of people in and out of academic. Ethical considerations are important if the people involved in women’s studies are to control their own evaluation.

No definitive list of goals was arrived at, but the following give an idea of the kinds of values attached to women’s studies: heightening awareness of the differences between actual and mythical roles of women; self-actualization of women; creating more positive attitudes toward women on the part of men as well as women; active involvement of women in women’s issues; increasing women’s intellectual competence; generating new methods within the disciplines, especially social science and history; enhancing the capability for collective responsibility; enhancing the competence of women teachers; and integrating material about women into the rest of the curriculum.

The method presented by Marcia Guttentag was enthusiastically received because it seemed the most sensitive to our needs. The group assigned three of its members, Lorelei Brush, Alice Gold, and Grace Baruch, to become competent in the method as soon as possible, and intends to have Dr. Guttentag return to teach a larger group the method.

One possible outcome of the Wesleyan Conference might have been an agreement that evaluation of women’s studies is premature, undesirable, and/or impossible. Rather, the group that remained decided to consider seriously undertaking some research, and named itself the Research Group on the Nature and Impact of Women’s Studies. Next steps involve learning more about the best methods for measuring impact and contacting other women’s studies programs for cooperation. A second conference will take place, either to train a small number of persons (some of whom will be free to travel in the coming year) in the Guttentag method, or to present a larger, and more representative group of women’s studies people with the full range of issues that the Wesleyan Conference considered. The choice will depend partly on resources, partly on Dr. Guttentag’s schedule, and largely on what kind of response we get by mail from persons who were not in attendance at the Conference.

At this point, we at Wesleyan would be grateful to hear from anyone who has attempted any kind of descriptive or evaluative research on women’s studies courses or programs, or are interested in participating in this project. We would be grateful to have samples of questionnaires or other measures used. We were turned on by this conference to new ideas and new people and hope our enthusiasm can be communicated. Do ask what we are about.

Sheila Tobias, Lorelei Brush, Alice Gold

CORRECTION OF A CORRECTION

Our faces are red, since we have been wrong twice about the institution formerly called San Francisco State College. It is now called California State University, San Francisco, and it is possible to earn both the B.A. and M.A. degree there with a “Focus on Women.”