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Men in Women’s Studies: Two Experiential Accounts

“Why Are You Here?”: A Man’s Experience at the 1981 GLCA National Summer Institute in Women’s Studies

Cyrus W. Banning

“Why are you here?” As one of two men among the sixty or so participants and staff at the 1981 GLCA National Summer Institute in Women’s Studies, this was the question I feared and knew I had to be able to answer. During the three weeks the Institute lasted I was actually asked it only a few times, but the conscious awareness of its legitimacy was with me every minute. I thought before I went, and believe more firmly now, that a man can be a feminist and even an effective teacher of women’s studies. Since this is a claim many find suspect and even self-contradictory, I expected to be challenged more often and more vigorously than I was. In retrospect, I see that I was harder on myself than the others were.

What really happened was that after a week or so I seemed to be fully accepted as just another member of the Institute. This was overwhelmingly the best part of the experience. I had never really believed that I could be part of a group of women who were talking openly about feminism and women’s studies. I was, and I’m grateful for it. As always, much of the discussion went on in informal groups out walking, at meals, or drinking and dancing at a disco a few blocks away in downtown Ann Arbor. To the credit of the organizers, even more took place in the seminars and workshops. This may have been less true for the women, who were all housed together on the upper three floors of the dormitory, while we two men were isolated in a rear corner on the first floor. These were times of real candor, and I learned a lot from them.

One thing I learned was what it was like to be in a class that was called upon to choose its own topics and devise its own methodology. I had been aware of this “feminist process” before but had never had to live with it. Now it often made me angry, and my hunger for careful, analytic discussion of the theoretical and philosophical pieces on the reading list went unsatisfied. I have since realized that the best things couldn’t have happened without it. Trying to explain why one wants to approach a certain topic in a particular way forces one to decide what one needs and why, based on one’s experience and situation.

The seminars and workshops, however, were not free to do just anything the participants decided, because of the Institute’s focus on the interlocking of homophobia, racism, and “classism” with sexism. This was the one point of substance the Institute wanted to insist that everyone confront, and we did. The ways in which we did varied among the four theory seminars and six teaching workshops we were in. Those of us in Gloria Joseph’s teaching workshop will never forget the struggle to characterize the various forms of oppression clearly and to say just what teaching in a feminist, nonhomophobic, nonracist, non-“classist” way would be like. It hurt to acknowledge what we realized about ourselves and our classrooms, but none of us will teach again the way we did before.

During these discussions I realized the one advantage I had in being a man at the Institute. I already knew what it was like to have to rely on vicarious experience from conversation, observation, and reading to form the basis of one’s understanding of a form of oppression. Most of the other participants were confronted for the first time with having to learn about an oppression outside of their experience.

In addition to increased awareness of other varieties of oppression and a confirmation that all the work I had been doing on my own was not wrong-headed or out of date, several other things remain with me from those intense and splendid three weeks. I became convinced that women’s studies must be interdisciplinary, filling the gaps left by traditional academic departments while showing them their relevance to each other. There is the difficult and unsettled question of whether we need a unifying theory of the origins of oppression before we can understand what is going on. At times it seemed beside the point—at other times, crucial. When it did not seem too important—during the final days—I realized the need to act, rather than just continuing to think and read. I was forced to ask myself whether, if I believed what I said I did, I didn’t have to work for change, and whether I could continue at my institution if change didn’t come fast enough. The answer to the first question is clear, but the second is still uncertain. What is certain is the energy the Institute and the other participants gave me.

I now know what I was doing there: I was getting informed and empowered for a job which is harder and more important than I could have realized before I went. I could have turned back then; I cannot now.

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Second GLCA Summer Institute in Women’s Studies to Be Held in 1982

The Second Annual National Summer Institute in Women’s Studies, “Toward a Feminist Transformation of the Curriculum,” sponsored by the Great Lakes Colleges Association, will be held from June 20 to July 10, 1982, on the campus of the University of Michigan. For information, write to Beth Reed, Institute Director, GLCA, 220 Collingwood, Suite 240, Ann Arbor, MI 48103; or call her at (313) 994-0977. The deadline for completed applications is March 10, 1982.