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Women's Studies and the Community: Some Models

One of the virtues of Female Studies VII (The Feminist Press, 1973) is that it enhances our awareness of the fact that women's studies is in a new phase. Among the features of that phase are: 1) an international interest in women's studies; 2) more respect from foundations and government agencies; 3) a concern for women in the curriculum of secondary and primary schools; 4) a worry about both the continuing hostility and indifference on the part of traditional academics and the danger that apparent converts may be little more than exploitative bandwagoners; 5) consolidation within existing programs; and finally, 6) the temporary crystallization of a number of models to follow for people and institutions who wish to begin programs.

My purpose is to examine three models that describe potential relationships between a women's studies program and the community. The question of what that relationship should be has been a barbed maze for persons interested in women's studies. Trying to resolve it has stirred up internal conflict and pain within various programs and among serious people. One part of the problem is that the question is a microcosm of a larger issue: the responsibility of education to society, the responsibility of society to education. Another part of the problem is that the question really consists of a number of separate, but linked, other questions. I believe they are:

1) Should a women's studies program extend itself to and draw from the community in the first place? Answering this question may involve contrasting the values of 'academic activities' and so-called 'street activities,' a distinction often drawn too rigidly.

2) If a program is to reach out to the community, what is it? Is it women in the women's movement, the neighborhood, or all women? Is the community to be defined politically, geographically, or sexually?

3) If the community is defined, how might a program most accurately and sensitively define what that community might want?

4) If the needs and desires of the community are articulated, how should a program physically fulfill them? Should women come into the academic institution, or should the program go out and set up new classrooms, or should both things happen?

5) What should a program provide on its own? Should it concentrate on obvious goods and services? Should it also work deliberately to help women change their consciousness of what it means to be a woman in modern society? Should it do it on to work to change the racial and political and economic structures of society?

6) If women in the community help to set up a program, how much control should they have over faculty hiring, courses, credits, and so on? (Assuming that the institution would permit any outside governance except regents, legislators, and trustees.) If people in the academic institution themselves set up a program, what mode of administration should they adopt?

At the risk of oversimplification, at the risk of violence to local programs, I perceive three models that have tried to answer such questions, each in its way.

MODEL I: THE INSIDE MODEL. Here a women's studies program will concentrate on research, publication, and teaching of the new scholarship about women. It will probably work for the conventional academic credits. Its practitioners may hope that their scholarship will trickle down into existing disciplines and into the culture-at-large. If teachers and students in the program are political, their activities (e.g., working for a daycare center, organizing a local group of lesbians) will be done more or less independently of the program.

International News: Four New Feminist Presses

In the last few months, we have received announcements of the founding of feminist presses in England, Japan, Germany and France.


Feminist Action Alliance of Japan, Heiwa Dai Heights #305, 16-14-3 Chome, Nishi-koita, Suginami-Ku, Tokyo, Japan, is planning a variety of materials, including the translations of some American publications.

Editions des femmes, 2, rue de la Roquette, Paris 75011, France is one of the projects of a feminist collective which operates (among other things) a women's bookstore (see NEWSBRIEFS). They have already published six titles, including a translation of Woman's Estate, by Juliet Mitchell.

Brot und Rosen, Maulwurf Distributors, c/o Basis-Verlag, Berlin, Germany, a feminist group involved in publishing, has already sold 100,000 copies of their Frauen Handbuch ($3.00 plus postage), containing information on birth control, abortion, and other feminist concerns.

The tie between courses and activism will be made through personalities, through individuals.

MODEL II: THE INSIDE/OUTSIDE MODEL. Here a women's studies program will set up some explicit connection to the outside community. At least four varieties of Model II exist: 1) Teachers and students will form coalitions with the local women's movement on specific issues, e.g., a rape crisis clinic. The programmatic politics of those teachers and students will probably vary from year to year, again depending upon personalities.

2) A program, like that at Cornell, will try to bring in community women, a source of potential talent, as faculty, advisers, and counsellors.

3) An institution will sponsor an academic program, the purpose of which will be to train competent specialists in something beneficial to women. I understand, for example, that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation gave the Radcliffe Institute a grant to prepare women for community health programs.

4) A campus, like San Diego State, will create a center that has several components, one responsible for academic courses, others responsible for community service. The components attempt to set up coherent and mutually compatible programs.

MODEL III: THE OUTSIDE MODEL. Community organizations here will sponsor non-credit courses. Their curriculum may follow academic leads from established women's studies programs. In Guide to Current Female Studies III (Summer 1973), 51 such courses in 15 places are listed, including the Syracuse YWCA in New York. My guess is that many more are going on, in study clubs, alumnae organizations, and the like.

Momentum for and interest in new relationships between women in the academic community and women in the larger community is encouraged by the recent arrival to the classroom of women (and some men) of many ages. So far, only continuing education programs and community colleges have worked with the bulk of such varied student populations. To enrich their notion of relationships between a women's studies program and a community,

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Books: New and Recommended

From time to time we will review at length some special books or series of note. This, the first of those longer reviews, will replace the usual short book reviews this quarter. Women in America is a Thomas Crowell series available in hardcover ($5.50 each). Dell plans to reprint those marked with an asterisk.


In the six years since the series called Women in America was developed for young readers, 18 biographies have appeared, 10 of which are reviewed here. The series is notable for its attention both to famous women and to those whose lives most of us do not know. Included are such reformers as Frances Wright, Lillian Wald, and Ida Tarbell; such revolutionaries as Emma Goldman and Mother Jones; politicians Margaret Chase Smith and Mayor Felsa Rincon de Gautier; and such writers and artists as Pearl Buck and Mary Cassatt. Still more unusual are biographies of the relatively unknown Mary Elizabeth Lease [late 19th century labor movement, objects to the conventional limitations of books], and Mary Jacob; and such revolutionaries as Emma Goldman.

As a result of such care, the book that emerges from the lives of women. We learn, for example, about the social restrictions that prohibited women painters like Cassatt from participating in Parisian nightlife, thus affecting her relationships with other (male) impressionist painters and limiting her choice of models to women and children. When Sanger decides that she must leave her children in order to continue her work on birth control, the authors treat her with sympathy as they review the complex conflicts involved. Indeed, the series' perspective appears truthfully on its book jackets: these are books about "women who refused to accept things as they were, who took great chances and offered bold challenges. Rebels, many of them, they were drawn to where the action was in whatever world they moved."

For the adult reader as well as the younger one, the books offer an introduction to the richness of historical research. Authors in the series are respected scholars—some also knew the women about whom they write. Lawrence Lader, for example, knew Sanger well and his research into her life included hundreds of long interviews with her, as well as a study of her personal papers and collections of materials on the birth control movement. W. G. Rogers, a friend of Gertrude Stein, includes personal anecdotes throughout her biography. All the books begin with acknowledgements and bibliographies that encourage young people to read further.

Even adults might welcome Alix Shulman's clear explanation of anarchism, in her biography of Emma Goldman:

very simply, anarchism is a political and social system opposed to all forms of government based on force. An anarchist society would have no laws, no lawmakers, no officials, no police, no armies, no institutions or even any customs or traditions that people would be forced to obey against their will. Anarchists are not against order, as many people believe. They are only against imposing order by force or threat of force. They oppose the force used by governments against their own citizens through police and against the citizens of other nations through armies.

As a result of such care, the books that emerge are different from most biographies written for young people: they deal honestly and directly with sexuality, politics, political movements, and the events of women's lives. Each life, moreover, is framed by the history and social conditions of the time. Mary Cassatt's life story tells us a great deal about the impressionist movement; Pearl Buck's about U. S. relationships with China; Bessie Smith's about segregation in the South.

Women's Studies and the Community (continued)

people in a women's studies program might look at these continuing education programs and at community colleges—assuming that they are not already working there.

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