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Teaching about Women's Lives to Elementary School Children

Sandra Hughes
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By Sandra Hughes

As sixth-grade teachers with a desire to teach students about the historical role of women in the United States, my colleague and I created a project for use in our classrooms which would maximize exposure to women’s history with a minimum of teacher effort. This approach was necessary because of the small amount of time we had available for gathering and organizing material on the history of women and adapting it to the elementary level.

Since textbook material on women is practically nonexistent, we decided to have the students use the biographical approach. Each student was to read a biography of an American woman and respond to it in several ways. We gathered biographies from neighboring libraries on reading levels ranging from third to tenth grade (the span of our classes). We made sure that each student had a book which was appropriate for her or his reading level. The assignment was fourfold:

1. Read the book and enjoy it.
2. Analyze the woman’s life by writing out answers to the following questions:
   a. Why is the person in this book a subject worthy of being written about? What makes her special?
   b. What qualities (characteristics) does this person have which made her successful?
   c. Did this person have any handicaps or difficulties that she had to overcome in reaching success? If so, how did she overcome them?
   d. As well as you can, describe what life was like for women at the time of her life. Are there any clues in her story?
   e. Compare yourself to the person you read about. What personal qualities of that person do you have? What qualities would you like to have?
   f. What did you learn from reading this book that you did not know before?
   g. What did you like about the book? What did you not like?
3. Prepare an oral presentation (5-10 minutes) discussing the life and contributions of the woman.
4. Create a picture poster of the woman which includes a paragraph summary of her life.

The intent in assigning tasks involving reading, writing, oral presentation, and art work was to allow each student to perform in an area of strength as well as gain practice in areas of less confidence (such as public speaking).

The students’ response to the project was more than enthusiastic. They were excited and eager to learn. The boys in particular surprised me, for they showed very little skepticism of a “What do we have to do this for?” nature. I found that there was much opportunity for me to teach about the history of women in general, for each oral report would stimulate discussion not only about the woman herself, but also about the times in which she lived and the other factors that made her life what it was. Each student seemed to take a particular pride in the woman studied—it could be felt in the tone of their voices when they began, “My woman is . . . .” They also enjoyed the poster part of the assignment and took much care and time trying to duplicate how the women actually looked. Afterwards, the posters were hung around the classroom.

The first time I taught the project, I did it in a somewhat haphazard way, in terms of preparing the students for what they were to do. The second time, I was much more methodical and deliberate in the lead-up discussion for beginning the project. The whole class (thirty students) was asked to name all the women they could who had made a significant contribution to our country’s history. With all brains working together, they came up with the following names:

1. Betsy Ross
2. Martha Washington
3. Amelia Earhart
4. Susan B. Anthony (Someone had heard of the new one-dollar coin.)
5. Dolly Madison (A boy said, “Isn’t she the one who makes those cupcakes?” We have a local bakery by that name!)
6. Eleanor Roosevelt

After reviewing the list, we decided to cross off Washington and Madison since they were primarily wives and not “doers.” So we ended our brainstorming session with a grand total of four names!

I then asked the students why, when our country had been in existence for almost four hundred years and half the population had always been women, did they think they were able to name only four women who had been active participants in significant ways in our history. The first response was from a Japanese boy. He hung his head, as though ashamed, and said, “Because we’re stupid.” The list of responses moved from this idea to the realization that there was nothing available for them to read, as the textbooks were silent on the subject. I finished the list with the thought that one of the main reasons they didn’t know about what women had done and experienced was because their teachers didn’t know! This really made them react because in their minds teachers are still infallible!

At this point in the discussion I said that this lack of knowledge was about to change. I brought out the boxes of biographies I had gotten from various libraries in my area and announced to my students that they were going to have an
opportunity to learn about the lives of thirty women. In addition to reading about one woman, each student would hear about twenty-nine others. By this time, they had such a positive mindset that they literally moved as a group toward the boxes, handling the books and reading the names of the women. They were excited and wanted to get going immediately. I told them not to look for familiar names as a way of choosing a book, for they would not recognize the names of these women. Instead I said things like “Who wants to be a doctor?” and handed the biography of Elizabeth Blackwell to a girl waving her arms in the air. I distributed all the books in that fashion.

The students read the books eagerly, many taking more than one as “free reading” material. Again, as in the first time I did the project, no one complained about the subject matter of the books. I sensed a genuine hunger for information they had never known existed.

In teaching the project this time, I changed the method by which the students would share their new knowledge. Instead of writing out answers to questions, making posters, and giving oral reports, this time each student made a filmstrip and wrote an accompanying narration. The lesson was then taught to the class. Thus, each student became a teacher and in a small way made up for all the teachers who still didn’t know much about the history of women. They were as motivated as I’ve ever seen children be, and they kept exclaiming how much fun they were having. Creating a filmstrip was exciting, for they had never worked in this medium before. Some students put their narration on tape, complete with background music and sound effects. One girl prefaced her presentation with the playing of Helen Reddy’s “I Am Woman.” I gave no suggestions beforehand and was amazed by the creativity and sensitivity shown in many of the lessons.

During the actual presentation of each person’s lesson, the class was totally attentive. Again, the feeling I got was that this was important and demanded the best that they could give. I filled in historical gaps as I had the first time. For example, I discussed why Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony called the Seneca Falls Convention or what education was like for women at the time of Mary Lyon.

I talked with several mothers after the project had been completed. Each remarked on how much her son or daughter had enjoyed the assignment. One boy had gone so far as to engage the help of his grandfather in putting together the tape to go with his filmstrip. One mother later told me that her daughter kept asking to go to the library all summer to check out more biographies of women. Her lesson had been on Margaret Chase Smith. And when this particular eleven-year-old student, an accomplished organist, went to Washington, D.C., to compete in an organ festival last summer, she asked her mother if it would be possible, while they were there, for them to visit a hotel which was prominent in the Chase biography in order to look up her signature in the directory of registrations. Her mother said, “Absolutely yes.”

I also discussed the value of the project with the students after it was completed. There was almost unanimous agreement that each phase of the assignment was worthwhile, and the students felt they had learned a great deal. One boy volunteered that he had tremendous respect for the woman he had studied, and he felt he never could have overcome the hardships she had to face in her life. There was an understanding nod of agreement from other students in the room.

My school district has adopted new social studies books for this year, and I will be teaching fifth and sixth grades. At the end of our final discussion I asked the students for their reaction to the idea of learning about women along with studying United States history as presented in the textbook. They said that they
would value being in a class that did so, and that it would make history much more interesting. I am encouraged by their response and determined to integrate the history of women with the material presented in the traditional text. Students on the elementary school level are eager to learn about women, and the presentation of role models of strong, self-actualizing women can have a powerful, positive influence on both boys and girls.

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The list of women studied included: Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, Martha Berry, Elizabeth Blackwell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Rachel Carson, Shirley Chisholm, Prudence Crandall, Marie Curie, Emily Dickinson, Emily Dunning, Amelia Earhart, Anne Hutchinson, Jenny Johnson, Helen Keller, Abby Kelley, Mary Lyon, Maria Mitchell, Deborah Moody, Lucretia Mott, Carry Nation, Annie Oakley, Eleanor Roosevelt, Sacajawea, Margaret Chase Smith, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman, and Emma Willard.

Teaching Lesbian Poetry *
By Elly Bulkin

In all that has been written about teaching women's literature, about classroom approaches and dynamics, there is almost no discussion of ways to teach lesbian literature. As a teacher, you hesitate to write about it in detail (if at all) for the same reasons you hesitate to emphasize it—or even discuss it—in class and out: the fear of losing your job, of being denied tenure; the fear that, regardless of your sexual and affectional preference, you will be dismissed by your students as "just a lesbian." You may be concerned that students who feel hostile, skeptical, or even friendly toward feminism and the women's movement will be irrevocably "lost" if you focus "too much" attention on lesbianism. You may feel doubts about colleagues' reactions to what you teach and how you teach it. There is also the threat that the validity of a hard-earned women's course, women's studies program, or women's center will be undercut, and funding jeopardized, if it becomes perceived as a "dyke effort.”

If you are not a lesbian, your responses need to be explored before you can effectively teach lesbian material. If you feel uncomfortable with the subject matter but insist you have "no difficulty at all" with lesbianism, you may teach the inappropriateness of discussing (and perhaps even recognizing) such discomfort. If you begin a class on lesbian poetry by "just happening" to mention your married status, you may communicate your fear of being suspected a lesbian and discourage students from asking "too many" questions or seeming "too interested." If, on the other hand, you acknowledge the limitation of your understanding of lesbianism and make available information learned from lesbians and/or from current books by lesbians, you may encourage students' willingness to fill the gaps in their own knowledge. If you admit your own fears, stereotypes, and myths, and place them within the framework of a society that teaches homophobia, you will help weaken barriers between nonlesbian students and lesbian material. Although I do think that a nonlesbian teacher should teach lesbian writing in any case, to raise the relevant personal and political issues and to explore them most adequately require facilitation by a lesbian teacher, student, or guest speaker, by someone who has herself experienced the freedom and oppression of being a lesbian and who can share that openly.

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When I speak in a classroom about lesbian poetry, I do so now as a lesbian guest speaker. I begin with two fundamental assumptions: (1) the poet's lesbianism is an essential, not an incidental, fact about her life and her work; (2) a discussion of lesbianism must focus not only on political ideas (what we think), but on feelings (how we act, what we say, how we live our expressed politics).

Students in one women's studies class were adamant about the "universality" of the selections in Amazon Poetry.1 Why, they wanted to know, had Joan Larkin and I called it "an anthology of lesbian poetry" (my italics)? Skeptical about my answers, they held to their sense of ready identification with the poets in the book; the fact of the poets' lesbianism, they insisted, was not sufficiently important for us to have stressed it. Other questions followed, more personal ones. I shared my feelings about the energy and time it took me even to be in the classroom; I recalled times when my anger at the need to deal with people's homophobia and general ignorance about lesbianism had been too strong for me to be able to do so.

I have almost never been the only lesbian in such a class. I run the risk, unless other lesbians in the class are vocal, of having my own perceptions and experiences applied to lesbians as a group. I emphasize that I am speaking as an individual. As a white, middle-class, comparatively young woman, I stress my obvious inability to speak for many lesbians who are Black, Latin, Native American, Asian American, working-class, and older.

*Earlier versions of this article, with a reading list, were published in Radical Teacher and College English. A much-expanded version is available from the Lesbian-Feminist Study Clearinghouse, Women's Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.

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