

Women's Studies for the Workplace

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Cet article explique l'effet des études de la femme pour les femmes qui retournent du travail.

While Women's Studies courses are burgeoning throughout Canada there appears to be an implicit split in the kinds of courses given to women under this general rubric. Some institutions offer 'academic courses' under the traditional disciplines or even through centres of interdisciplinary studies. These courses are usually accredited and perceived as general theoretical courses promising no specific practical application in the 'great out there'. Often, other divisions of these same institutions or other community-based institutions will offer courses geared more to practical application, such as Demystifying Math, Re-entry into the Labour Force, Management and Leadership Skills, and various aspects of parenting. Often these courses do not offer credits to the students, but are seen as a species of 'interest course'. Through this division of accreditation, we see within Women's Studies another manifestation of those very values of the power structures that have habitually oppressed women. Theory, or institutionalized knowledge, is highly rated while practical experience is seen as lacking substance.

Women, it must be admitted, are used to this set of standards; in the workplace, they are commonplace. A woman employed as an executive secretary might leave the labour market for fifteen years to raise a family. On her re-entry into the labour market, she is given no credit for her fifteen years' experience as a housewife and mother. Unpaid labour is simply not recognized. However, if we consider how these years were spent, we must realize that in that time she must have refined many skills necessary for an executive secretary. Because so many women are now holding down the double jobs of child-rearing and other employment, this kind of division of the theoretical and practical is especially irrelevant to their experience. Yet it is also true that many women contemplating a return to the labour market after a decade or two of isolation in the home need suitable support to regain their self-confidence for the highly mystified 'real world'. Are these 'practical courses' enough for them? They might have neither the interest nor the skills to learn de Beauvoir's notions of the '*en soi*' and '*transcendence*' or Mill's irrefutable arguments against the subjection of women. Yet we know from the lesson of other liberation movements that true liberation begins with a historical perspective and analysis of one's own dilemma. There can be something very liberating about knowing how some people have thought out the question of, let us say, nature versus nurture in the past and present. I am not suggesting here that students in a Leadership Training course must read all the classics of Women's Studies. Rather, that if the teacher has

this knowledge, then the relevant ideas can be usefully integrated into the course experience and the teacher will have the resources to suggest reading for those who want to know more. Her knowledge will form the implicit ideological base for the course.

My first point, then, about 'interest courses' is that we shouldn't short-change women of that heritage which has been denied us for far too long. A criterion for the hiring of teachers should be demonstrated knowledge of or work in the field of Women's Studies. Appropriate people will increasingly become available from the many colleges and universities in Canada offering Women's Studies programs. Such job opportunities are conversely a good morale-booster for students in such programs. They might then see practical applications of their theories and ways of living out their convictions.

The burden of this essay, however, is from the opposite point of view. It is my argument that students taking academic Women's Studies courses can and must be encouraged to connect the contents of these courses to their own experience in school, in the workplace, and in their private lives. For the last eight years, I have been giving a course on Women's Identity and Image at Concordia University with my colleague, Christine Allen. This is the introductory course to our Women's Studies program, and it attracts students from all faculties and widely different age groups. It is an intellectually demanding interdisciplinary course with an extremely heavy workload, and covers the conceptual history of six archetypes of women. We are concerned that the students also examine the effect of the material on their lives. Hence, at the beginning of the course we ask them to write and submit personal profiles, and, at the end, evaluations of the effect the course had on them. I would like to share some of the practical ways in which the content of this one course in a large impersonal lecture hall has affected the students' lives.

One of the results of Women's Studies has been that students have learned to apply their knowledge to an evaluation of their other courses as well as a projection of how they will use this knowledge later on in the workplace. A young woman in Early Childhood Education speculates:

Perhaps the fact that sexist attitudes within schools have been made apparent to me will enable me to teach in a way conscious of which modes should be avoided.

An experienced high-school teacher of English and Drama wrote:

Even my attitudes about teaching have changed. I'm going to strive for nothing short of excellence.

Next year I plan to do something along feminist lines with senior students. I am fortunate that I have the same students for two years. I have some interesting volatile girls in my class who will probably be able to do some very interesting things.

An elementary-school teacher of several years' experience writes:

We as women, once aware of our circumstances, can come to terms with the world. Attitudes are learned and consequently can be unlearned. We no longer have to accept male myths without question. As women, we have a choice. . . . I will try to assert myself in my profession as a good teacher and as a wife and future mother.

Even in extra-academic activities, one teacher finds that Women's Studies will change her participation in professional life:

I have decided to take a more active interest in school union politics. It can be another outlet where I could probably yield a strong positive influence. . . . I've wanted to become involved but have just not taken any initiative in this direction.

Many of our evening students are involved in the business world in one way or another, and it is gratifying to see how readings in Women's Studies have given them new insight into their situations. A secretary of many years comments:

I was able to tell my boss the real reason why I chose to give notice, instead of just mumbling something about feeling sorry that I had to leave because of outside circumstances. I could tell him frankly that I was dissatisfied with the role I had to play, and think I am capable of doing more than just executing some plans designed by others.

Another secretary of twenty-five years describes how her own acquired behavioural patterns have hampered her professionally:

I have also had an insight into why, when I have a good and valid idea or plan, I do not assert myself in presenting it. I have usually presented it apologetically or in a light vein, in case it wasn't 'valid' or 'acceptable'. . . . Through this course, I have been helped to realize that many of my reactions, opinions, ideas are appropriate, authentic, and valid. In other words, my gut feelings about many things including the condition of women and men, relationships, myself, have been reinforced and I don't have to apologize to anyone for them.

Women's Studies can also make managers aware of the untapped resources of their employees. One male student, who holds such a position, began the introductory course by stating that women simply don't take responsibility or have ambition because that's the way they are. In his course evaluation, however, he acknowledges how women's 'opportunities for self-fulfillment have been curtailed on sexist grounds', and how he could 'participate actively in the struggle to improve the status of women. Initially it will be more to actively support the aspirations for equality of women closest to me and to actively encourage their feminist activity.'

Many of our students confront their futures with strength and optimism. Some, having seen other alternative available to them, consider changing their field of work. One woman in her late twenties, who had been stereotypically streamed into a traditionally female field, has come to such a conclusion.

She states it in this way:

Prior to this course, I feel I was inclined to compromise some of my beliefs if pressured by a situation or employer. Because things are in sharper focus and I perceive the situation to be more deep-seated throughout our institutions, I feel stronger rather than more helpless and have renewed determination to help effect changes in other women, men and my working situations. I wish to continue in Women's Studies in order to further alter and radicalize my perceptions and expectations. . . . As Women's Studies is the only thing I have encountered that is totally relevant to me, when I complete university, I wish to do something in this field. I have no idea what form it will take; many possibilities are rattling around in my mind, but I have no doubt that it will be working with and for women in some capacity.

Personal growth is a rather ephemeral objective for a university program to pursue. Yet many graduates find, and will continue to find, themselves in a work world where they must diversify their interests and abilities in order to survive. Indeed, increasing numbers of graduates are finding themselves in career and life situations which do not relate directly to their university training. Women's Studies, by its inherently self-referring quality, is often able to sensitize women students to the possibilities of personal growth and change in their lives in a way that opens new possibilities and encourages flexibility. A young woman writes:

I found this course of particular interest because I am planning on getting married at the end of this year. I do not want to live a vicarious existence, living only through my husband. I do not want to become fragmented by boring repetitive housework, while my husband is constantly being stimulated through work and his daily encounters with others. I would not only destroy myself but my husband and my marriage as well. I am now more determined than ever to continue to work after marriage and so maintain my independence and integrity.

It is often most gratifying to see students who have come to Women's Studies late in life and see renewed possibility for growth and change in the course of their life's experience. One of our students, a gifted fifty-five-year-old grandmother, writes of her life:

Our liberation, of course, must come from without as well as within, but I insist the greatest barriers to change for women are within. When I am being very honest with myself, I must admit the same choices which I am making now were there in my youth. There were strong pressures on me to make the traditional choice I made, but the choice was mine and I clearly remember being aware of it. I simply wasn't ready, not mature or confident enough, to choose a more independent course.

. . . My feminine past, for me, has always been understood through the women who were the role models in my life: my mother, my aunts, and grandmothers. This course has given me a much more comprehensive past. I now can understand more clearly how Blacks in North America have felt without a history, and how important it is to a perception of self to have one. I have greater strength gained from the knowledge of all those women who have gone before us. How much we owe them. How disgraceful, after that long and really ugly fight to win the vote, that women have done so little with it. . . . What is there, in me, that is uniquely my own waiting to be born? It is criminal, I've now come to feel, to have pined my dreams like toenails. . . . Because of this course I can no longer

dodge the question. . . . The course has changed me. I am stronger, surer because of it. I think I could ask for no more.

Certainly, in our time when a fifty-five-year-old woman still has a fairly long life ahead of her, such insight and optimism is an invaluable asset in planning her future course of action.

Yet it must be said that while many of our women students clearly indicate a greater sense of personal potency as a result of exposure to Women's Studies, it is also clear to them that they cannot always expect to offer lone solutions to the problems of sexism in our society. We try to offer models of collective action, but there is still the problem of finding positive reinforcement in the workplace.

I only hope [concludes one young woman from the Commerce Faculty] that I will be able to handle myself in my career as well as I feel I can now. What I am trying to say is that now I understand and feel strong, but what will it be like when the chips are

down? I only hope that I can keep all that I've learned in my mind and not lose its meaning as time goes by.

So far, approximately ten per cent of our students have been male. It is our conviction, which is reinforced by our male students' comments, that Women's Studies can offer to men not only another perspective of reality, but also the possibility of different undertakings and roles.

A young woman was most affected by de Beauvoir's views that woman has an ethical obligation to take hold of her own destiny. Accepting this, she feels, 'makes it more difficult, in some ways, to deal with the direction my own future will take, but I am convinced that in the long run this is the only position I can take.'

The main purpose of education, surely, is to change or refine people's consciousness of the world around them and their options within it. It is toward this end that Women's Studies strives. By refusing to divide the theoretical from the practical, we are, at last, providing formal academic education with a relevant application to the lives and futures of our students.

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