3-27-1978

Ann Fitzgerald Article in GLCA Faculty Newsletter on Teaching Interdisciplinary Women's Studies 1978

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Women’s Life/Work: April Conference for Faculty, Students

The third annual GLCA Women’s Studies Conference, focusing on the theme of Women’s Life/Work, will be held April 6-9 in Rochester, Indiana. More than 100 faculty members, administrators, and students from GLCA colleges are expected to attend.

Major speaker and resource person for the conference will be Sheila Tobias, Associate Provost of Wesleyan University and a pioneer in women’s studies. Her most recent work has focused on finding ways to cope with math avoidance, and her forthcoming book, Math Anxiety—What It Is and What Can Be Done About It, will be published by Norton in the fall. Tobias will discuss what is needed to make education for women students more effective. She will also work with persons interested in dealing in math anxiety among students, and lead a discussion on “Gay Women.”

Marjorie Bell Chambers will present the Saturday evening address. Chambers is president of the American Association of University Women, a member of the National Advisory Council on Women’s Educational Programs, and has served as Academic Dean of Mary Baldwin College, Mayor of Los Alamos, New Mexico, and president of Colorado Women’s College.

European Urban Term Takes Students to England, Holland, and Yugoslavia

Students who have an interest in urban planning, urban politics, urban development, or some other aspect of the modern city are invited to apply for participation in the GLCA European Urban Term in Comparative Urban Studies. This program, an interdisciplinary introduction to urban problems, emphasizes direct field observation and research. During the fall, 1978, term students will visit England, Holland, and Yugoslavia to explore the contrasting ways in which these different types of societies are planning, and implementing their plans for, the urban habitat of the future.

Students will attempt to define those characteristics essential to the development of the humane city of the future. Directing the fall term will be William Bonifield (Economics, Wabash).

Since one goal of the program is to help students learn how to learn about the city, students are exposed to the skills of urban observation and analysis. Preceding field visits and presentations by professional resource people in each of the three countries, the director provides an urban conceptual framework through lectures, readings, and discussions related to each city’s physical structure, employment opportunities, quality of life, and government. After ten to sixteen days each in England, Holland, and Yugoslavia, students spend four weeks of independent study in England to develop individual urban field projects. These projects might explore more thoroughly material covered in the seminar or branch into other aspects of the urban experience, such as aesthetics, literature, or the status of women. Each project is reported to the entire group, and the final version is submitted to the director for evaluation.

Students interested in the European Urban Term should be asked to get in touch with Paula Spier, Director of Student Programs, Antioch International, Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387 (513/767-1031). Applications are due by May 1.
Teaching Interdisciplinary Women's Studies
by Ann Fitzgerald

In thinking about the interdisciplinary nature of women's studies, I am reminded of Augustine questioning himself about the nature of time:

What therefore is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I am asked to explain, I do not know.

While I probably know as much about women's studies as I do time, my ideas of both are equally difficult to articulate. I will, therefore, in the best feminist tradition, make use of the autobiographical mode—talking about my own work experience—and move from there to more general comments about women's studies, its significance to the academy, and some of the factors which hinder its acceptance. I hope that the following remarks will suggest some of the rewards, if not a conclusive theory, of interdisciplinary women's studies work.

I have been involved in women's studies for almost seven years. Initially, my work was personally motivated. I read all the feminist works I could get my hands on because I felt that I was reading about myself and about the world, not as I had been told they were, but as I had experienced them. It was a time of overpowering revelation for me, as though I had unlocked some secret door and for the first time the world within made sense. I read because I wanted to, because the material was crucial to my life in a very immediate way; and I read widely and randomly, jumping from books and articles about female sexuality, to sexism in textbooks, to the politics of housework. I did not think in terms of disciplines or courses—much less consider the fact that I was educating myself in an interdisciplinary manner. For the first time, I was engaging in true self-education, high on my own faculty development, motivated by the desire for acquiring knowledge and skills for problem-solving.

Naturally, when I first taught a women's studies course, I felt almost compelled to share my discoveries with others: discoveries which had not been made through specialized inquiry into one discipline, but rather through recognition of the conflict between my world of experience and a societal/academic definition of it. Therefore, the first women's studies courses I taught were structured, like their parent movement, to challenge the traditional definitions of women—to react to the problem of sexism. We pursued the question: How is sexism manifest in our lives and in our education? The structure of these early women's studies courses was intended to mirror the complexity of the political reality of women's lives and consciousness.

I was working on a reactive/urgent basis. Consciously using a multidisciplinary model, I relied on the explosiveness of this new information from a mixture of disciplines to transform my students' lives as it had my own. And I called on the knowledge of my colleagues, asking them to suggest readings and to lecture in my classes. I became interested in their work, in their biases, and in the ways in which we could help one another. In other words, I began to develop a sense, albeit an ideal one, of what a true academic community could be. In working in a limited way with others in different disciplines, I found myself alternately frustrated by the jargon we all acquire when we become socialized into a field (mine is English) and enlightened by the new angle of vision and insight that contact with new disciplinary terms and methodologies provides. My growing library reflected my increasing interest in other fields, particularly in the areas of female sexuality, social movement theory, and sex roles. As my interdisciplinary vocabulary developed, I became eager to talk with my colleagues in various departments and found myself more knowledgeable and critical in colloquia. As time went on, I became more aware of how feminists themselves have a kind of specialized vocabulary, centering around such terms as "feminism," "women's studies," "consciousness," "political," and "androgyne." And even though none of us mean quite the same thing when we use these words, we are at least speaking the same language, only in different dialects, for we are talking about the same system of thoughts and the same problem.

While developing a greater consciousness of the rich disciplinary diversity within my own university, I was also increasing my ties with the national interdisciplinary network of women's studies teachers—all those who, like myself, had brought our feminism into the classroom. I felt bound to this larger network, not only by a similar political vision, but also by a method of inquiry. Rather than studying a scientifically manageable question suitable for investigation by the method of one discipline, we were engaged in the exciting task of merging our disciplinary skills and knowledge, harmonizing our vocabularies and working collectively across universities. This type of work and inquiry involves of necessity some very real problems. We cannot always work with our colleagues next door. Instead, we have to rely on the telephone or too-infrequent conferences. In addition, we must maintain connections with two national professional networks: our feminist interdisciplinary colleagues and our disciplinary ones. Both networks are central to our professional growth. We experience a similar crisis of allegiance in microcosm at our own universities as we strive to maintain ties with both our departmental and university-wide colleagues. For reasons which I will explain later, this is not a mere crisis of time.

There are other problems. Let me return to the pedagogical ones. First, although I tried to maximize continuity in my interdisciplinary women's study course as I moved from one subject to another, I was plagued with the fear that in merely juxtaposing disciplinary approaches without considering aspects of the unique methodologies, I was relying too heavily on sheer accumulation of evidence and not enough on systematic analysis or theory. Many times, particularly half-way through a semester, I would panic about the lack of synthesis and the lack of answers (which I had hitherto thought education, especially specialization, should provide). But I slowly began to realize that this worry was inevitable; this unique sort of interdisciplinary approach to the nontraditional subject was groundbreaking. It was like building the ship as I sailed it.

Ann Fitzgerald of Denison University will lead a workshop on interdisciplinary women's studies teaching at the Women's Life/Work Conference in April. What appears here is her modification of a talk she presented at the GLCA Women's Studies Curriculum Conference on November 12, 1977.
Questions abounded and answers could only be guessed at. Of course my goal was to develop the system or theory, but not one fixed in concrete; I wanted the students to realize that disciplined theory involves constant questioning and receptivity to new angles on old ideas. Educating, in other words, leads us quite simply to heightened consciousness about the process of education itself. Previously, I had not explicitly connected the idea of consciousness-raising with what I had learned within my disciplinary courses. This may say something unique about me or my courses, but I doubt it; I, like too many women, had been an unconscious consumer.

Consciousness-raising, outside women’s studies circles, is a dirty word. It conjures up T-groups, rap sessions, and a roomful of scruffy feminists sitting in the lotus position, chanting “male chauvinist.” It is generally agreed that consciousness of our world and ourselves is just what we should be engaged in raising (read: confronting and challenging) in every educational encounter; yet this very basic and seemingly self-evident aim of education is often ignored or shrugged aside when the discussion shifts to women’s studies. This is because women’s studies confronts head-on the two shibboleths of the traditional curriculum: disciplinary specialization and apolitical objective knowledge. Women’s studies, in contrast, is necessarily interdisciplinary and frankly political. It is problem-centered, and it challenges the ways in which social structures (the curriculum very much included) create and foster ideas about ourselves and the world. In acknowledging the male-centeredness of the traditional curriculum, it points out the biases inherent in all the disciplines and thus the political nature of education itself. Coming to grips with the nature of bias—easy to see in the depiction of women—is the first step towards seeing the truth of Kuhn’s assertion that we have all been trained within limited paradigms. Questioning the underlying assumptions about the truth and supposedly objective knowledge of academic fields is to recognize that the very chopping up and categorizing of knowledge in the academy is itself a political act. One need not be a Marxist to see that almost all our actions are political when we live in a society, that all our decisions reflect bias; indeed, it takes a certain sort of blindness and false consciousness not to see it. A strong attack on women’s studies—for its consciousness-raising purpose, its interdisciplinary nature, its open political stance—is itself a political affirmation of the present design and assumptions behind the traditional curriculum.

Any faculty member has to face certain problems in deciding to teach an interdisciplinary course; but prefix women’s studies to the I.D. label and she is in double jeopardy. The word “interdisciplinary” itself is an adjective, referring to no particular discipline and, to many, no content. Or rather, women’s studies implies “content,” all right, but a kind that, to many of our colleagues, is problematic. Put the two together—interdisciplinary and women’s studies—and you get my most paranoid fantasy: a group of content-lacking, consciousness-raising women. But this is only a fantasy. In truth, in an I.D. women’s studies course the necessary eclecticism of the interdisciplinary approach merges with the necessary politics of feminism. And it is the latter, the politics of feminism/women’s studies, more than the interdisciplinary label, that is the real issue. Even the departmental shield will not protect us from the same charges that are leveled against any scholarly endeavor that challenges the traditional curriculum.

In confronting these issues in interdisciplinary women’s studies, I have developed a much stronger sense of intellectual identity. As my interdisciplinary consciousness has grown and my knowledge of other disciplines has expanded, my problem-centeredness in women’s studies has become more refined. Instead of dealing with such broad questions as the nature of sexism, I now focus courses around such issues as the idea of women’s sexuality, the role of women in the fine arts, and the nature of social movements. In addition, I have come to realize that the previously mentioned tension between disciplinary and interdisciplinary identity and methodology that a women’s studies teacher faces is also operative in her own field. The more I work as an interdisciplinary in women’s studies, the more I work as an interdisciplinary in English literature. I find that the questions I now ask in an English course are ones whose answers require some work outside the field: in history, philosophy, art. The richness of this inquiry has led me to a heightened interest in the study of literature and an appreciation of the true complexity of literary questions.

There has remained, however, the recalcitrant problem: women’s studies is not a discipline and academic feminists have all been trained (and hired to work) within a discipline. To the extent that we move outside or beyond our discipline, we experience some very real problems. It is not, as I have said, wholly a problem of time. We have a desire for excellence and recognition within our own field and a corresponding and often contradictory desire to expand our world in an interdisciplinary way in women’s studies. The two activities or desires not only may pull us in what seem like opposite career directions, but may also work to the very detriment of our academic careers. Those of us with such dual concerns live constantly with the following anxiety-causing questions: (1) where am I most effective (in teaching departmental courses or women’s studies); (2) what will my involvement in women’s studies do to my disciplinary career; (3) will work in women’s studies affect negatively my chances for tenure; (4) who can evaluate my work in women’s studies—how will my colleagues perceive it; (5) how will I cope with the isolation (perceived and felt) of working in an interdisciplinary course? We all have our separate versions of these questions. And all of them will be answered differently depending on our local situation. But as women’s studies continues to develop, both nationally and locally, we will continue to confront them both individually and collectively. I predict that as our campuses experience some major changes throughout the next few years, both in curriculum and in the nature of the student body, we will be joined by our disciplinary colleagues in resolving these issues which eventually all academics will have to face in one context or another.

The issues and questions I have posed have their roots in the political questioning of education during the 1960’s. Many of us involved in the excitement and turmoil of those years are now working in the academy, questioning and challenging the shape of education. The problems we face in such areas as women’s studies—where the issues are seen in relief—are a necessary part of any attempt to create change.

As we struggle with the issues of consciousness-raising, interdisciplinary work, professional identity, and the politics of education, we in women’s studies are making an imprint on, if not setting a direction for, the shape of education to come.