

WOMEN'S STUDIES IN BRITAIN: TEACHING THROUGH THE DOOR MARKED 'BOYS'



Maggie Humm

L'auteur aborde certaines questions touchant les études sur la femme en Grande-Bretagne. Elle détruit, entre autre, le mythe selon lequel ces études constituent une discipline tout à fait indépendante; elle précise qu'elles doivent, au contraire, englober la vie toute entière des femmes, sociale et privée.

Giving directions to my classroom to a Danish student recently arrived on exchange, I told her to go past the 'chippy' (fish and chip shop), look for a converted Victorian primary school and come through the door marked BOYS. On the first floor she would find us in Area 3, a patch of uncarpeted floor staked out by waist-high office dividers. This is where Women's Studies takes place at North East London Polytechnic (NELP). We all enjoy the *frisson* of entering through BOYS but not the shortage of classrooms, shuttling from site to site, or using one public telephone for two hundred students.

Of course feminist scholars never fit very well into any institution. Women's culture, as we know, is incompatible with the organisational style and discourse of traditional universities. In addition, historically, the British Women's Movement has been deeply hostile to, and suspicious of, institutionalised study. Women's Studies in Britain has flourished in part-time and non-vocational courses, in Adult Literacy and Access programmes. So it has remained on the edges of educational power. Those Women's Studies courses that *are* in higher education are often options within otherwise traditional departments, or M.A.'s an inaccessible Utopia for most women, or attained by a few only after the grind of a traditional discipline. Britain has an exceptionally elitist system of higher education which admits, through its sluiceways, very small numbers of people and even smaller numbers

of women. Women's Studies in Britain has thus only been able to concentrate on women as subjects of change rather than on using feminism as an agency of change.

So where and what are the courses that I can call Women's Studies? I teach several different things under the general umbrella of women, media and literature. These range from a third year Cultural studies option on "Women and Feminism Since 1945" to Independent Study where students choose research on topics as various as "Feminist Theatre" or "Lesbian Criticism." There are also women post graduates.

Those of us who teach Women's Studies are used to a schizophrenic split between teaching on existing patriarchal courses of uncertain age and teaching outside them in Women's Studies. My own split represents an ever more problematic division in the sociology of education: between teaching students in Independent Study, where education is primarily a *resource*, and on a Women's Studies syllabus that I have *designed* (and therefore, at least notionally, *direct*).

In Independent Study at NELP each woman plans her own course. She writes a proposal giving an account of her experience, her future aims, and what assessment she prefers as a way of demonstrating having achieved her targets. This 'contrast' becomes her course. Here Women's Studies is a mechanism for validating each woman's intentions. I can be asked to teach anything from "Spinsters in Fiction" to "Chinese Women in Literature." Contract writing depends on a negotiated approach to educational definitions.

In traditional teaching research questions come from within existing paradigms. My independent students move from the empirical – their own needs as members of the community – to the methodological and conceptual. The

approach is an exciting development for me in forms of learning and student-teacher relations, since it challenges the idea that educational activities have to take place only in educational institutions.

But I also teach something listed as Women's Studies on the Polytechnic computer, which I designed and had to defend to external examiners. This is based on the premise that, if students know something about contemporary critiques of disciplines, they will be more able to validate personal experience within the context of academia. As a group we do not substitute experience for theory since we do use say, Umberto Eco's semiotics, but apply existing methods to new areas like romance stories in women's weekly magazines. Both 'kinds' of women's studies teach skills of writing and analysis. Independent study moves from the personal/empirical *towards* concepts; the other uses my pre-constructed framework of concepts within which to read the personal.

For me, the problem was crystallized by one Women's Studies group. We were discussing Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* and looking at clippings. Williamson offers a useful method (and perhaps her Lacanian notions can slip in osmotically). Shan, taken out of school at six to work in the fields, began to tell us of washing rituals in Guyana; Florence, a West Indian midwife, for the first time saw the symbolism involved in shaving women in labour; Ilona, a Solidarity member, told us of Polish family patterns. The problem, then, of 'appropriate' knowledge is more complex than whether or not to teach the literary canon. For these women the class was their first opportunity to examine themselves as women in patriarchal societies. In the Women's Studies course students were learning about the ideological contexts which have shaped them as women. The group was, in effect, enacting the central method of



Maggie Humm

Women's Studies – the act of translation. We were discovering a common language. In order to understand each other, for an immigrant from Guyana to talk to a trained health worker, to a member of Solidarity, and to me we have to find a language that is at once complex and simple.

My different kinds of Women's Studies for me, then, have begun to break down the barriers between 'educational' knowledge and 'valid' knowledge, because they break with the artificial distinction between discipline knowledge and social need. The criterion of knowledge selection in all Women's Studies is the particular needs of women as social representatives. To that I try to add my ability to equip women students to make comparative evaluations of the various methods of explanation available to them – not in an idealist way but in a materialist analysis of particular problems. I have clearly given up any notion that Women's Studies should be the *sum* of other disciplines (adding psychology to literature and economics). It is precisely the inappropriateness of these disciplinary divisions that is my reason for being in Women's Studies in the first place.

I cannot overcome all gender conflicts in the distribution of power in educational decision-making, if only because I am a permanent member of the institution and students are transient. But I am cheered when a student shows that the personal is political. Catherine, while researching male violence to women, managed to fund a local refuge for battered women. The complications of arranging grant-aid in Britain are horrendous. Catherine's ability to surmount them and to make her research an integral part of her political activity was, for me, a wonderful example of 'conscientization.' Women's Studies at NELP may be multifaceted and ambivalent, but I hope this means it has potential to change the limitations of my institution. Certainly we will never reproduce the educational parameters chosen by men.

Dr. Maggie Humm is Co-ordinator for Women's Studies at North-East London Polytechnic, England. An article about her research is in Women's Studies International Forum, 6, 1 (1983). She is currently writing Feminist Criticism for Harvester Press.

THE HOUSEWIFE

She scrubs the windows
until they are hardly there
leaving
from the outside
a shining reflection
of the world
that lures the birds
all unsuspecting
to self-destruct
like kamikazes
against the inviting facade;
while from the inside
those same windows are
so clear
so nonexistent
so connective
to the outside world
that instead of venturing
forth
to risk
struggle
perhaps
succeed
she can safely imagine
that she is/has always been
out,
and so she
flutters weakly
with only vague misgivings
towards her death.

Judith Johnson
Winnipeg, Manitoba

jazzmin

i don't
want this
blue colored love
covered
by
layers (of sand).

Clara Valverde
Montreal, Quebec