Finding New Forms: Student Autonomy in a Patriarchal University

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REGIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY AND LITERATURE:
NEW APPROACHES TO NEW MATERIALS

Introduction

The project "Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective" was developed in 1976 by the Modern Language Association Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession and has been supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The major goal of the project is to improve the teaching of literature through involving students directly in conducting research on the letters, diaries, journals, oral testimonies, and "lost" published literature of the women of their region. Courses have been developed in a number of colleges and universities throughout the country in which students have explored local archives in public libraries and historical societies or have interviewed local women. Although each student had an individual project, classes met as a whole to learn research skills, to analyze findings, and generally to offer mutual support and encouragement. Finally, each student presented her or his findings to an audience outside the classroom. Some went into the community with dramatic readings from diaries and letters; some prepared slide-tape shows; others invited faculty, community people, and family to "celebrations" at which they read excerpts from their research; still others published their work in booklets funded by the project or in local journals.

The most obvious accomplishment of the project has been its own growth and the number of women's literature courses it has facilitated—from three in 1976 to 15 in 1977 to 24 in 1978. At least ten other courses are being taught outside the project. Thus, the project has helped make some modest breakthroughs in departmental bias against women's literature generally and regional women's letters, diaries, and oral testimonies in particular. One of the purposes of this year's project is to provide a structure to support the continuation of such courses, to consolidate faculty within four regional clusters—in Appalachia, the Great Plains, the Deep South, and California—so that they can help one another in both substantive and political ways.

A second accomplishment is the development of a broad variety of courses: there is no one model course. Teachers worked independently, although they shared progress reports and met in three planning sessions. We expect that their syllabi, bibliographies, research exercises, and essays on their experiences will be available soon. One of the major goals of the project was to develop a student-centered course, in which students might conduct original research on women's letters, diaries, oral testimonies, and "lost" published literature, and then present the results to others. In this process, students moved from the thrill of discovery to the pride of ownership. In practical terms, they learned research, analytical, and communication skills transferable to other courses.

The third accomplishment of the project is the discovery of materials which are valuable not only in their regional settings but in other settings as well. We know that working with these documents has engaged students affectively. We are also making intellectual claims for the materials—that they are significant to scholars. Teachers and students have believed enough in the worth of these materials to make at least a selection of their findings public.

In the broadest sense the project has been building a body of knowledge. Apart from discovering the new materials, teachers and students have had to ask why these materials have been lost, ignored, or neglected. Why have such materials been excluded from the literary canon? This project has led to an examination of the biases which have shaped traditional definitions of knowledge. Some of these questions will be investigated in an NEH Humanities Institute to be held this summer at the University of Alabama.

—Leonore Hoffman, Director of the MLA Project on "Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective"

Finding New Forms: Student Autonomy in a Patriarchal University

By Barbara Hillyer Davis

"Oklahoma Women" was a year-long experimental seminar at the University of Oklahoma designed to teach research skills and to discover what a few women could learn in a short time about the literature and history of the women of our region. In the first semester, we did research on Oklahoma women, and in the second, public programming based on that research.

Students learned directly how to do research in the humanities and did individual work on research projects and group work on the public programs. A photographic exhibit for a local conference on women's work, a community-wide series of programs in women's history in the Lawton area, and a booklet on the seminar's own group process were some of
The results, but the heart of the seminar was a series of research papers which are now in the University of Oklahoma Library in the Western History Collection.

"How can women's culture express itself and how can we responsibly examine it in a patriarchal society? What can we learn from women's lives and writings that will touch—perhaps change—the academy?"

These questions are quoted from the cover sheet of the course outline for my class on Oklahoma women. I thought the answer would be new, nonpatriarchal classroom forms. In the most patriarchal of state universities, I really believed we might initiate such a change. In a way, we did, but it was not as I had projected. The women in my class learned from my noble experiment in classroom equality that they prefer traditional academic structures and want parental authority from their teachers. But unstructured class sessions combined with traditional research methodology permitted them without my direction to develop new forms for the academic term paper.

The women of Oklahoma were never directly studied before our seminar. The women who came together to do this work were extremely uncertain of their ability to do original research and quite unprepared for the independence and initiative such work would require of them. They asked for—and received—guidance in choosing topics, acquiring research skills, and developing their projects. This was provided by the most traditional of classroom methods: guest lectures and written exercises. Lecturers presented information on research methodology and on identifying research subjects. Exercises provided training in the use of such source materials as newspapers, archives, interviews, tape transcriptions, and secondary sources. With this background, the students began their individual projects.

Because the work itself was original, it required a high degree of autonomy from the student researchers, who developed personal "ownership" of both subjects and methods. Within a few weeks, they were protesting the expenditure of class time on lecturers when they were better "qualified" than the guests to help one another. The lecturers were authoritative, professional, convinced of their "objectivity." But in our own discussions, after they left, we discovered that the "untrained" students knew important things which the lecturers had left out. The students were doing research on women, on subjects that had not been approached before, and I as professor was not more knowledgeable than they, not authoritative, therefore, or convinced of my "objectivity." I believed that my life as a woman was more important than my scholarly training for giving insight into the meaning of their research findings. This belief was as reassuring as the lecture on using archives for building the students' self-confidence.

Thus encouraged, I began to implement my plan for giving up the role of authoritative professor. I met with very intense resistance. The students demanded much more direction and structure than I had intended to offer. Although I have used a "student-centered" classroom for several years, these students experienced more stress and resisted my "imposition" of autonomy more directly than other groups. Highly critical of my "requirement" that they make their own decisions, they seemed to demand patriarchal structuring of the seminar even as they were gaining control of the materials of women's history for themselves. Eventually this paradox was expressed as disappointment in my unwillingness to meet the needs created by discovering the circumstances of Oklahoma women's lives. Having rejected the patriarchal guest lecturers, they wanted mothering instead. I, in turn, wanted to mother them.

The problem was resolved by one student's choice of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born as a text for class discussion. This enabled us to examine and analyze the casting of woman teacher in the role of mother. I think that the stress which necessitated such analysis was directly related to what we were learning about what it means to be an Oklahoma woman. In the first class session I had asked, and in our discussions we continued to ask one another, "Do you consider yourself an Oklahoma woman?" Until very near the end of the process, the answer was always "No," but a "No" that became increasingly elaborate. Our group identity, initially based on how different we were from the women we intended to study, was both strengthened and complicated by the research-based realization that most women have come to and responded to Oklahoma as outsiders. The women whose journals and letters and books we read had had the same range of responses to this land as we had.

As we gained knowledge of the circumstances of Oklahoma women's lives, including our own, the university's semester was moving right along. Although no student was prepared to challenge patriarchy by redesigning the classroom, we were all ready to challenge another patriarchal form: the term paper. We decided that although students' research findings would be carefully documented, we would not require the usual formal structure with its pretense of "objectivity" and "completeness." The redefinition, achieved by a group consensus rather than professorial edict, gave the writers permission to do what was comfortable to the individual. The results included a traditional scholarly paper for publication (Janet Noever's paper on Perle Mesta's feminism) and a conventional academic term paper (on the Woman Suffrage Movement in Oklahoma by Gayle Barrett). Other students moved cautiously away from these traditional models. Jane Taylor's paper on Angie Debo, for example, directly explored a woman historian's integration of her own life and her work as a model for women's history as integral with women's literature.

Another student, Linda Posada, distinguished between the "objective" writing she believed was expected of her by academic tradition and her own personal relation to the subject. She wrote a conventional paper presenting her research findings and then a separate personal essay on the impact of this research on her own life. Clearly distinguished from each other, these two parts, the public "research paper" and the private "reaction paper," define the problem of presenting a "personal research" (in Linda's case a family history focused on her grandmother) in a way that is both academically and personally responsible.
Applying Feminist Approaches to Learning and Research: A Practical Curriculum Model

By Ann C. Carver

A next logical step was Sallie Bodie's use of her own relationship to Jane Holder as a narrative framework for her presentation of her oral history interviews with her 84-year-old friend. And, going further still, Barbara McQuitty expanded the idea of the research paper to include the physical and psychological environment of the research. She became, in effect, one of her own primary sources. Her paper brings together not only the personal and the academic, but images from women's lives (carpools, fabric, living room furniture), the Oklahoma landscape (wind, dust, red mud), and the library (boxes of clippings, letters, old carbon copies). The whole experience is shaped by her effort to place herself in the landscape through which she drives to class and her understanding of herself as an outsider whose roots were torn by her move to Oklahoma.

Oklahoma is a plains state; the dominant feature of its landscape is the sky. "When I look at the sky," McQuitty says, "I want to go back in time, looking for some way to share and be less alone, back to when we were all outsiders to this place, all from somewhere else." In this context, she presents her own and other women's words about the sky, the landscape, trees, grass, fire, winds, and howling—"a rich and conscious presentation of past and present together. Having presented the diversity of women's responses to the same landscape and to the experience of exile, in striking and heavily documented detail, she speaks of the stories she has collected from diaries, letters, fiction, in terms of her own likes and dislikes, and concludes: "I don't like and I do like, but I understand them all—which tells me more about myself than it does about the stories." The personal note is characteristic. She says, "Doing a paper like this is impossible. I am sure this is not what a research paper is to be, I am sure this is my paper."

It is indeed. The great discovery for me in this course was the exploding possibility of new academic forms—not, as I had expected, in group process, but in writing: women's words. Nothing could be more appropriate to this project. In recovering the words of women, we began to discover our own.

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The three most difficult and crucial challenges I found in implementing the course design were the points in the process when a synthesis simply had to take place before we could progress further. In the first stage, Definition, the challenge for the students and for me was to transfer the abstract comprehension of various concepts and their implications to a gut-level understanding of how all that really does affect "me and my life"—to achieve an experienced relationship between the student and the material studied.

To achieve this synthesis, I used a series of structured exercises designed to help the students get in touch with their childhood language/cultural environment. For example, one day each student was asked to draw, in a set period of time, a house plan of the first place she remembered as "home." She filled in objects that she remembered—such as a piano in the parlor, the wallpaper pattern in her bedroom, a ghost in the attic. When the time was up, the students paired off, and each shared orally her house plan and the memories and experiences that it carried.

A second effective technique was a magic carpet ride to the community each student grew up in. To take the magic carpet ride, each student closes her eyes, with head on desk, while I "talk" the class into a sense of being on a carpet, so that they feel it lift off the ground, rise up above the school, hover, then float easily cross-country to the community the student