Closeup: Alternative High School Course

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CLOSEUP:
ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL COURSE

During the past two years, we have been developing a Women's Program at The Group School, an alternative high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts for students from working-class families. At present, the program consists of The Women's Group and The Women's Course. The first is run by a nurse and teacher and focuses on sex education. The second, an English skills and social studies class, we will discuss at length.

In the fall of 1971 when we taught The Women's Course (year-long, divided into three terms), we began with five girls and were later joined by most of the fifteen girls in the school. The students ranged in age from 14 through 18, and in reading level from low to high. Most entered with stereotyped images of "women's libbers."

As teachers, we did not want to start the course by labeling women's experience as "oppression," nor did we wish to alienate students with rhetoric or through "laying" our experience on them. Instead, we sought a framework in which the students could look comfortably at themselves as women. We began by asking questions about growing up female: what early experiences made you feel like a girl? When did you first feel like a woman? As a woman, what do you look forward to? As a woman, what are you afraid of? What do you feel when you look at your body? When this last question brought out horror stories about the students' experiences with the onset of menstruation, to promote discussion, we gave them a section from The Diary of Anne Frank.

To talk about the topic of socialization and how it affects women, we used records, magazines and children's books. The students wrote their own children's story and visited a pre-school, looking for differences in the behavior of male and female children. As the course developed chronologically through the life cycle from childhood to adolescence, we read a story by Marge Piercy (in The Bold New Women, ed. B. Wasserman, Fawcett Books) about a girl's first sexual experience. Excerpts from Margaret Mead's writings also provoked discussion about the socialization of girls in other cultures. We defined anthropological terms like "taboo" and "ritual" and applied them to American culture. One day, quite spontaneously, the students wrote a short story about the American girl, as seen from the viewpoint of an anthropologist from another country.

The second term of the course focused on history. We assigned the first fifty pages of Pride and Prejudice in order to give students a sense of conditions that preceded the 19th century women's movement. For a lesson on this reading, we held a tea party to capture the atmosphere of the book. One of the teachers played the role of a feminist who had come armed with her feminist newspaper (which the teachers had written and mimeographed before the class) to talk to the gathering of "ladies."

As a basis for the second term's work, the students found Miriam Schneir's Feminism: The Essential Writings (Vintage) too difficult to read easily. Teachers, therefore, focused on main issues raised in the text and searched for a way of teaching about them. The tea party is one example of this kind of teaching. From the selection on prostitution by Emma Goldman, the teachers wrote short descriptions of four women's lives, a poor woman in a conventional marriage; a well-to-do woman in a conventional marriage; a $100 a day call-girl; and a street prostitute. With the students, the teachers raised questions about the similarities and differences among these women's lives. The discussion helped the students to understand, at least in outline, the issues that Goldman raises about prostitution.

A high point of the course was a visit from Florence Luscomb, a long-time feminist who had been involved in the suffragist movement. A subsequent trip to the Radcliffe Institute Library gave the class a chance to see early pictures of Luscomb, nineteenth-century feminist journals and writings, etiquette books, and The Woman's Bible by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The third term was quite different from the first two. With some technical assistance, the students turned a short story they had written into a film script, acted in it and learned to do some of the film-editing. Later, they showed their film at other schools and led discussions afterwards. In the time remaining, the class read A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, chosen because it raises issues immediately meaningful to students' lives: pregnancy, alcoholism, divorce, first jobs. Teachers used role-playing here, on one occasion, for example, asking students to act out a situation in which a woman competes for another woman's boyfriend.

The course concluded with a women's day to inform the entire school of what we had accomplished. We showed our film; organized role-reversal exercises with both male and female students participating; heard a poetry reading by Denise Levertov; and enjoyed a dinner cooked by male students.

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NEWS FROM THE CLEARINGHOUSE

We are pleased to announce the publication of a new twelve-page pamphlet: Feminist Resources for Schools and Colleges: A Guide to Curriculum Materials, which provides brief descriptions about books, articles, films and other media, as well as course syllabi and bibliographies. Send $1 (plus $.25 postage and handling) to Clearinghouse, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568.

As most of you know, we have been publishing Guides to Female Studies—lists of those teaching courses and organizing programs in higher education and in high schools. Guide I (October 1971) and Guide II (October 1972) are still available separately at $1 each (plus $.25 for postage and handling). Guide III (April 1973) will be available shortly at the same price.

In June, we will publish High School Feminist Studies, a collection of course outlines, essays, and materials useful for teachers, students, and administrators who are planning new courses. It will include Feminist Resources for Schools and Colleges. $2.50 (plus $.50 for postage and handling).