Your Mind — Use It or Lose It: Women's Studies in a Nursing Home

Dorothy Kilton

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

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Teaching Research Methods in Women’s Studies

"Research Methods in Women’s Studies" is a two-credit-hour, 300-level course taught in the School of Library and Informational Science at the University of Missouri—Columbia. One objective of this course is to ensure that students become regular, successful users of a library. The other is to introduce them to the wide variety of women’s studies resources which are available at UMC and to make them aware of resources in other research collections, some of which may be available through interlibrary loan.

Students are taught that there is a systematic means of using a library’s collections which every person should adapt to her or his needs. Seven basic types of resources are studied: (1) books—accessible through card catalogs, book catalogs, and computer terminals; (2) journals—often accessible through indexes to periodicals, but sometimes requiring scanning issue by issue; (3) newspapers—sometimes indexed but often not; (4) government documents—state, federal, and international; (5) audio-visual materials; (6) microforms; and (7) manuscripts.

Students are required to compile a bibliography on a topic which they choose on some aspect of women’s studies. The bibliography must include an introduction which defines the subject, outlines the research method used, and lists any limitations which the student has placed on the topic. All formats of materials studied in class must be included in the bibliography unless the student has determined that they are not applicable.

A pre-test is handed out on the first day of classes so that the instructors can more closely direct the course toward the students’ needs. Areas of research already mastered by the students are omitted in order that unfamiliar topics can receive extra time and concentration. A post-test given on the last day of classes is used as a guide for both the students and the instructors to indicate the mastery of the resources and research methods by the students.

The course is taught by Robert Grey Cole, Associate Director of UMC Libraries and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Library and Informational Science, and June DeWeese, Social Science Librarian and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Library and Informational Science, UMC. The instructors would like to know whether other courses like theirs are being taught, and would like to share syllabi and ideas with the teachers of such courses.

Your Mind — Use It or Lose It:
Women’s Studies in a Nursing Home
By Dorothy Kilton

The following article, an example of student work, was sent in by Anne R. Barrett, Coordinator of the Women’s Studies Nursing Home Education Project sponsored by the Women’s Studies Program at the University of New Hampshire. Written by one of the elderly participants in the project, the essay, Barrett feels, "captures the spirit of our program most eloquently."

Barrett reports that she and her colleagues "are absolutely delighted with the outcome of the project. It is even more successful than we had originally anticipated. The average age of our students is 87, and we have added a new course this semester (at their request): New England Women’s History."

She adds that she "would be happy to provide detailed information to anyone interested, including a list of possible funding sources."

Until fairly recently, it has been the common belief that both the body and the mind succumb to the infirmities of old age. True or false? False! Among the elderly, there are many minds that long for more intellectual activity.

Two years ago, Anne Barrett, of the Women’s Studies Program at the University of New Hampshire, had a persistent idea that there must be older people—old-older—who would enjoy attending academic classes at the university. Yet, because of handicaps, or lack of transportation, they weren’t able to. Could intellectual education be taken to them, and conducted in their own environment?

Because she is particularly interested in what women have accomplished and are accomplishing, and because there are more elderly women than men, she decided that homes for aging women would be a good place to start her outreach project. She got other faculty members interested, secured funding for a fascinating series of courses, and supplied books and materials for everyone. The details of how she did it—how she has brought her program to the elderly women here—are her story. How ten elderly women at the Eventide Home in Exeter, New Hampshire, have responded is my story.

Outsiders say, "But you at Eventide are really old." We sure are. We are the elder-elderly ranging in age from 75 to 97. The interesting point to me is that the many years have given us a broader and deeper perspective, with actual experience in some activities that are only history to our very much younger instructors. It amazed them that we actually marched in the Woman Suffrage parades back in 1915 to 1920.
What has given us both pleasure and an opportunity to learn has been a class one evening a week. The curriculum was divided into three courses: (1) Women and Literature, (2) Creative Writing, and (3) Women and Films.

The “Women and Literature” section was a study of women writers. We read two short stories each week—twelve in all, ranging from the late 1800s to the modern period—and in class analyzed them word by word. We learned what made a good short story, as we were tactfully led into understanding a bit of the techniques involved. There was always a difference of opinion. It took only two evenings till we could really speak our minds.

To give you an idea of the kind of stories we read, all written by women, here is a brief list. From the older writers: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “The Revolt of Mother”; Sarah Orne Jewett, “The Flight of Betsey Lane”; Susan Glaspell, “A Jury of Her Peers.” By contrast, modern writers: Grace Paley, “The Long-Distance Runner”; Rebecca Morris, “The Good Humor Man.” And, for good measure, from mysteries: C. B. Labrid, “Golf Widow”; Dorothy A. Collins, “A Type of Murder.”

The second section, “Creative Writing,” was fun and instructive. By the second evening, not only were we writing, we were reading out loud what we had written. Each week we had a choice of subject—for example, “A Haunting Memory” or “Something Happened,” “A Moment of Peace” or “A Character in Relation to an Object.” The nicest part was what we learned about each other. So many of our characteristics were revealed in our writing, and so much was shared.

One member, 92 years old, always had something interesting to share, such as this excerpt from her “Memories of the Grindstone”:

One of the joys of my childhood was when I helped my father with the grindstone . . . a flat stone rotated on an axle, and used for sharpening tools like those used on a farm. I would turn the crank on the stone and my father would sharpen the tools on the stone. There was also a pail of water and a ladle. This was to keep the tools from getting too hot while grinding. Father would tell me when to pour the water on. On fair days Father would bring the grindstone outdoors. On rainy days, we worked on the big barn floor.

I enjoyed Saturday because had I stayed in the house with Mother, it would have been to clean the steel forks and knives, which I did not like to do. We cleaned these with bath-brick. This was fine powder made from calcium and silicon, and pressed into brick shape. We scraped the powder off the brick, and the polishing was done by a raw potato cut in two and dipped in the bath-brick. The name “bath” came from Bath, England, where it was originally found.

I do not know today if those stones are still used as they were then. But one still sees them as decorations . . . reminders of those long-ago days.

Another woman, 79 years old, always wrote introspectively, leaving her listeners with food for thought. The Bible was often a source of inspiration for her, as in this piece from “Something Happened”:

He awoke to feel the gentle motion of the great boat from side to side, very different from the violent twisting and turning during the preceding days and nights. He had never experienced such a storm. The rain descended incessantly day after day. His boat, which had been built on dry land, was soon surrounded by water and afloat on a sea which gradually enlarged and grew more frightening. All land disappeared from view; everywhere, life seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. Seemingly, only the old man and those he had gathered to himself were alive. What would become of them? . . .

Presently, we are in the third section, “Women and Films.” It is appalling that, beginning in the 1920s and running along for many years, women were treated as intellectual inferiors. Their acting was manipulated by the directors who in turn knew how to satisfy the moguls of the box office.

We grew up with the nickelodeon, the silent movies, the early talkies, the later movies featuring women as “stars.” Now we are looking behind the scenes, learning what has led slowly but surely to the art-movie of today.

Life at Eventide in Exeter, New Hampshire, runs at a slower tempo than the world outside. But one evening a week, a group of elder-elderly women takes part in a very different atmosphere. All are loving it. And we’re very proud of our blue notebooks with the University of New Hampshire seal on the cover!

Dorothy Kilton is an 86-year-old resident of the Eventide Home.