Closeup on Women's Studies Courses: Feminist Theory and Practice

Melanie Kaye

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

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

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.
Closeup on Women's Studies Courses: Feminist Theory and Practice

The following is a talk delivered to the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in December 1977. It was part of a program arranged by the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession, addressing the topic, "Teaching Women's Studies in an Interdisciplinary Setting: Materials, Methods, and Politics."

I want to talk about why we should include training in feminist theory and practice in women's studies programs; and to describe the sequence of courses designed at Portland State University to provide this training, in particular the segment I teach called Feminist Theory and Practice.

Let me begin by looking back to the origins of women's studies, in the context of a burgeoning movement. Women's studies programs came into being because of women's power to demand these programs. Because women did demand these programs. Because in the turmoil of the sixties and early seventies, campus administrators were under pressure to make concessions, pressure which we had helped to create and which we were astute enough to increase in various ways, from writing polite letters to sitting in. Because even our polite letters were backed by the existence of an activist movement and the possibility of more militant action.

The existence of women's studies thus testifies to women's power. This fact suggests one reason why we should provide women with political training, like all sound political reasoning, it is at least partly selfish. In the current economic crunch, women's studies programs are in danger. If we don't help women to articulate collective power, learn how and where to act, we will not have women's power supporting women's studies. Feminist activity made women's studies possible. Women's studies must in turn help make feminist activity possible, if we are to survive as women's studies teachers, or as teachers, for that matter (some of us, like myself, have already been axed), or even as women.

But granted that political training is necessary, why should women's studies provide it? Because inside and outside the universities and colleges, opportunities for acquiring political skills are hard to come by. Let me use my personal history, for I think my experience fairly common. I learned about feminism and the need for an autonomous women's movement through my participation in other movements, especially the civil rights and antiauthor movements. Like many women with this background, I was a student in the late sixties and early seventies, and my first feminist work was directed toward the university. I was part of the women's caucus (in comparative literature at the University of California/Berkeley) that demanded a class and the choice of instructor; and I was blessed with teaching that first class, digging out books from my friends' collections, devouring the first issues of Female Studies for titles.

Looking back, I am overwhelmed by the naiveté and starvation of those early efforts. I actually typed up a list for my class called "Books by Women" that was less than a page long. All of this work—from the struggle to get the class, to the creation of curriculum, to the trial-and-error invention of new classroom structures—included political training.

In that first class, politics was clearly part of the subject, and would have been whether I wanted it there or not. Many of the students also considered themselves part of the women's movement. Literature and politics clashed hands as women defined the parameters of common experience; or clashed noisily as women argued their preference for Nin over Lessing, or Lessing over Nin. Some wanted less politics, some wanted more; but everyone knew that what we were doing was in fact political, slightly outside the law, and precious. The explosive growth that was happening to so many of us was happening in the context of a larger whole—a vital, ornery women's liberation movement. Many of us were reading passionately on our own time and in our nonacademic women's groups the feminist theoretical writings which were just then appearing and which, along with actual events, were urging us to new edges, new possibilities.

Looking for the Women's Movement

Now we see a different picture. The women's movement is fragmented and under attack, still vital in some places (Portland being one), but thriving in particular projects and counterinstitutions: coffeehouses, health clinics, rape hotlines, bookstores—and women's studies programs. These projects tend to be highly specific and task-oriented, rather than broadly political. Besides, having been around for a while, they have tended to solidify into a particular way of functioning, especially since the essential task of maintaining them usually requires all available energy. They are often not open to absorbing the energy of new women (which, barring unusual coincidence, is bound to be different energy).

Moreover, the movement now has a history almost ten years long and a body of theory. One problem the women's movement, like the Left, has reeled under is our difficulty in learning from what has happened before us, even a few years before us. Some knowledge of the history and existing traditions of feminism should at least make it possible for us to avoid rehashing the same issues, and to ground ourselves in a common context.

In addition, many women now coming to college have never experienced how movements can win victories. Even the women's studies classes we meet them in are givens. Women students—especially at an urban working-class public institution like Portland State—bring a wealth of experience with them; and I am sure all schools have felt the impact of returning women students. But while consciousness of feminist issues has spread widely, a sense of possible breakthrough, of modes of resistance and activity, has not. "What can I do?" people say. Everything in this society, from the threat of rape to having social security numbers to unemployment to being put on hold, seems designed to make us feel helpless; or, at best, we seek individual solutions. In a time when there
are not many places to learn how to think and act politically, the need for women's studies to provide such training becomes all the more pressing, especially since in many towns and cities, women's studies is the most visible aspect of feminist activity. Last spring about half the thirty women who enrolled in my course on Feminist Theory and Practice were nonstudents. They weren't looking for credits; they were looking for the women's movement.

A Core Curriculum

At Portland State, an incremental unit has been developed to provide training in feminist theory and practice, a core curriculum which women's studies minors are urged to take whether their field of concentration is biology or literature, structural engineering or law. The curriculum begins with an introduction to women's studies, oriented toward issues and designed to acquaint women with the existing feminist activities and institutions in Portland.

The second course is an introduction to feminist theory, which covers ovular second wave texts in such a way that women can not only absorb the tradition(s), but also assess, evaluate, and synthesize what seems useful and accurate. The third course on theory and practice was invented to bridge the gap between the theory course and the last course in the sequence, which is eclectic-field work in a feminist institution or on a project for women's use. Some favorite examples of practicum work include: creating and maintaining a women's gallery; organizing a series of women's readings in the gallery (both of which projects have the double function of providing women makers with space to be seen and heard, and giving women the chance to see and hear women's work—and not incidentally support to become makers themselves); lobbying in the Oregon State Legislature for legislation which forces the police to arrest men who beat women, and which makes marital rape a crime; writing a book on climbing for women and teaching a group of women to climb; as well as working in such places as the women's bookstore, women's resource center, or shelter for battered women.

The Germ of the Course

I'll focus now on the course I was asked to teach, since it's especially odd. It was offered through the Department of Philosophy, but in truth it seems to me outside academic categories, nondisciplinary. In the sixties it would have been called "Now That We Know What We Think, How Do We Figure Out What To Do?" This practical emphasis separates it from most university disciplines. And, in fact, a problem I had with this course is that there are almost no appropriate readings for it, a situation reminiscent of those early days I was talking about. What we need to read hasn't been written yet.

On the other hand, also reminiscent, I was forced to be inventive. The Women's Studies Program asked me to design a course that would connect theory with practice. I was first delighted, then stumped. I knew what I did not want. I knew I did not want to spend time and blood on sterile questions like "Are men the enemy? Are lesbians the vanguard? Can change happen within the system? Is armed revolution essential? Possible? What is the primary contradiction?" etc. These questions have helped tear our movement to pieces, yet no one knows the answers—because at this point in our history, they're unanswerable. There are some theoretical points we cannot move beyond because we don't have enough practice to assess and understand the multifaceted and rapidly changing reality we confront in the late seventies. Questions that seem more useful—like "What do we need? How can we get it? What do we want? How can we get it?"—these questions can be answered, if at all, through problem-solving, trial and error, that is to say, through practice.

But how could I teach that? Either I was the wrong person for the course (a possibility I considered) or I had something to offer besides books and the already named questions. One morning I was circling around my brain trying to think up a course outline, and I got hungry. I took out a loaf of bread and noticed that the label said, "No preservatives added." This was not hippie 47,000-grain bread, this was commercial supermarket bread. Now
method. I chose to include this component because for me learning to think dialectically was a slow but dramatic break through confusion. After a presentation on dialectics from a woman familiar with Hegel and Marx, the assignment was for each student to analyze dialectically a problem she was dealing with right at that moment. We went over the problems in class, contradiction by contradiction: problems like how much to let kids watch TV, men not sharing in housework, raising boy children to be strong and non-oppressive to women; many indecisions about living situations, jobs, and school. Interestingly, several women resolved their selected problem through this exercise. Problems about immediate choices were particularly amenable to this approach. With others the blocks to solution became apparent: as in how to raise boy children. The point was not to work magic, an instant cure, but to teach an approach that could incorporate the flux and crash of phenomena, a way of seeing that was not static, moral, artificially compartmentalized or polarized, but rather could apprehend conflicting aspects part of the same whole. It was a way of figuring out what we can and cannot solve, and at what level—internal, familial, communal, societal, global—solution is possible.

We talked about consciousness, about what had made changes in our consciousness possible, about the relationship between changing consciousness and a changing world, how they make each other possible or not, how we make them both possible and how they have made/continue to make us. We dealt with the muddy hole into which entire movements have fallen of explaining behavior that doesn't make sense to movement participants as "coming from false consciousness." Thus the Old Left has explained the racism that keeps white workers from uniting with their Black working-class brothers (sic) without asking what concrete privileges whites obtain, regardless of class, from the institution of racism (without, for that matter, questioning whether the white working class is any more racist than the white middle class).

In the women's movement, "false consciousness" mostly comes dressed as "role conditioning." We've all read about it in Ms., not to mention a fair amount of what is being written under the rubric of feminist scholarship. Thus women's consumption habits—or, makeup, or clothing which seems degrading to the "liberated" woman with her "true" consciousness (i.e., the woman who has dispelled her conditioning), or female opposition to the ERA—get written off.* What gets left out of this analysis is the real pleasure we get from exercising our limited power to choose among products; the fact that women who dress to appeal to men may be surviving rather than backward; or that women feel sensibly threatened by the idea of losing some of the scanty protection we have.

Changes You Have Seen, Changes You Want to Make

We made more lists. Fifty changes you have seen in your own lifetime (a spinoff from Northridge Bread). Fifty, a large number, so that no one would spend time puzzling over which changes were most important: any fifty. The point here was to sensitize ourselves to the astonishing flux we live through and with, in order to counter our sense of immutability, and especially our sense that social movements do not, for example, help stop wars in Viet Nam, or force bakeries to put out a "health" line. We focused on a few changes. How did they come about? What has happened/ could have happened/could still happen from them?

Another list, this time of changes you want to make in your life: any ten. Divide into changes you can make by yourself; changes you can make with one other—friend, lover, child, therapist; changes you need a group for. Pick one change that requires a group. Define the group. Make a plan. List the prerequisites for each step of the plan. What keeps you from making the change?

Some other topics, briefly: some dealt with, some touched on, some passed over because as usual there was not enough time: feelings and experiences about working in groups, masses, individualism vs. individuality; rigid rules of conduct, guilt vs. responsibility; contemporary theories of social change; spotting political assumptions; survival—your work and its relationship to your politics, where you can work for change in your present or future job; process vs. product; self-activity (the politics of fun).

So much for the academic quarter. During the assignment on "changes you want," every woman in the class had listed "stopping rape," a striking commonality. A smaller core of women from the class has continued to meet as an action group—again reminiscent of early women's studies—and this fall helped plan a wonderful anti-rape event, the Women's Night Watch, in which two hundred women marched in the rain to reclaim the night. The Night Watch was an energy boost, the effects of which are still being felt. Activity generates awareness generates more activity. Night Watch helped create a climate of activism about violence against women. And Night Watch happened in part because of the focus provided by this class.

I don't take credit for this. The women in the class were remarkable—although one suspects that most women are remarkable when they get the chance to be. And clearly fighting rape and other violence against women is an idea whose time has come. Nor am I offering a six-month plan to revitalize the movement. I simply mean to suggest the possibilities of encouraging women to think seriously about change as something we can make, and to experiment with various forms of group activity.

Now you may be wondering what this has to do with you. My experience with teaching and with political organizing tells me that these are basically similar activities. The task: to create a situation in which people can mobilize their own energy, in which people use their experience and the

---

*This idea has been with me for years, but I think its source was Ellen Willis's article on "Women and Consumerism," one of the best examples of the Redstockings' analysis. The fullest critique of the "role conditioning" approach can be found in Feminist Revolution by the Redstockings women, now available from Random House for ( alas ) $6.00.
Yolette Garaud

A Student's Journal: On Menstruation

The following is an excerpt from a journal written for the Introduction to Women's Studies course taught this year by Naomi Rosenthal at the State University of New York at Old Westbury. Yolette Garaud is not a native English speaker; she was born in Haiti in 1952 and came to the United States in 1971. She is now an undergraduate at Old Westbury, where she is majoring in biochemistry. Unable to write the first journal assignment, she produced the following piece within six weeks of the beginning of the course. Interestingly, according to the instructor, it was being asked to write

On the topic of menstruation that elicited the students' best papers and the highest degree of classroom unity.

When I was a child I was told that a girl past eight years old was not supposed to eat certain fruit, like pineapple. Anything that was sour was a no-no. When I asked my grandmother why, she told me that it was because at that age a girl's body is changing and those fruits interfere with certain chemicals, and that death could be a result of such interference. Not knowing better, I just swallowed the story. Years after, I discovered it was just one of the thousands of myths surrounding menstruation.

I wonder why people make such a big deal about menstruation. Little boys are told the story about the birds and the bees as soon as their voices change. There is no myth about that, and they know what it means. It is the opposite for us girls. We have to learn everything the hard way. Our parents, our mothers were young once and knew the trauma of a young girl seeing blood coming between her legs thinking misunderstanding on my part. One Sunday, I went to church without my grandmother. Instead of sitting in the family pew, I went to the balcony where most of the young people hung out. It was crowded. A young man was standing behind me. He was pressing his body so hard against me that I was sitting down on the floor, she screamed and I asked her why. She told me there was blood on my underwear. I thought it was a handicap to me because back home we do not use sanitary napkins. We used something like those cloth diapers, and they were white. We do not have washing machines, so we had to wash them by hand and they had to be white as snow. People could judge you by their whiteness. It was unbelievable. Your boy friend will pass by and will look for them hanging on the clothes line. It was embarrassing. I did not have a friend to confide in. So I went to the lady who used to do the washing in our house and asked her how people get pregnant. She told me the facts. I was mad because I went through hell for nothing.

During the first year my menstruation was a handicap to me because back home we do not use sanitary napkins. We used something like those cloth diapers, and they were white. We do not have washing machines, so we had to wash them by hand and they had to be white as snow. People could judge you by their whiteness. It was unbelievable. Your boy friend will pass by and will look for them hanging on the clothes line. It was embarrassing. Now I understand why we had to put them on display. It was a way to show our future husband how well we could wash.