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ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, the relatively new discipline of Women's Studies was taught by educators whose primary fields were literature, psychology, sociology, or history. One problem that faces many instructors is the double-bind situation that Women's Studies courses are popular, so the dynamic teacher may find herself/himself teaching more courses--sometimes with as many as 120 undergraduates--writing more papers, and attending more conferences. Some students see literary readings such as Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" as an attack on their traditional mothers. Explanation and re-explanation of truths and realities in society, while necessary in the classroom, are energy-draining over a period of time, and can cause instructor fatigue and "burn out." Additionally, evolving consciousness sometimes turns student rage on the instructor; also, the Women's Studies instructor can find herself/himself spending more and more time with more and more students. The final hurdle for many instructors is that Women's Studies is seen as a "mongrel" discipline, which is not helpful in the tenure process. Many academics fail to perceive the legitimacy of feminist literary criticism, but feel that anyone writing is this area can get any article or book published. The vulnerability of courses in Women's Studies to educational budget cuts is another drawback. Those who teach Women's Studies, however, feel that it can go a long way in helping men and women to more completely understand each other and the society which shaped their attitudes. (NKA)

Teaching Women's Studies: An Historical Perspective

by

Pamela Hindman Hearn

Teaching Women's Studies: An Historical Perspective

Many of us who are now teaching Women's Studies courses and coordinating programs were never prepared for the realities and demands of this relatively new discipline in the early 1970's. Most of us, at least in the Mid-West, who pioneered Women's Studies, were educated to teach literature, history, psychology, sociology, economics, biology, etc. After all, in the 60's there were few, if any, Women's Studies courses offered in most institutions of higher learning, so the graduate students destined to teach in this "new" area were mainly prepared by independent study with a favorite professor, individual reading, or group consciousness-raising sessions. In a sense, many teachers of Women's Studies walked into this new area of exploration "blind" with curiosity and enthusiasm. After all, we thought, we are getting at truth, and surely in the academic world, truth is worth something. In retrospect, our blind faith in the value placed on truth in academia seems a little naive.

For one thing, many of us underestimated the task of educating our colleagues and others about the need for and value of Women's Studies courses and programs. For those of us who learned so much about ourselves, our society, other societies, and history through Women's Studies, it seemed in the early 70's, that surely the value of scholarly

pursuits in the area would be recognized by most, if not all, academics. Perhaps our underestimation of the negative reception of Women's Studies was due to the fact that we did not then see Women's Studies as a threat to established systems of power. Others, however, did and do, or think they do. Such seemingly innocent questions such as "Why not teach men's studies" or "blue eyed" studies turned out to be just the tip of the hostility iceberg toward Women's Studies which was, and sometimes still is, manifested in overt and covert ways in the academic world. I'm not referring here just to "misplaced" requests for travel funds or denied requests for grant monies, though such experiences are common among teachers of Women's Studies. The fact is that the teacher who chooses or is thrust into Women's Studies must be wary of other major problems that most of us, unfortunately, have had to discover and decode for ourselves.

One problem that faced and faces many of us is an uncomfortable double-bind situation. At my University, students clamor for a seat in Women's Studies courses—a fact which doesn't escape chairpeople, deans, and other administrators concerned about enrollment figures. And since student interest is high, the dynamic Women's Studies teacher may find herself/himself teaching more courses, writing more papers, and participating in more conferences in the Women's Studies area. This development has potential for at least two kinds of detrimental fallout for the instructor.

First, the number of students interested in Women's Studies may lead to capacity class sizes in these courses. At my University, capacity is considered to be 25 in composition classes and 35 in other classes. It is not unusual for the Women's Studies

instructor to teach as many as 120 undergraduate students while colleagues teach half this number or less.

In addition to the enrollment factor, which can lead to "burn out" and lax standards, there is the unique Women's Studies student attitude to consider. There are basically two types of students who are attracted to Women's Studies courses. There are those, usually freshmen or sophomores who enroll because Women's Studies is "new," challenging, and interesting. (Some may have no notion of Women's Studies at all and may even think that the course will be similar to home economics or family planning courses.) These students impose a particular burden on the instructor as discussions and papers delve more and more deeply into the role of women and the cruelty and discrimination that they have traditionally suffered and still suffer. As Matina Horner discovered in 1969, freshmen female students, especially very intelligent ones, experience a desire to succeed which is corrupted by the fear that academic success will make them unattractive, undateable, unmarriageable and even unnatural. Her conclusions about female freshman students in the late 60's seem to hold up, even with some 90's junior and senior students in Women's Studies classes, and of course, this has been the case in the 70's and 80's. These students may fear learning too much about the position of women in our society and others, because such "radical" knowledge may somehow damage their relations with both males and females. Students have told me, "I know that what we are reading and discussing is true, but I really don't want to think about it." Still other students see readings such as Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" as an attack on their traditional mothers, sisters, or other female relatives and friends, even if readings

and discussions are regularly prefaced with a statement defending the traditional female role for those women who choose it. The result is a very real demand on the Women's Studies instructor's energy and patience. She/he may be asked to explain and re-explain that which appears to be the most elementary of truths about traditions in our society and others. Explanation and reinforcement are always necessary in the classroom, of course, but this particular kind of energy-draining explanation, over a period of time, can easily cause instructor fatigue and "burn out."

And then there is the problem of rage, the student's and the instructor's, depending on the progress of each in evolving consciousness. The student usually feels rage at some point in a Women's Studies course; indeed, if she/he doesn't, one must ask if the course "took." This rage, as experienced Women's Studies instructors recognize, is a normal stage in the student's awakening consciousness. However, that the rage may be turned on the most unlikely of targets, the instructor, sometimes comes as a nasty surprise—at least the first few times student anger is directed at the instructor for documenting injustice.

On the other hand, the older and non-traditional students, some sensing resonance and authenticity in their own experiences for the first time in their lives, tend to absorb the instructor's office hours and any other "free" time. They are frequently thinking their way through a bad relationship or marriage, troublesome work relationships, or relationships with their parents or children—all of which they want to talk about with the instructor in the context of their discoveries in a Women's Studies class. The relationships which develop between instructor and student (and, incidentally between

students in the class) can very rewarding, but also very, very time consuming and draining. Often, the time spent with individuals in a Women's Studies class can equal or surpass that spent with a three-hour independent study student. The result is that the Women's Studies instructor can find herself/himself spending more and more time with more and more students, which adds up to less time for reading, writing, evaluating, committee work, and professional development.

And "professional development" is the other half of the double- bind—the final hurdle for many Women's Studies instructors who are ambitious to attain tenure and/or promotion. Because Women's Studies is seen by some as a "mongrel" discipline, a product of a political movement, professional development in Women's Studies is often discounted by powerful committees on campus such as those controlling money and deciding rank and tenure. Generally, nothing having to do with Women's Studies is mentioned as the reason for denial of money, tenure or promotion, and, therefore, efforts to appeal are usually doomed to failure. The problem of Women's Studies instructors earning status in higher education is so acute that young teachers interested in the field have been warned to stay away from it, at least until tenure is attained, because of the assumed corruption by association:

Given the suspicion among many who hold power in the academy that women's studies is an accomplice of affirmative action, some young women are avoiding contact with the field, lest they come to be seen as infected. Anne Pratt acknowledges the dangers of guilt by association. As the monitor of tenure for the National Women's Studies Association, she counsels assistant professors with dreams of tenure to stay in the closet:

"We're only talking about seven years of your life—spend them fooling the jocks. Then you have 30 or so years to write about women" (The New York Times Mag., April 22, 84).

It's clear that many academics fail to perceive the pertinence and legitimacy of feminist literary criticism, feminist sociology, or feminist interpretations of history or psychology. The result may very well be a lack of recognition or a devaluation of all academic work and professional development of the Women's Studies instructor. And recognition, tenure, and promotion—always hard struggles for those teaching Women's Studies—may become nearly impossible when educational cutbacks are a common method of controlling budgets.

The young may have the energy and optimism to overcome these discouragements, but those of us who have been fighting to overcome obstacles for thirty years or so may become impatient with struggling. The name of this state of psychological passivity is "burn out." As most Women's Studies instructors know, it is very easy to"burn out," even permanently "burn out," as far as teaching goes. A cynicism among Women's Studies instructors which was receding in the 70's because of protective Executive Orders and Affirmative Action policies, has grown rapidly in the 80's and 90's due to policies which have eroded support for women, minorities, and affirmative action generally.

Then there is the not-so-insignificant problem of the confusion of any female speaker with a Women's Studies speaker (She's a woman; she must be a feminist.) among some of those controlling monies.

And, of course, there is the suspicion that Women's Studies instructors must be lesbians and that lesbianism is being encouraged in these courses. (Family advice newspaper columnist, James Dobson, for example, has warned families sending daughters off to college to be aware of the risks of Women's Studies courses and the lifestyle encouraged in them.)

As far as individual accomplishment is concerned, another complicating factor is the misconception of many academics that anyone writing in the area of Women's Studies can get the article, book, review, whatever, published. After all, colleagues reason, Women's Studies is a "new" area, and, at that, one largely involving women writing about women's (read "minor") concerns. As those of us in the field know, Women's Studies is a constantly changing, highly competitive discipline in which the skill, creativity, and imagination demanded in any other discipline are exacted of its scholars. After all, there is no good-old-boyism to fall back on when scholarship and discipline fail. Though feminist networks certainly exist, good old- girlism doesn't.

In addition to these complications, the Women's Studies instructor may feel the pull of community obligations which come with the territory, such as speech making on timely issues and work with local organizations like women's shelters and safehouses. In some ways this work is the most rewarding, if time consuming, of all, and certainly one must take advantage of the opportunity to do some concrete good for people of the community, but all of this activity takes time.

Finally, and most obviously, there is the vulnerability of courses in Women's Studies in times of educational budget cuts such as those we are presently experiencing.

Since many academics see Women's Studies courses as frills, and some as threats (if that course enrolls, mine may not!), Women's Studies courses will likely be those that are cut first. Chairpersons may be reluctant to free up an instructor to teach a Women's Studies course if required courses need to be covered. For instructors who work mainly in this area, such complications mean career frustrations.

For those of us coordinating programs, often without compensation in salary or released time, other problems can emerge. Institutions of higher learning which overtly or covertly discourage people who initiate or teach Women's Studies are experiencing an exodus of capable instructors to more liberal institutions or businesses where their expertise and contributions are readily recognized. In the process, good teachers leave, and programs flounder. Usually few recognize the pattern of flight and sense of defeat experienced by those who seek recognition elsewhere except the person responsible for keeping a Women's Studies program afloat.

Considering all of these factors, why did gifted teachers/scholars work in the area of Women's Studies at all? Perhaps as children maturing in the 50's and 60's, we stubbornly continued to hope for improvement in the world for our daughters and sons. Divorce was up, communication was down; distrust of the opposite sex was rampant. Was this the world that we wanted for our children? Of course not, and we believed that Women's Studies could go a long way in helping men and women to more completely understand each other and the society which shaped their attitudes. For those of us who were pioneers, teaching Women's Studies was a risky business at best —almost a quest. But we thought that the risk was worth it if we could help bring about a more informed

society and more healthy relationships between men and women and parents and children.

Some of the frustrations I have mentioned are laughable today, although not all have been resolved. But for those young teachers just beginning to teach Women Studies courses, maybe some of the barriers which almost overwhelmed the pioneers have been broken down. If so, the reward has been worth the struggle.

Notes

1. Matina Horner, "Fail: Bright Women," in Up Against the Wall, Mother (Beverly Hills, California: Glencoe Press, 1971), pp. 379-86.

2. Robyn Rowland, "Women's Studies Courses: Pragmatic and Political Issues Concerning Their Establishment and Design," Women's Studies International Forum 82), 493-94.

3. Walter Goodman, "Women's Studies: The Debate Continues," The New York Times Magazine 56 (April 22, 1984), pp. 9-10.

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