Applying Feminist Approaches to Learning and Research: A Practical Curriculum Model

Ann C. Carver

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

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/391
Applying Feminist Approaches to Learning and Research: A Practical Curriculum Model

By Ann C. Carver

By "Feminist Approaches to Learning" I mean a process of "breaking the accustomed mold" of established learning (to use Florence Howe's language). I mean learning to take the risk of questioning knowledge itself, using the creative expressions of women's cultures for the subject of study, and drawing upon the positive "ways of doing" in women's cultures for classroom and research methods.

The three operating principles for my course in "Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective" grow out of this approach. Those principles are: (1) intense, nonfragmented involvement of the whole person in the creative act of study; (2) sharing, based on deserved trust, as the mode of operating in the course; (3) conscious recognition that learning is a process.

The curriculum model for the course is the result of carefully blending the separate, recognized ingredients of the overall MLA project—regional cultural pluralism, women's creative expressions, interdisciplinary vision, and student-centered learning—into a coherent course experience through the dynamic created by these three principles of learning. The result is a curriculum design that is a process with four stages: Definition, Discovery, Analysis and Redefinition, and Creation. And each stage has a process within it which forms the basis for the following stage and continues to function in the following stages.

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 student closed her eyes, with head on desk, while her partner "talked" the class into a sense of being on a magic 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

Barbara Hillyer Davis is Director of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Oklahoma and is Treasurer of the National Women's Studies Association.
grew up in. Then I direct, quietly, the students’ examining from on high the terrain, architecture, general appearance of their communities. Then they move closer, land, and walk about invisible. They are to note whom they see, what those people are wearing, what they are saying, what their voices sound like. They are to note the details of the buildings, the air, the sounds, the smells. Then they are to look at themselves. They are six years old, at “home,” no longer invisible. They are to examine their “home.” Then I ask these and similar questions, softly: Who comes to meet you—Mother? Father? A pet? How are you greeted? What is your mother wearing, what hairdo? What is your father wearing? How old are they? What are they saying? How does your mother’s voice sound? Your father’s? What do you look like? How are you standing in relation to the others? How do you feel?

Then I direct the students to go to their first grade school, and I ask: What does it look like? Whom do you see? Go into the classroom; who is there? What does the teacher look like? Where and how are you seated—or are you seated? What is the teacher saying? How are you reacting? How does the teacher’s voice sound? How does she stand and move? What are you wearing? How do you feel? Then I free them to leave the class and wander about as they choose, observing their home, family, community, as if this were their last chance to print the memory on their minds indelibly. Then they must get back on their carpet, retrace their flight, land in the class, and then, fully back, open their eyes. In reality this whole exercise takes only from five to ten minutes.

These exercises were followed by extensive discussions about getting in touch with our earliest childhood language/cultural socialization and its continued effect and modifications. Now the students were ready to begin a course-long exercise, writing their own “Language/Cultural Autobiographies.” These autobiographies were kept in journal form, each student telling her own story in her own voice, focusing on her socio-cultural-language influences. When the course was two-thirds finished, each student edited her own journal into a consciously structured autobiography.

Writing and editing the autobiography had several important results. It initiated linkage between the student and the materials researched—triggered the recognition that “I am creating a woman’s expression as those women did whose works I’m studying—we are sisters.” Second, through editing their journals, students identified many of the critical questions they would encounter in analyzing nontraditional materials. Also, we shared house plans, exercises, and what was happening with our journals constantly. This helped change the class into a community of people who were learning how to share and how not to sabotage trust. We were building the support group necessary to risk asking the hard questions.

The second crucial challenge in synthesis came in moving from mastery of the research methods and analytical perspectives of different disciplines separately (the traditional interdisciplinary awareness) to the creation of a transdisciplinary awareness which equips the students and teacher to look at a document and be able to recognize what kinds of truths, what kinds of value, it contains. This means the student must recognize which critical questions, which analytical approaches, are appropriate for a particular document.

The exercise that actually made this concept a functioning reality for my students was created by the three faculty women who presented it in my class: Barbara Goodnight, sociology; Julia Blackwelder, history and American studies; and me, literature. We chose three letters written by women to the Atlanta Constitution during the depression. We put the letters on transparencies so that they could be projected on a screen. This allowed all of us, students and instructors, to look at them together while the three of us analyzed the letters from the perspectives of our different disciplines. Barbara asked questions of sociological analysis and discussed what could be learned from each letter as viewed by a sociologist. Julia asked questions of historical research and discussed the value of the same three letters in terms of what could be learned from them by a historian. I, in turn, asked the questions of literature and discussed the kinds of truths and the value each letter held as literature. The ensuing three-way discussion comparing and contrasting the various analytical questions, approaches, and kinds of value materials may hold for researchers was most effective in making the transdisciplinary approach to research analysis real to the students, and, I might add, to the three instructors. We had actually experienced the phenomenon.

The third challenge was the necessity of creating what Inez Tovar has called a “dynamic intimacy” between student and material researched. Because of this unique relationship of intense, nonfragmented involvement, the students became passionately committed to the women researched. Their goal became to capture in the students’ own writing, with complete accuracy, the contribution each woman made, recognizing both the real value of the contribution and its limitations, and why they are what they are.

Sue Felton, a sophomore in my class, studied the letters of Anna Greenough Burgwyn, a young Boston-born wife of a pre-Civil War North Carolina plantation owner. The opening paragraphs of the essay culminating Sue’s study illustrate both the dynamic intimacy achieved between researcher and material researched and the resulting nonfragmented analysis:

This is the story of a woman I have come to know, love, and admire. It is also the story of two women who have been able to reach hands across the expanse of 140 years and share similar and conflicting experiences in their lives. One of these women is myself; the other is Anna Greenough Burgwyn. We are both children of the North, transplanted South to put down roots in an unfamiliar soil of red clay. We are both young women on the verge of accepting a new maturity, experiencing a time when one looks in the mirror and is surprised by a face that seems much older than the last time we looked. I live in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the year 1978. When I came to know Anna it was 1838.

Through Anna I have come to know and feel and grow so much that although I have never actually met her, she is as alive and real to me as it is possible for anyone to
be. It is Anna’s letters to her mother that have enabled her to reach out to me and helped me to see into her world, and to come to a better understanding of my own. These letters were Anna’s way of extending back to her old world, of keeping in touch with those she loved. Little did she realize that one day they would also reach forward into time.

Sue was able to create and sustain the necessary tension which recognizes the value of both the analytical, universal dimensions and the personal, experienced dimensions of the letters and of the research process itself, without confusing them. This dynamic intimacy with the materials and the ability to evaluate them on their own terms, not judge them by preconceived ideas of what they should be, was possible because the students had learned to relate to one another on that basis.

In fact, I am convinced that none of these challenges could have been met, none of the hard questions asked, none of the exciting, truly original scholarship produced, if the mode of operating had not been sharing and if the extra energy had not been spent to build a bond of trust and support among the class members. And that, I believe, could not have happened if we had not committed ourselves to the principle that true unity grows from the mutual acceptance of differences as well as similarities. We had to work very hard to make this principle a functioning way of life. We developed a little colloquy we recited in seriousness and later as a joyful affirmation:

I recognize the right of each person to her perception
I may disagree with it
I may challenge it
I may offer alternatives to it
I must listen with openness
in order to understand it and
to discover what I can learn from it
I may not demean or attack
the person’s worth because of it

Because we were able to allow each woman in the class to be who she is and because we learned to affirm her right to her perceptions, we could also trust and share without fear among ourselves. Consequently we could allow the women we studied to be who they are and could learn from them and evaluate their real contributions without prejudging or being blinded because of preconceived assumptions of what they should be.

Ann C. Carver is Associate Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Awakenings: Developing a Regional Identity through Women’s Writings
By Sally Brett

Before you can write about a Civil War mother’s letters to her son or edit the courtship letters of a young Tarboro woman, you have first to find the letters. For some researchers, this means finding people—informants—and then, hopefully, the family manuscripts in the attic or barn or cupboard. For my class, I took a different—some might say easier—route: I identified manuscripts of interest in the university’s manuscript collection. Actually, that is not as easy as it sounds. Most manuscripts come from prominent men of the region. Thus the emphasis of cataloguing falls on male activities—and male names. What you do is search very, very carefully for the note stuck at the end of the last paragraph which reads, “Also, letters of wife.” Or daughter. Or “Some household and domestic journals.”

As the students and I discovered, beginning with the manuscripts is just that: a beginning. Students tend to look blankly at the assorted letters or diaries or journals and say, “Now what?” It’s a panic point, and the best way to get beyond it is to provide parallel readings. These readings should help the students learn to do two things: (1) to read the archival materials in a new way and (2) to observe the methods of researchers who have worked with similar materials. To start with the latter: possibly the best models are furnished by Anne Scott’s book The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics and by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s article “The Female World of Love and Ritual.” I stress that Scott and Smith-Rosenberg (as well as Barbara Welter) provide not only content information but also highly impressive answers to the questions of citation and use of archival materials.

Further, beyond the mechanics of citation and usage, the selected parallel readings provide analytical models—models for reading. Students have to learn how to read between the lines. I had my students read excerpts from published memoirs—for example, Susan Smedes’s Memories of a Southern Planter. Then we asked questions that Anne Scott or Carroll Smith-Rosenberg might have asked when she faced her manuscripts. Questions like: What does this woman write about? What does she not write about? What does she repeat? What are her favorite topics? What are her characteristic or idiosyncratic phrases? How does she see herself or report herself? How does she see others? Is her penmanship revealing? Does she seem to have been educated? Several of these questions are identical to those used to ascertain the reliability of a first-person narrator in fiction.