Fall 1977

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On Teaching a Feminist Writing Workshop

What is a feminist writing workshop? Is it a group of writers who share certain political beliefs? Is it an all-female group? Is it a workshop in which one's writing is labeled "feminist"? What is feminist writing anyway?

Feminist writing has as many definitions as the phrase "women's movement," but I will explain what it means to me. Feminist writing makes a conscious attempt to show the lives of women as women see them, not as reflections of male fantasies or sexist myths; feminist writing uses language in new ways, considers the oppressive ways it has been used and changes them. In a sense, if you are a feminist writer yourself, it means giving the women in your stories the integrity they almost never have in real life.

The feminist writing workshop I taught at the University of Massachusetts was part of a residential program in a large complex of dormitories. Students ranged in age from 17 to 22 years, from first-year students to graduating seniors. All the students in the workshop were women. They were not a group of writers with certain political beliefs in common, nor was the workshop one in which the students consciously wrote "feminist" stories. It was a workshop in which women could talk freely about their lives, the lives of other women (and men), the meaning and practice of social change—and express these ideas and feelings in written form.

This format evolved out of the needs of the students: in this group of 15 women, only one seriously considered herself a writer. A few first-year students were interested in careers in journalism. The majority of these students had never written a short story or autobiographical piece. They did not read much. They had little confidence in their ability to think or to express themselves with words. They were not interested in creating "literature" or in detailed discussions of writing techniques. They wanted to talk to one another, to be listened to, and to hear different points of view about feminist issues. Writing was simply a way for them to record their thoughts and emotions and to share past and present experiences.

The vital difference between this workshop and the creative writing class as it is traditionally conceived was the focus on the content of the students' writing rather than on its form or style. While there was some concern for basic writing skills, emphasis was on helping the students accept their life experiences as "worthy" material for creative work. It is especially important for female students to learn to respect themselves and to write out of the problems and conflicts in which they are actually involved. Hence, much class time was spent talking about sexuality, pregnancy, abortion, leaving home, sexist men in the dorms, relationships with mothers, etc., to reconnect with the essential concerns of women's lives.

Finding a Voice

The long-range goals of the workshop were to help each student develop a personal writing voice that was close to the rhythms and intonations of her speaking voice, and to rid her work of clichés. To reach the first goal, each student had to break through the formal, stilted voice she had been taught to use and find a voice that expressed her personality through an imaginative use of language.¹ It is especially difficult for female students to find a natural personal voice because some of them, quite literally, have not yet found their speaking voices. They have been actively discouraged since girlhood from being outspoken, they lack confidence in their ability to think well, are often intimidated in coed classes, and say nothing even when they do have strong opinions.² Helping the students find a personal voice, then, could not be done without understanding their position in the world outside the classroom—as second-class citizens whose voices had gone largely unheard or ignored.

The second goal, to rid their work of clichés, could not be reached until they stopped thinking in clichés; only then would they stop writing them. This involved the changing of consciousness—and many of our classes were like consciousness-raising sessions. Sometimes it was hard for them to see why a word or a phrase was a cliché because they had not yet examined the ideas behind it. Their stories were riddled with stereotypes of proper male/female roles: "He was tall and lean but sexy"; "... his muscles rippled like a jungle cat"; "Joan always felt that John's job as a mechanic was much more important than her day at school."

Some of them resisted the impulse to change because it was hard, at times terrifying, to see the reverberations of change for all areas of their lives. Their struggle to rid their work of clichés was one with their struggle to break out of old, destructive behavior patterns. For example, one woman wrote a story in which the main character passively waits for the man she loves to drop his old girlfriend and fall in love with her. The story is called "A Happy Ending for Once" (he drops his girlfriend and declares his love for the heroine). The women in the class questioned whether this was a happy ending at all, and talked about sex-role stereotyping and alternatives to passive/aggressive, female/male polarities. But the author could not revise the story until she had broken out of this passive role in real life. When she did give us a revision, she mentioned that for the first time she had asked a man out for a date.


² I asked the students if I could tape record the classes, and no one objected. I explained that the tapes were for them to use and could be helpful if they wanted to hear how they sounded in a group discussion. Only one woman asked to take the tapes home during the semester. I suspect their reluctance was part of the general discomfort they feel at hearing their own voices. As one woman said when it was her turn to read her story out loud, "I hate the sound of my own voice."
And the revision did show a change in consciousness in that the main character was actively trying to resolve her emotional frustration.

The Writing

"A radical critique of literature, feminist in impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped us as well as liberated us. . . ."

This particular workshop was for prose writing only—short fiction, journal, autobiography, and essay. This emphasis reflected my own areas of skill and interest. Each student was required to write and submit one short story or autobiographical piece to the workshop for discussion; another short story and autobiographical sketch; several short essays on themes that came out of the open discussions; and a journal. At the end of the semester, students were required to write a ten-page final project of short fiction, autobiography, or a combination of the two.

The first challenge was to integrate the learning of basic writing skills with the consciousness-raising of the open discussion. I found that the best way to do this was to talk about apparent or relevant feminist themes in their stories by discussing the points of view of the narrator and the author, the choice of words, and the overall tone. In this way, they learned some of the basics of fiction while talking about feminist issues. We also focused on words they used to define or describe women. If an author called a character a "lady," we examined what that word meant in the context of the story. (I should backtrack here and explain that at the very beginning of the semester we had one whole class of consciousness-raising about how women use language and how language is used about women, so that we all had some understanding of what to look for.)

There were different levels of writing skill in the workshop. Several students had never written a short story; a few had written many stories before. We spent one class talking about elements of fiction (theme, point of view, diction, plot, setting, characterization), and I gave them an article that explained these elements so that they would have something to refer to after class. I suggested that before they write the required short story, they write brief explanations of the plot, theme, etc., to help them organize their ideas. I knew this would benefit the beginning writers, but I was not sure how the more experienced ones would respond. In fact, one woman who had been writing for years did tell me that she had pulled together an entire story while writing the explanation of the theme.

I wanted to spend more time in class talking about syntax, grammar, and punctuation but we lacked the time (we met once a week for two and a half hours). Also, the students were not interested in detailed discussions of technique which could have included discussions about style. Since I thought it was important that they get feedback on this aspect of their work, and because several students asked for help, I responded on a one-to-one basis. I did not grade their stories. I marked the places where corrections were needed and wrote a one-page critique that included my reactions to the story, suggestions for revisions, and specific points of structure and style that needed to be worked on.

Integrating Life Experiences

The second challenge was to integrate the students' life experiences into the context of their work. At the beginning of the semester, before we found the kind of open discussion that worked best for us, many students were having trouble with ideas for their stories. One woman said that she had plenty of ideas but they all "sounded stupid." This, in spite of our belief that it was crucial that we write about aspects of our lives that had never been considered worthy or suitable material for literature.

At the beginning of the semester, when the students first handed in their stories for discussion, we talked about the work much the way students do in any creative writing class. The author steeled herself against what she expected to be harsh criticism; other members of the class talked at her, randomly giving their ideas and opinions; students looked toward the teacher (literally) as the authority on what was good or bad writing; the teacher was always expected to have the last word.

I was very uncomfortable in this position because I did not think there should be a hierarchy of important and nonimportant opinions; I did not want any student to feel that she was a passive recipient of criticism; and I did not like the feeling of "me against them" (authority against peers) that was developing. At this time, several stories were passed in for discussion that were not even remotely connected to feminism or to women's lives. Clearly, the traditional kind of class structure was not working here. The student/teacher, author/critic dichotomy had to go.

Open Discussions and Collective Writing

We floundered in this manner for a short time, then discovered by accident the kind of discussion that would serve us so well for the rest of the semester. I call this kind of discussion "open" because anyone can begin it; there are no points that the
teacher wants to make that are masked behind "leading" questions (questions meant to elicit a certain response); and any political or personal issue that someone thinks is relevant can be brought up.

We had our first open discussion the night a student didn't come whose story was on the agenda. Because of this extra hour, I asked the students to read out loud the short sketches they had written about an experience with someone in the medical profession (this theme came from our discussion about the book *Revelations: Diaries of Women*). We talked about each story after it had been read, until the discussion gradually turned to the lack of control women have over their bodies, the power and elitism of the American Medical Association, and the exclusion of women from medical fields. No one talked about good or bad writing, although the students responded more intensively to the better crafted stories. We moved from the writing, to personal experience, to the women's movement, back to personal experience. During the midsemester evaluation of the course, the students expressed the most enthusiasm about this collective sharing of their work. After a long evaluation, we decided to change the focus in our discussions from craft to content, since this would give us a chance to talk more spontaneously about the women's movement and our own lives.

The open discussions were not abstract but rooted in life experiences: the nature of work, oppressive models of physical beauty, homosexuality, romantic love, marriage, sex, anarchism, etc. At least one theme would surface naturally, they would write short papers about it, read them out loud in class, and another discussion would follow. We got to know one another as individuals and learned to respect the great diversity of opinions in the group. At the end of the semester, one student said that the most important thing she had realized was that her opinion was "just as good as anyone else's." Since everyone in the class had a unique point of view, she felt encouraged to respect her own.

There are problems, of course, with this kind of discussion, especially for the teacher. It is difficult to prevent the classes from disintegrating into endless babble about boyfriends, the latest parties, etc., and difficult also to challenge the students to relate their personal experiences to the system of political and social forces that oppress them. How does one decide which issues should have priority? How does one involve the quietest students in the discussions? When is it important to dwell on a subject that they are reluctant to talk about? Probably the worst thing a teacher can do is to ask leading questions. Students must think things through for themselves, especially in a course where consciousness-raising is essential to the development of their work. "Open-ended questions?" like, "Mary, how did you react to this book?" or simply, "Did you like this story?" encourage them to accept their cognitive and emotional perceptions as valid.

The success of the open discussion may mean that individualized attention in the group is not necessary. By individualized attention I mean the traditional method of discussing students' work by xeroxing a story and passing it out to be critiqued by the rest of the class. Since I felt that it was important that each student learn how to accept supportive criticism, I kept this format in addition to the collective writing and sharing (the focus of the individual critiques did change from craft to content during midsemester). This is not solely a problem of protecting people's egos, but of creating a sharing, supportive environment. Some teachers of creative writing ask their students not to sign their stories at the beginning of the seminar so that none of the criticism will be taken as "personal." My guess is that this encourages students to dissociate the story from any human struggle that goes into writing it; they might view their stories as products to be carefully scrutinized for flaws and defects. In a feminist writing workshop like this one, it is important that there be no pretense of ignorance about where a story originates, no dissociation between person and story. There should be an easy flow between life and fiction as writing loses some of its mystique and becomes one with the process of growing and changing one's consciousness.

**The Role of the Teacher**

We never did away entirely with the student/teacher dichotomy; my role evolved out of the needs of the students into one of facilitator/lecturer. I felt most comfortable facilitating the open discussions, although there was always the problem of students deferring to my opinion. I countered this by asking them pointedly, "Well, what do you think about that?" and then keeping quiet while they started to talk to one another.

Many of the women in the class had assumptions about my "authority" that I tried to undermine. For example, some of the beginning writers expected me to tell them what to write. They had a passive attitude about disciplining themselves to conceive and write a story, and expected me to prod them on—to teach them how to write. I don't think it's possible to teach anyone how to write and I told them so. I encouraged these students individually by discussing different ideas for stories and made a point of involving them in class discussions if they were excessively quiet. Yet at the end of the semester some of them were disappointed that I had not offered more guidance and individualized attention; curiously, in the midsemester evaluation some of these same students had strongly supported talking more about political issues and less about technique. It was my belief—and still is—that open discussions should be students' primary source of inspiration in the class, rather

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6 Florence Howe's explanation of "open-ended discussions and open questions" in "Identity and Expression: A Writing Course for Women" has been especially helpful to me.

7 Florence Howe's phrase.
FACT SHEET ON WOMEN’S STUDIES PROGRAMS IN 1977

1. There are now 276 women’s studies programs on college and university campuses in the United States. The growth rate of these programs in the last 18 months was 80 percent.

2. Women’s studies programs can be found in the District of Columbia and in all but nine of the 50 states. Those states without programs are Alaska, Idaho, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, North Dakota, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

3. The state with the largest number of programs continues to be California, with 48 programs. Other states with significant numbers of programs include New York (38), Illinois (21), and Michigan (17).

4. Three-quarters of all women’s studies programs can be found in public colleges and universities; one-quarter on private campuses. More than half of them (56 percent) are to be found in public four-year colleges and universities; 24 percent in private four-year colleges and universities; and 20 percent at public two-year colleges. There are no programs at private two-year colleges.

5. The largest area of growth is in the public two-year college. Of the 127 new programs, 40 percent are in the two-year community college, exactly twice the general percentage of two-year women’s studies programs in the total 276 programs. Eleven of the new two-year programs are in California, and six are in Illinois. In general, the states with the largest numbers of new programs are California (16), Michigan (12), Illinois and New York (11 each), and Minnesota (10).

6. Slightly more than half (51 percent) of all programs offer a structured curriculum leading to the completion of a minor, certificate, or degree. Six programs (all located in California) offer the Associate of Arts degree; 56 programs, the B.A.; 16 programs, the M.A.; and 2 (SUNY/Binghamton and Union Graduate School), the Ph.D.

7. A number of mature programs have, in 1977, instituted the B.A. degree: Barnard College, the University of California at Berkeley, California State University at Sonoma, the University of Georgia, SUNY/Albany, the University of South Carolina.

8. Four older programs have instituted both the B.A. and the M.A. degrees: the University of Maryland, the University of Alabama, California State University at Long Beach, and SUNY/Binghamton.

9. Four older programs have recently established certificates or minors and B.A.’s: the University of Nebraska, SUNY/Stony Brook, Towson State University, and the University of Georgia.

10. Cornell University, with one of the two oldest programs in the country, begun in 1969, has just established a graduate minor, the first in the country.

Compiled by Florence Howe and Frances Kelley

than a dependent relationship with a traditional authority figure.

Because this was the first women’s studies course for most of the students, I often had to relate information about women's history, anthropology, and feminist theory. This is what I mean by "lecturing" although it was done in a spontaneous way: I did not give speeches and would stop whenever someone had more information to offer, opinions to express, or questions to ask. When we talked about a subject like women and language, which was completely new to them, I had a responsibility to present at least basic introductory information. Students voluntarily took the lead in discussions about subjects that were more familiar to them.

Perhaps the most important responsibility a teacher has in this kind of workshop is to see that sexist and racist attitudes in the students' work and in the readings do not go ignored or unexamined. This is not only up to the teacher, of course; in this class, this responsibility was mine because no one else was inclined to speak up at the right moment.

Summary and Conclusion

I do not mean these observations to be in any way definitive for all feminist writing workshops, yet I think my experience suggests ways in which a feminist workshop is crucially different from a traditional (apolitical) writing course. To sum up, emphasis is on - process rather than product, on learning to trust and challenge oneself, to set a realistic pace, and stick to it.
- content rather than form or style to encourage women to respect themselves and accept their life experiences as material for creative work. Some consciousness-raising is necessary about the neglect and trivialization of women's lives in literature and discrimination against women writers.
- open discussion in which students talk to each other about personal experiences to reconnect with the essential concerns of their lives.
- consciousness-raising about the relationship between our personal lives as women and the patriarchal society in which we live.
- collective sharing of work to establish a supportive environment, generate ideas, and break down strict teacher/student roles.

As an exploration of "how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves," the feminist writing workshop provides an essential link between the "voiceless" past and the future that women imagine—and work to create.