Teaching Women's History to Men in Prison

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Teaching Women's History to Men in Prison

By Diane Tarmy Rudnick and Sayre Phillips Sheldon

"To me, real feminism means working together with other people to try to change the balance of power and wealth, working for everybody's right to human dignity." —Inmate at Massachusetts Correctional Institute, Norfolk

With all the problems of getting women's history accepted in traditional institutions, why try to introduce it in an environment that we could expect to be unsympathetic? The idea, when it was first suggested to us, sounded improbable.

As we discussed it, possibilities began to emerge. We were each giving courses at Boston University on women's history in America: one emphasizing the economic and social aspects, the other using a historical and literary approach. We could easily collaborate on an interdisciplinary course. Such a course would provide a new way of looking at American life for men who had reason to question the American history they had learned in their school days. It would allow us to try our material with students of very different backgrounds from those of our college students. Since Boston University's Metropolitan College had been giving degrees at Norfolk, a medium-security prison, for several years, we would have the support of a successful, established program.

One of us had been both teacher and administrator in the program for several years and knew how hard-working and challenging students who were inmates could be. The reasons for giving the course overcame our reservations, and we agreed to teach it in the spring of 1978.

At our planning sessions, we concentrated on designing a course that would meet the special conditions of teaching in prison and at the same time present women's history as a valid, disciplined subject for a group of incarcerated men. Some of these special conditions were: Men would sign up for the course to stay in the degree program even if they objected to the subject. Although they had to satisfy certain entrance requirements, the men would represent a wide assortment of ages and backgrounds, including a wide range of educational experience. We would see them only once a week for three hours, the time further reduced by the security checks we had to go through to enter the prison, as well as by continuous interruptions from men being called out of class for visits, lawyers, and other programs. There were budgetary limitations on the number of books we could assign and no adequate library resources with which to supplement them.

Under these and other as yet unforeseen conditions, we were determined to be flexible and still maintain the highest standards of college teaching; to encourage questioning and still maintain our commitment to women's history. In this summary,*

we attempt to show how we designed and carried out an untraditional course in an untraditional environment; what results the course had for our students; and how the course enriched and broadened our own understanding.

We chose the title "Women in American Life," and agreed on two major goals for the course:

(1) to demonstrate how women, like men, have contributed to and been affected by the history of the United States, although their part in the historical process has been largely ignored until recently;

(2) to demonstrate that the process of education requires a tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to suspend and change old opinions when confronted with new evidence.

As our basic texts we chose Friedman and Shade's Our American Sisters, 1 because it combined articles of real depth with a historical overview, and Merriam's Growing Up Female in America, 2 for its documentation of women's lives through biographies, journals, and letters. We supplemented the reading material with Labor Department materials, census data, and other sources, especially Baxandall, Gordon, and Reverby's America's Working Women. 3 The materials from American literature included poetry by Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson; selections from The Scarlet Letter and Uncle Tom's Cabin; and selections from contemporary authors, such as Lillian Hellman, Tillie Olsen, and a group of Black women poets. Weekly reading assignments averaged 100 to 150 pages.

We planned the course as a series of units with a thematic and roughly chronological framework. For example, the first and second units were on Women in the Colonial Period—the first emphasizing their roles and status, the second examining their economic functions. Other units were: The Cult of True Womanhood, The Nineteenth-Century Working Woman, Radicals and Reformers, and so on, up to Contemporary Feminism, with a unit on Women in Other Countries to provide some cross-cultural analysis. With each unit we handed out a sheet of questions designed to provide structure for the reading assignments, and topics for written work and classroom discussion. Our lectures were kept short to allow maximum time for discussion. We varied the routine with films, assigned television programs, and reference to contemporary events. The first written assignment was short and ungraded, in order to give the men a chance to develop skills in using source material and improving their writing. Longer assignments followed, leading up to the final examination, which was a series of essays assigned during the last two weeks of the course.

Confident of our planning for the course, we were still unsure of the reception we would get when we met the class for the first time: sixteen men, ranging in age from their early twenties to their late fifties. Some had taken their first college

*A more detailed account of the course, including the final examination and analysis of the men's responses to it, may be obtained by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the authors.
courses in prison; others had finished college before coming to prison; one of these men had had two years of law school. We talked briefly about our intentions for the course. The men then expressed their doubts about it—their assumption that it would be largely devoted to consciousness-raising; their distrust of the women's movement; and their uneasiness about being talked into beliefs they did not approve of. We explained that we were there to give them materials from history, sociology, economics, and literature, which would allow them to come to their own conclusions about women in American life.

We handed out a selection from Ruth Landes's observations of women in the Ojibwa tribe, observations that provide a timeless exposition of women's experience. The selection was short, had clear parallels with the present, and yet was removed enough to be on neutral ground—or so we thought. In a short time, however, we had plunged into the kind of lively, impassioned discussion that was to characterize the course. One man brought up the subject of how badly Americans of European descent had treated Native Americans, male and female. Another refused to accept Landes's evidence that Ojibwa women moved more easily into the world of male tasks than Anglo women did. Everyone seemed to want to speak at once, to overwhelm us with opinions, to convince us that women from the world outside the walls had little to tell them. We managed to steer the discussion back to our major point: women in subsistence cultures assume many roles that our society traditionally restricts to men. We were providing a foundation for our second class, the unit on women in colonial times. We were also establishing the ground rules for the course: we would listen to arguments as long as they were supported with evidence, and allow discussion to digress as long as it was productive; but we would return over and over again to our main themes and the material which supported these themes.

As the term went on, we showed our determination to deal with facts even when the issues were emotionally loaded. Eventually the men wanted to hear what we had to say even when they disagreed with it most. They began to see that the social forces affecting women's lives in this country were similar or identical to forces affecting their own lives. More concretely, they began to use the materials of the course to support and expand their own ideas and to articulate these ideas more clearly. Some continued to show resistance to new material which questioned old beliefs. We never left that shabby, beat-up classroom, however, without a sense that the struggle going on there involved growth and change. At our final session, the men thanked us as they said good-bye. One told us, "When I watch T.V. now, I am always noticing what women are shown doing—or what they are not shown doing." Another said, "I didn't think I'd ever say this, but I sure hope they pass the E.R.A."

The course was over, but perhaps the men's new awareness of women's lives would continue. The men had accepted the importance of women in American history; they had moved from opinionated, often defensive, argument to reasoned, coherent points of view. At the same time, they had honestly expressed their struggle to accept these new ideas about women. One quotation from the final examination summarizes this struggle very well:

Let me say that I'm all for change. I have always been the underdog in every type of endeavor possible. Where I am now should make it easy to believe this statement... but I have something to say as to why many men oppose change. You see, I'm a twenty-four-year-old white male in America. I didn't enslave the Blacks, I didn't repress women in jobs and tasks. You see, it seems I have to take all the heat for things I had nothing to do with. ... So, yes, I do have a little resentment in me about things but I think with time I will be better able to understand the needs and problems of people around me.

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NOTES

2. Eve Merriam, ed., Growing Up Female in America (New York: Dell, 1971). (Noticing that our students made brown paper covers for this book, we asked why, and were told that its title and cover illustration—a "Colonial maid" carrying a basket of stars—had provoked too many comments from fellow-inmates.)