Evaluating a Women's Studies Course

Joan Borod
Susan Dorsky
Carol Hull
Ellen Keller

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Borod, Joan; Dorsky, Susan; Hull, Carol; and Keller, Ellen, "Evaluating a Women's Studies Course" (1974). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/119

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
EDITORIAL

It's been a year since our last editorial. We continue to receive encouragement about the Newsletter especially from people who like the mix of news about elementary, secondary, and higher education. But we wonder about the fact that we've had no negative criticism of our coverage or our features. And we're sorry, frankly, that we've been able to provoke no debate, and only a trickle of correspondence from our readers. In the interest of provoking such debate or correspondence, we offer several clusters of questions that need answering. We hope you'll try one or more of these.

First, about courses. What should "introductory" courses consist of? Will content need to shift with the level of popular consciousness, or is there a "hard core" of information, a developed "body of knowledge" that all introductory courses should contain? After introductory courses, what? What distinguishes "introductory" from "intermediate" from "advanced courses"?

Second, about curriculum. Is there a practical theory for organizing a women's studies curriculum? What models are there for organizing a sequence of women's studies courses? Need all programs offer a pot-pourri or are there other means of curriculum-building?

Third, about "majors" or "minors" in women's studies. Are they necessary or useful? Or are there alternatives? Where do majors lead? What is happening to graduates?

Fourth, the issues of programs. Is the interdepartmental or "network" model viable? Or is it too costly and too powerless? Are programs becoming "departments"? Are any programs dissolving? What are the major political and pedagogical issues that new and continuing programs face? How are directors being selected?

While we've asked specific questions only about higher education, obviously there are even more questions to be asked about newer developments in secondary and elementary. Here, our needs are somewhat more primitive, for we don't yet have an abundant proliferation of women's studies courses or units, much less system-wide programs. What we need here are information, reportage, and analysis from those of you teaching or administering new developments in women's studies. We also need information from those of you who are pressuring for system-wide nonsexist education or developing public school affirmative action programs. Let us hear from you.

ANALYZING PHYSICAL EDUCATION FOR EQUALITY

On his last day in office, New Jersey's Governor William T. Cahill signed into law A823, a bill prohibiting discrimination in the public schools of the State. The bill states simply:

No pupil in a public school in this State shall be discriminated against in admission to, or in obtaining any advantages, privileges or courses of study of the school by reason of race, color, creed, sex or national origin.

The following day newspapers reported the enactment of this legislation on their sports pages. There is good reason for this. While many aspects of sexism and sex discrimination are not recognized as such by educators and laypersons alike, discrimination in educational sports programs is so blatant it cannot be overlooked or rationalized. The increasing demands of girls and women for more equitable treatment in sports programs are seen by many as a threat to the boys' programs, and, therefore, are viewed with alarm by the male sports establishment.

Just how unequal boys' and girls' sports programs can be is demonstrated by a study of the athletic program of the Westfield, New Jersey, schools undertaken by this writer for the Union County Chapter of the National Organization for Women. Westfield was chosen for survey because it typifies the pervasive neglect of extra-curricular sports programs for girls.

Table 1 graphically illustrates the gross inequities in the girls' program.

EVALUATING A WOMEN'S STUDIES COURSE

Some fifty women attended the first Women's Studies Evaluation Conference in June 1973, at Wesleyan University. About half had previously taught women's studies courses. Literature and the social sciences were heavily represented; there were no hard scientists. We came with questions about the value, even the possibility, of evaluating women's studies courses and programs. We wondered whether any measuring technique could isolate one class as the cause of change in a student. We questioned social science methodology, and we speculated about possible alternative methodologies.
As we listed the goals of women's studies courses, we realized the overwhelming expectations for both student and teacher: beyond teaching new facts, we wanted courses to raise the self-acceptance and aspirations of our students, to encourage their active involvement in women's issues, to evolve new research methods and new classroom techniques, to alter the very nature of our disciplines. Success in achieving such aims would be difficult to measure, but their very scope made evaluation especially important. Their realization demanded excellent courses, and the improvement of our classes was the best reason for evaluation.

After outlining some difficulties of classical research design, Marcia Guttentag, Visiting Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard, presented an approach which might make course evaluation possible and useful. Her approach is, like all research strategies, an "information-destructing" process; it reduces goals and probabilities to numbers so that they may be compared. But this process seemed both flexible and practical. Traditional research design is based on assumptions which are difficult to fulfill in practice: large samples, random selection, appropriate control groups; classical statistics uses probabilities based on certain assumptions about normal distributions (chance). The method proposed by Guttentag uses Bayesian statistics, in which the probabilities can be personal, based on prior projections of the extent to which a particular goal will be met. Thus, this "decision theoretic" model makes bias explicit. An open system, the "decision theoretic" model, unlike classical methods, provides immediate feedback throughout the evaluative process and allows for variety in individual and group goals. The expansion and evolution possible within the "decision theoretic" approach seemed especially adaptable to the dynamics of women's studies classes and programs. On the whole, our expectations were realized.

The steps of this method are outlined here (see Appendix for an actual list of goals and a GRID):

1. Clarify the goals to be achieved (here, class goals). Simply doing this with a class helps a teacher direct her course toward students' interests and needs.
2. Rank goals in order of their importance. This step (and #3) can be done in several ways. Class or program coordinators can collectively decide the order, or they can keep individual lists. In our evaluation the students decided the goals and their relative importance.
3. Assign importance weights to the goals. The list of goals is translated into numbers showing their comparative importance. Steps #3 and #4 help make class priorities explicit.
4. Determine aspects of the program being evaluated (here, class methods). List these down one side of the GRID and list the goals across the top.
5. Estimate the likelihood that each method will achieve each goal on an arbitrarily-determined scale. These estimates are the prior probabilities that are plugged into the GRID. Multiply them by the importance number assigned to each goal to obtain "utilities"; the number quickly indicates how useful the evaluators expect each method to be in meeting the program goals.
6. Decide how to measure fulfillment of the goals. (1) Measure them. The degree of success is translated into numbers the same way that the estimation of success was in Step 5. The actual contribution of each method to the realization of the goals is then compared to the prior estimates of success.
7. This information shows which methods are effective enough and which should be changed or dropped, and provides more accurate estimates for planning future programs.

Since students could actively participate in this process, it fit our wish for a student-centered, non-authoritarian classroom. The method might provide some measure of evaluation during the course so that planning and evaluation might become a synonymous process.

On the last day of the Wesleyan conference, Joan Borod decided to use the "decision theoretic" approach to evaluate her summer session course, "The Psychology of Women and Sex Differences," which was to begin two days later. Three of us who had attended the conference called two meetings in Cleveland to explain the project and its implications to women who might be willing to share their time and expertise. Each meeting taught us something about the complex mechanics of collective action.

Jean L. Ambrose
We held our first meeting with the Women's Studies Caucus, a group of campus-affiliated women who had provided the impetus for women's studies courses and sponsored other activities for women. As this group drew up its own list of goals for women's studies, it polarized on what we later called the doctor-potter schism: whether to encourage students to be part of a sexist system, get power, and change it; or to approve their dropping out to find their own peace. Compulsively we kept debating whether the one was a sign of high aspirations or slavish acquiescence to societal values; whether the other was a sign of inner-directedness or of self-doubt. As feminists, our main concern was empowering women, giving them the ability to choose. We learned that a collective decision would have to be broad enough to include a range of possibilities, especially when working with women of varied class and socio-economic status.

A week later we met at the Women's Center to try to find women from various disciplines to help with the work and methods for measurement. This meeting raised conflict on both theoretical and emotional levels. The theoretical debate, again unresolved, was over methods of measurement: "scientific rigor versus sloppy subjectivism." And there was the inevitable skepticism about the value and methods of evaluation itself. We learned again about the difficulty of structureless groups; we resolved to make our agendas more explicit in future meetings.

But despite differing concerns, there had been general agreement about the aims for women's studies among the Wesleyan conference, the Women's Studies Caucus, our academic women's group, and the class. As a group of four now, we brainstormed productively to find methods to measure the degree to which these goals would be reached. We finally decided to base the evaluation on three items: the students' journals over time, tapes of each class session, and in-depth interviews to be taped at the end of the class.

The class itself was an active part of the evaluation process. It was their self-defined goals around which our GRID and interviews were constructed. During the first week of class, students and the instructor stated their personal goals for the class and later, working collectively, determined group goals. Ranging from vague to very specific, these goals were typed up from the tapes of class sessions and later refined, ranked, and weighted by the students themselves. As this involved clarifying and defending personal priorities, it took a lot of class discussion time. Although collective effort was part of the goals of the course, several students began to feel very strongly that evaluation interfered with its “real” business: studying the psychology of women.

During this time a number of experts from outside the group provided moral support and advice. Marnie Wheeler, CWRU developmental psychologist, helped refine methodology. Joanne Kaufman, head of a Cleveland research consulting firm, and Betty Mawardi, a social psychologist who does student evaluation at the medical school, were also consulted. Gene Wise, a professor of American Studies, advised us on the use of the journal; Bob Davis, a CWRU sociology professor, helped design interview questions and discussed at length the lack of social/psychological theory to predict change resulting from class awareness. Annie Huston was doing her own course evaluation at Central Connecticut State, and Donna Shavlik at the University of Delaware sent us model questionnaires.

As the summer session came to a close, the evaluation group decided on the proper order for the questions of the interview. We thought seriously about making the questions projective and open-ended, but decided instead to keep them specific; we felt that feelings would naturally be expressed in a one-to-one interview, but we needed clarity in the questions and responses.

Our use of the interview as a primary measurement technique was seen originally as a compromise by some of us, as the best we could do given limitations of time and our other commitments. Soon we began to view the interviews differently; we felt they would be a good tool, among other reasons, because they would be a positive experience for the students—an active contact, not just another questionnaire. After they were completed, we began to see the interviews themselves as interventions, more than a simple measurement of change, and, in that sense, a continuation of the class. Moreover, the "tool" became also a positive experience for the researchers. Susan Dorsky writes:

I was concerned about the possibility that the kinds of questions we were asking would lead to very personal responses. Students would be sharing deeply important feelings with us, and what would or should we be doing? This wasn't therapy or counseling. Was it politicizing? I think we came to feel that we should simply be supportive, in whatever way our different styles allowed, so that the students would feel good about the interviewing process. Terrible to show yourself deeply and be received with neutral deadpan. We also came to feel that we might be getting something out of the interviews too, but it's hard to capture in words. To be allowed to enter a person's deep inner world is a gesture on the student's part both of great strength and great trust. The students' strengths—did they come partially from the course or from new feelings about themselves as women? Their trust—was it a tribute to us as persons, or more likely, to us as feminists? Or does it make sense to separate the two? Anyway, their responsiveness to the situation and the rapport that we were all eager to build were unexpected returns for our time and energy. We learned a lot about them, exchanged some ideas with them, felt their and our need and desire for solidarity expressed concretely in these hour-long meetings between "strangers." It was as if a deep friendship had begun really fast—but of course it hadn't: it was just an interview, and then goodbye. But no one seemed to regret the contact.

After finishing the interviews, we met to evaluate the effectiveness of the questions. Later we put together an impressionistic report: a tape recording of the range of responses to the first interview question, "Do you perceive yourself differently now than before the class started?" This tape is available and has been effective in stimulating interest in women's studies. The evaluation is not yet complete; much of the information is still being processed. But we have tabulated the students' estimation of the effectiveness of certain classroom methods in achieving the goals of the course; these results are recorded in the Appendix.

The inevitable question, of course, is, "Was it worth it?" With some reservations about the dangers of over-evaluation, the answer, on the whole, is yes. The process encouraged the class to articulate and refine its goals so that they were clear from the outset, though subject to change. And in teaching future courses of a similar nature, with a similar student population, we can apply what we have learned about the relative effectiveness of specific methods. For example, the results indicate that students' presentations were less helpful in achieving most goals than those by visiting lecturers. Such information could be used in the future, but not blindly and automatically. Rather, future classes could establish goals of their own; and, through discussions of the results of earlier semesters, might arrive at their own priorities and perhaps suggest revised teaching methods as well.

Use of the "decision theoretic" model in class evaluations, then, necessitates a continuous dialogue between students and instructors, allowing each class to answer the crucial question, "Why are we here?" in its own way, and to assess realistically the success of the course on its own terms. The process could be applicable to the evaluation of programs as well. Its greatest strength is that it makes of the class or program a genuinely collective endeavor—and though planning and acting collectively takes a great deal of time and emotional energy, it is finally a vital part of women's studies as of the women's movement as a whole.
EVALUATING WOMEN’S STUDIES (continued)

APPENDIX: RESULTS

I. The Class’s Rank Order of Goals (from most to least important):
1. To explore and break down sex-role stereotypes
2. To gain knowledge and understanding of oneself
3. To discuss and explore changes in childrearing, education, psychotherapy, and vocational counseling
4. To obtain new information re: sex differences and psychology of women
5. To relate class experience and discussion to the women’s liberation movement and vice versa
6. To gain skills in critical evaluation of research
7. To develop new classroom techniques compatible with feminist ideas about collectivity

II. The Effectiveness of Each Classroom Method for Obtaining the Goals:

The following data illustrate one use of the GRID for assessing method effectiveness. Each number on the GRID represents the rank order (from 1-most effective, to 6-least effective) of the group means. Group means were obtained by combining and averaging the individual judgments of each class participant on the last day of class.

Please note: Since these data have yet to be analyzed for statistical significance, please be very cautious in any generalizations from our tentative results. We are merely presenting these findings to demonstrate how numbers can be plugged into the GRID. Our findings will be further analyzed and interpreted and made available in a forthcoming paper.

INSTRUCTIONS:
1. Give each method a score from 1 (Not at all) to 10 (Most) on how effective it was in attaining a given goal. You may use a number more than once for each goal.
2. Overall, how much was each goal met on a scale from 1 {Not at all} to 10 (Completely)? Please indicate your responses in the top row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Gain knowledge about self</th>
<th>Gain new inform. skills in psych., sex roles</th>
<th>Explore new ideas</th>
<th>Critical evaluation</th>
<th>Class discussion</th>
<th>Personal experience</th>
<th>Class discussion course content</th>
<th>Lectures by students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Material</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures by Instructor? Guests?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Class Presentation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Discussion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Discussion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>course content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures by Students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WOMEN’S STUDIES AT ALBANY (continued)

studies was officially approved by the university in the spring of 1973, the women involved viewed the act not only as a "legitimization" of the Women’s Studies Program in the eyes of the university, but also as the opening wedge in an effort to secure real university support and funding for the program, including funding to hire personnel.

Despite budgeting difficulties, the Women’s Studies Program continued to expand its offerings, maintaining its academic emphasis. Enrollments in eight courses offered during the fall 1972 semester totaled some 285. For the fall 1973 semester, combined enrollments in nine women’s studies courses, several multi-sectioned, totaled approximately 460. (The combined undergraduate and graduate student population at SUNY/Albany numbers some 12,000.) During the spring 1974 semester three new courses will be offered: Ethnography of Women, Women and Education, and Spanish Women Writers of the 20th Century. Furthermore, faculty in such departments as anthropology, rhetoric and public communication, astronomy and space science, Germanic and Chinese, Hispanic and Italian, sociology, physical education, library science, English, history, economics, and business administration offer independent study in certain aspects of women’s studies.

In addition to the undergraduate courses, several graduate courses and seminars concerning women have been offered by different departments and schools. Library resources to support these courses are adequate, and with the cooperation of some individuals within the library, are being increased.

The Women’s Studies Program at SUNY/Albany developed and grew through volunteer labor, as is the case with women’s studies programs at most other institutions. Early in 1972 the Coordinator of the Ad Hoc Committee on Women’s Studies went directly to the President for funding, securing $500 for course development and for one outside speaker during the following academic year. So far, this has been the only funding directly assigned to the program. However, this year some monies have been made available through an office for interdisciplinary studies. Administrative officials continue to affirm the importance of interdisciplinary studies and to cite Women’s Studies among such programs, but they have not agreed to a budget allocation on a continuing basis for Women’s Studies.

This year women involved in women’s studies have realized that matters will remain as they are—a group of courses in different departments plus such extras as lectures sponsored by a poorly financed program—unless something is done. Committee members believe that the program needs more coherence and unity and a wider range of courses on different levels. Efforts are currently underway not only to create an introductory interdisciplinary women’s studies course but to secure university funding for this course. The Women’s Studies Committee has also requested a full time position of coordinator, but so far there has been no favorable administrative response. Money is a measure of a university’s commitment to a program, and we believe it necessary that SUNY/Albany increase its commitment to women’s studies. While the university has cited scarcity of funds in this and other cases, it has managed to finance some new programs through various means. Interested women on campus are now studying appropriate measures and tactics, and at the same time, the committee is considering seeking outside funding for the program.

The Women’s Studies Program at SUNY/Albany has arrived at what might be seen as a crossroads. In two years we have done a great deal, but have gone about as far as we can with the usual volunteer labor force. Where we go from here is far from clear.

Joan Borod, Susan Dorisky, Carol Hull, Ellen Keller

Editors’ Note: This article is excerpted from Female Studies VII. Going Strong: New Courses/New Programs, edited by Deborah Rosenfelt. Available for $4.00 plus 50¢ postage, from The Feminist Press.

June E. Hahner