Rationale for an Interdisciplinary Approach to Women's Studies

Greta Hoffman Nemiroff

Le Rapport entre les Etudes de la femme et l'interdisciplinarité: un Résumé.

Dans cet article, l'auteur se penche sur les questions suivantes:

1 **la raison d'être d'une approche interdisciplinaire aux études de la femme;**

2 **la façon de concevoir et de structurer un cours interdisciplinaire;**

3 **l'impact sur les étudiants de la méthodologie d'un tel cours;**

4 **la nature des difficultés qui accompagnent le travail interdisciplinaire tant au point de vue pédagogique que du point de vue de la philosophie de l'éducation, difficultés qui relèvent des structures socio-économico-politiques des institutions scolaires, en particulier des universités.**

I. *Rationale for an Interdisciplinary Approach to Women's Studies*

(a) *The Limits and Value of the Disciplines*

While there is no doubt that the phenomenon of women's experience can be examined under the aegis of any of the appropriate existing disciplines (e.g. Sociology of Women, Biology of Women, Literature by Women), not one of the existing disciplines can in itself give a complete account of the human experience, let alone women's. Scholars within this or that discipline, on the whole, do not pretend to be comprehensive. In fact, very often scholarly works clearly define their parameters in ways that emphasize the very partial nature and application of any conclusions they might draw. Frequently the nature and limitations of conclusions are predetermined by the extent to which the scholars remain within the accepted confines of their disciplines.

There is no doubt that the established disciplines have much to offer all of us in the pursuit of knowledge. They have been refined to useful methodologies, have created analytical tools of great refinement, and very often point to specific application that can be of use elsewhere. It must also be clearly understood that however useful certain methodologies are they can never be static, but must stimulate new methodologies; further, that there are 'historical contingencies' to all disciplines which are always under the sway of 'extradisciplinary' forces such as 'public reputation, sociocultural values, political ideologies and economic conditions'.[1]

On the other hand a strict division of the disciplines, and their attendant interest groups, can lead to an unfortunate fragmentation of the students' educational formation. A student involved in an undergraduate programme which requires courses in several disciplines is often expected to arrive at a comprehensive synthesis of these diverse disciplines alone. Professors who design such programmes hope, with little reinforcement from reality, that the total configuration of the students' courses will add up to one clearly integrated piece of knowledge; that somehow – through some mysterious process – lacunae will be filled. Yet the structure of most North American universities and colleges with their strict departmentalization, reinforces the fragmentation of knowledge and rarely offers a model of synthesis either in its socio-political structure or its intellectual life. While individual departments may have excellent symposia open to their students, on the whole it is rare that interdisciplinary discussions are precipitated by academic leaders. The prevalent system of reward and recognition within the university encourages (if not coerces) university teachers into devoting all available time and energy into further specialization in their field of expertise in order to attain security, recognition and other financial and emotional rewards. The field of expertise is usually predetermined by the limits of the existing order of disciplines.[2] Thus, the student almost automatically absorbs the fact that it is specialization within a discipline which is rewarded; as well, often the language surrounding one specialization succeeds in totally mystifying it and thus rendering impossible an easy inter-change which

might lead to interdisciplinary undertakings. Recognizing all this, the most ambitious (though not necessarily the best) students might feel very motivated to recognize, much less to expand, the boundaries of their own knowledge.

While universities and departments, with their interests understandably invested in their own survival, treat the separate disciplines as sacrosanct and immutable in the sense of reflecting some higher Platonic reality, it is clear that in practice they are subject to change and modification. Clearly, the biases inherent in a methodology (how one acquires, judges, and expresses knowledge) of a particular discipline might be inappropriate to the study of women. When I speak of biases here, I am not using the term pejoratively. My meaning is simply based on the observation that every area of scholarly pursuit must begin with value assumptions. Implicit in the choice of an area of inquiry are the decisions of what is *worth* pursuing, and what knowledge is *worthy* of being passed along. Herein lies one of the basic philosophical problems facing education: that of axiology versus epistemology. Do value judgements precede the study of knowledge and its particular pursuits? Or, on the other hand, does epistemology, the study of knowledge and its particular applications, produce values and value assumptions? My own view, a synthesis of the two, is that so many of our values are so profoundly rooted in both our culture and our unconscious that value assumptions must always precede scholarly pursuits – from which further value assumptions then evolve. For these reasons, in courses focusing on women within the traditional disciplines, it is essential that the epistemology and biases of the disciplines concerned (their very disciplinarity) be thoroughly and continually examined and questioned in the preparation, presentation, and evaluation of the material.[3]

Given the view that the traditional disciplines are of a fluctuating and value-laden nature, perhaps one way in which they can be best defined is by reference to other related disciplines. (Of course the problem this view presents is that there are certain blind spots inherent in the assumption that only certain disciplines are related.) Interdisciplinary studies, however, bring this process a step further; perhaps the times (our Zeitgeist) are ripe for this extension and merging of traditional fields of knowledge. We live in times when the gigantic problems facing the world cannot be resolved by knowledge gleaned from any one discipline: agriculture, engineering, economics, etc. Each of the problems facing the world contains multiple factors of great complication and requires complex solutions which point to the dissolution of traditional barriers between fields of knowledge.

In a recent seminar on Interdisciplinarity in the Universities organized in 1970 under the aegis of OECD, a 'Survey of Interdisciplinary Activities of Teaching and Research in the Universities' was administered to people from eleven countries and many more institutions. Some of the benefits identified in interdisciplinarity work were that it provided for *students* greater motivation rooted in their own experience and more flexibility in changing their major fields, qualifying for jobs in a fluctuating market, and learning how to be creative in their use of concepts. For *teachers* and *researchers* interdisciplinarity necessitates collaboration (rather than the usual isolation and competition) as well as new fields for research; for *universities* interdisciplinarity appears to be a 'means to blow up from inside the barriers and obstacles to communication in the university, and to break down from the outside the sharp dividing line between knowledge and reality, between the university and society'.

There is no doubt that the subject-matter of Women's Studies fits many of the motives and benefits listed above. It is a subject to which no one can be indifferent. Given that our first experience in life is with a woman and through a woman, we all have deeply rooted feelings and expectations concerning women. Thus it is a subject which by its very nature must have sufficient relevance to create a high level of motivation grounded in the students' reality. Furthermore, the newness of the field requires inventiveness, research, and discovery. There is the challenging need for conceptualization and the creation of a methodology. There is also the need to pursue and unearth more information, data hitherto inaccessible. In accordance with these criteria, Women's Studies is an appropriate field for interdisciplinary work.

(b) *Interdisciplinarity Defined*

Frequently, the term 'interdisciplinarity' is used to describe any intellectual undertaking that takes into consideration more than one discipline. When I discuss interdisciplinarity in my own work, I am referring to a methodology similar to the one so succinctly defined by M. Guy Berger in his 'Introduction' to *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities*:

> *Interdisciplinary:* An adjective describing the interaction among two or more different disciplines. This interaction may range from simple communication of ideas to the mutual integration of organising concepts, methodology, procedures, epistemology, terminology, data, and organisation of research and education in a fairly large field. An interdisciplinary group consists of persons trained in different fields of knowledge (disciplines) with different concepts, methods, and data and terms organised into a common effort on a common problem with continuous intercommunication among the participants from the different disciplines.

This is in contradistinction to *multidisciplinarity* (a juxtaposition of various disciplines with no apparent connection between them); *pluridisciplinarity* (a juxtaposition of several disciplines assumed to be related, as mathematics and physics); or *transdisciplinarity* (establishing a common system of axioms for a set of disciplines).[5]

II. *How is an Interdisciplinary Course Created? A Case Study on Woman's Identity and Image: two courses: Historic Attitudes and Woman's Identity and Image: Contemporary Approaches*

(a) *The Interdisciplinary Basis of the Course*

In 1970, a version of the interdisciplinary Women's Studies course referred to above was given for the first time in what is now Concordia University in Montreal by me and a colleague, Christine Allen. In the particular case of our course I must stress that each of us comes from different academic disciplines and areas of interest. Christine Allen's training is in Philosophy and she has also done work in Religious Studies. My academic training is in English Literature and Fine Arts. We are both educators of long experience and are both interested in educational processes although neither of us has received anything in the way of 'teacher training'. We first came together socially through a series of circumstances that has little to do with our intellectual training or interests. It was only as we began to know one another well that we began to talk about our then vague and unfocused interest in women and women's identity. As I recall, our first discussion on the subject took place early in 1969 when we spent an afternoon together with our three young sons, aged two years, six months, and six months. As we sat there talking about our own academic interests in the

fields of Philosophy and English, we were often interrupted by our children's needs. Finally we became conscious of ourselves from an objective point of view: we were two harried professional mothers trying to do several jobs well at the same time. This insight led to a broad discussion of women's destiny and the now familiar subject of nature versus nurture, although we didn't give it that name then. In that discussion lay the seed of our course, and from it developed a long and fruitful professional association.

As it turns out, we are not an exceptional phenomenon. Frequently interdisciplinary courses grow from what are termed 'chance encounters' such as ours: 'an encounter between people, a matching of interests, a conjunction of different centers of interest within a single individual'.[6]

Our course, then, emerged from our 'conjunction of interests'; and our divergent intellectual training provided *a priori* an interdisciplinary approach. We were both very junior members of departments in the same university (now known as Concordia University in Montreal), and we blithely set about constructing a course, writing it up, appearing before various committees to defend it, and finally giving it for the first time in 1970-1. At that time there were very few books available on the subject (aside from such classics as de Beauvoir, Engels, Friedan, Mead, Mill, and Woolf) which could comprehensively satisfy the conceptual structure we were evolving. There were few anthologies of writings available; so in order to keep within the students' limited economic means, we were obliged to put together our own materials. Now, fortunately, a burgeoning market of Women's Studies texts makes very rich and varied material available to the students in our course.

However much that course was founded on a somewhat arbitrary if felicitous coincidence of a particular afternoon, our experience over the past eight years has convinced us that the students' first introduction to Women's Studies at a university level (or perhaps at any level at all) should be an interdisciplinary one. In order to tap the great energy generated by the complex feelings people have about women and to direct this energy on a course of intellectual inquiry, it is essential to address oneself holistically to those issues that are most basic to women's experience in our culture.

From the considerable demands our own experience as women had made upon us, and through our pooled experience, we began to schematize our own socialization process and network of values into several thematic groupings in the following way. As young women of the 1950s, we had both been raised to realize that both sexual attractiveness and premarital virginity were still highly rewarded in women in our culture. As well, in those days which preceded the birth-control technology on the wide scale we know it now, we were also brought up to believe that heterosexual love relationships, marriage, and procreation were women's unquestionable destiny. As daughters of the educated middle class, we were further placed in a contradictory experience by the academic expectations placed on us. On the one hand, through the patriarchal structure of our society, in the institutions with which we were most continually in contact – the family, school, the work world – a certain degree of passivity was expected from women. On the other hand, in order to achieve the ends considered appropriate to our abilities in an increasingly liberalized educational system, we were expected to excel academically and then professionally. In order to achieve such a degree of excellence, passivity was a definite liability. Hence it became our task to differentiate when active and passive behaviours were appropriate. We were expected to marry and raise families as well as pursue excellence and commensurate validation in the external work world. Finally, in the late 1960s, as we were establishing ourselves in our careers, along with many other North American women we began to acquire a more objective awareness of our situation. Our own malaise in this often dismembered state and our consequent (very tentative) sense of rebellion were not only shared by many other women, but could be justified by a critique of the existing social order.

From the experience above, we schematized a course with six central themes, which are manifested by the following images of women: beauty and its rewards and punishments in 'Woman as Evil Temptress'; chastity and its rewards and punishments in 'Woman as Virgin Goddess'; the experience of marriage and/or motherhood in 'Woman as Earth Mother'; women's institutionalized passivity as defined by philosophy, psychology, biology, etc., in 'Woman as Passive Object'; women's often thwarted intellectual and creative urges in 'Woman as Genius'; and finally, women's desire to revolt, to change their situation, in 'Woman as Political Activist'.

I am certain that there are many other equally viable decisions of women's experience in our culture, and I often learn much by reading other people's course descriptions and seeing how they schematize such a complex and involving subject. However, this has turned out to be the most useful armature for our views. We are continually learning from each other, and we both tend to read widely in different fields from which we bring material to the course. In the actual logistics of the course, we are both at all the classes, and since the lecture material changes from year to year there is a continual dialectic between us. We always refer to each other's classes and synthesize the material as we go along. While we usually invite a visiting lecturer once a semester and sometimes draw upon films, our essential conviction is that continuity is a very important factor in interdisciplinary studies. Since the trend towards the fragmentation of knowledge is so strongly reinforced in the existing academic structures, it takes great effort and consciousness to fight against these tendencies. Perhaps as a result we are sometimes too conscientious about offering a synthesis of the material. Our intent is to bring as much as possible from eclectic sources to bear on these six images in the time available. We also realize that it is virtually impossible to present a truly objective account of something as culturally determined and value-bound as images of women. The best we can do, then, is to identify the issues and common images ascribed to women's identity, and then to expose students to different ways of investigating and judging the phenomena under discussion.

For example, in discussing our first theme, 'Woman as Evil Temptress', we examine the basic relevant myths of our civilization as they appear almost simultaneously in the *Bible* within the Hebrew tradition and in Hesiod's *Theogony* in the classical tradition. We examine these myths and their function in both the individual psyche and society through the application of two modes of analysis: the historical and the psycho-anthropological. We also investigate the philosophical and social significance of the historical development of this concept of women through laws relating to evil in women; here, we address both the phenomenon of witchcraft and the present-day controversy revolving around the nature of rape. We also examine how women themselves internalize this image and use it to their own destruction. Throughout our investigation, we have used literary works in both poetry and prose to provide exempla for the views we describe. Thus far, we have drawn on the following disciplines in our treatment of this unit in the course: Classics, Religious Studies, History, Psychology, Philosophy, Jurisprudence, Literature, and some Comparative Anthropology. We are no more comprehensive than a single regular discipline, perhaps, but certainly no less so. With the students, we regard a phenomenon first this way, and then that. In

this or that light. Why do men consider women evil? Why do women accept it? Where? When? Under what circumstances? Is there truth in this view? Can we effect change if there isn't? We show how some conclusions can be reached by developing a methodology with the students; other conclusions we leave to the private thoughts of our students. It is, of course, our hope that the students will apply this methodology elsewhere and also that, in working out the basic values and conflicts underlying this or that image from many vantage points, they will be able to make clearer distinctions in their own lives.

(b) *The Effect of This Methodology on the Students*

We have an additional, perhaps a more hidden objective to this course. While we want to offer the possibility of pursuing as comprehensive a version of knowledge pertaining to women as possible, we also want to involve students viscerally in the topic. It is not our intention to dismember the cognitive from the affective in the experience of our students. Rather, we favour a holistic approach to education, the view that people learn best and with the greatest motivation that which is personally meaningful to them and which they see as contributing to their own personal growth. In the course of readings on 'Woman as Evil Temptress', for instance, each person inevitably finds some aspect of this complex issue which is both corroborated by and corroborates his or her own experience. This will cause the student to pause for reflection, and then perhaps to make the choice of pursuing this matter of interest in more detail through further research.

We are aware of the fact that a full course could be given on any one of the six themes we have chosen. In the case of most of our students, Women's Studies is only part of their course load. However, we are constantly amazed and gratified not only by the amount of work our students invest in the course but by how much they seem to derive and take with them to other experiences in life.

Some of the benefits which accrue from an introductory interdisciplinary course in Women's Studies given from the values underlying humanistic education are: (1) it provokes immediate identification within the student, and by the variety of disciplines touched upon it is likely to inspire in each student the curiosity to explore in greater depth some topic of scholarly and/or self-referred interest in research assignments; (2) it exposes students to classical works and to newly excavated readings as well as to contemporary thought on important aspects of women's experience regardless of strict disciplinary boundaries; (3) by applying works in various disciplines to one phenomenon, it exposes students to the complexity of intellectual inquiry as well as both the inter-relatedness and the divergence of the disciplines; (4) it gives women students a sense of their own intellectual community through the use of an eclectic intellectual framework by which they can conceptualize their own experiences; (5) it provides for men a new way of looking at women and thus at at themselves. This latter advantage was movingly described by Virginia Woolf:

> There is a spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head which one can never see for oneself. It is one of the good offices that sex can discharge for sex . . . to describe that spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head. . . A true picture of man as a whole can never be painted until a women has described that spot the size of a shilling.[7]

III. *Some Problems in Interdisciplinary Work*

While it is relatively easy to assert *a priori* that neither this course nor any other can hope to be complete, teachers of interdisciplinary studies must assume the responsibility of analysing with the students both the course content and its methodology as if completeness were possible. This is in order to provide a working model of critical thought. It is very difficult to achieve such an on-going critique when one is also in the process of dispensing information and synthesizing diversely achieved conclusions. The problem is well expressed in the following quotation:

> That is to say, it [interdisciplinarity] assumes that the student will somehow pick up the capacity to apply knowledge of these similarities to the fruitful solution of concrete problems in the natural and/or social sciences. After being acquainted with common metaphysical, ideological, philosophical and methodological problems and concepts, he will go back to his respective area of specialization and somehow be better equipped for creative integrated work than he was before. Consequently, even though the conceptual approach rejects the pragmatic approach, it still faces its crucial problem . . . selectivity. Academic disciplines, even as they are institutionally defined, are enormously complex. Within each discipline, some issues will be more susceptible to integrated analysis than others. Part of the trick, as it were, is to recognize which problems to choose for such analysis and which to leave for more orthodox disciplinary treatment.[8]

In our course, we attempt to be selective of issues which we think lend themselves to interdisciplinary treatment. However, the big question that still remains is whether all questions that cannot be treated by the existent interdisciplinary methodologies must be relegated to the more traditional disciplines for solutions; or whether, out of more research in Women's Studies in its every aspect, new methodologies intrinsic to the biases and values inherent in Women's Studies can rise to the challenge of a 'creative integrated analysis'? Perhaps this need for integration will set into motion an extension of the boundaries of the disciplines as we know them as well as those of Women's Studies itself; then it would be highly desirable to see the amount of interchange among all these pursuits increasing. In our own course, we consistently find ourselves arriving at new syntheses of the material culled from diverse disciplines. While we consider it essential that we communicate our own synthesis to the students, it is also of equal importance that we model synthesis in such a way that the students learn to achieve this end themselves. Our final 'take-home' examinations always pose questions in such a way as to demand this kind of synthesis from our students and we are frequently impressed by the level of sophistication they achieve. This leads me to suspect that, as in the acquisition of many cognitive skills, what is essential is an example and practice.

Nonetheless, the question of 'where to' still persists in Women's Studies programs. Given an interdisciplinary introduction such as ours, is it preferable for students then to retreat to the traditional disciplines and take courses on women within these disciplines in order to familiarize themselves with methodologies specific to the traditional disciplines? Does such a strategy ultimately advance Women's Studies? When we look at these questions, we must see them within the social economy of the university. The achievement pressures within the traditional disciplines often militate against a beneficial flow of mutual feedback between disciplines. The disciplines, after all, are usually embodied by departments which are often struggling for survival or expansion in competition with one another. On the other hand, one must ask if it is wise or fair to expose a student to an entire program of interdisciplinary courses which are at best exciting and stimulating but, at worst, in the first stages of experimentation and thus very confusing? And further, will interdisciplinary studies create in itself the rigour already established within the traditional disciplines? Either way, it seems to me that all teaching should involve an on-going examination of its methodology and context. For instance,

when literary exempla are introduced within a Women's Studies course, it is still possible within the framework of the course to take some time to reach some working principles of literary exegesis and criticism by applying them to the works under consideration. The methodology of literary studies, which is particularly useful in Women's Studies, can then be brought into focus each time such exempla are used, with particular discussion pertaining to the usefulness of this methodology in Women's Studies.

Wherever a program goes, however, it is essential to ventilate its objectives and problems honestly among all concerned:

> The introduction of Inter-Disciplinary programmes can have dramatic effects on the distribution of power and responsibility within both the polis and the universities. These effects can dramatize conflicts of interests between the subject and those professional interests more identified with the course of study or degree as a whole. Often in debates about inter-disciplinary work, there is only implicit recognition of such conflicts when it is vital that attempts should be made to confront and resolve them. Failure to do so can lead to disastrous consequences for the teaching and organizing of so-called Inter-Disciplinary degrees. . .[9]

Our own course eventually precipitated the development of a Women's Studies Program in our university. As in many other places, I suspect our program originally developed out of the interests of specific teachers within the different disciplines/departments in the university. Furthermore, the introductory course began to attract numbers of students and became thus more accepted within and desirable to the university. After negotiations with various departments for cross-listings, this course finally came to rest in a newly created centre for inter disciplinary studies. A small sub-group of interested professors formed around Women's Studies, and eventually it became necessary to create a program with its own co-ordinator. Nonetheless, for its first years, arrangements within the program were haphazard; criteria and accountability for hiring of teaching personnel were never clearly delineated, and so essentially the program was forced to accept as teachers within it appointments made by departments whose members might not have been either aware of or sympathetic to the exigencies of Women's Studies. It is only now, eight years after Women's Studies has been introduced into the university curriculum, that we have begun seriously to address issues concerning hiring and curriculum. Significantly the occasion for this change has been provided by external pressures. The university in the interests of its survival has recently amalgamated with another college in Montreal. The two Women's Studies programs in the universities have had to come together and form a single unit. This contingency put us in the position of having to survey our accumulated resources and rationalize them as well as having to design a viable Women's Studies program.

It has been a highly instructive experience; originally there was some overt as well as covert resistance to the merger, a fear of loss of autonomy, mutual suspicion, and frequently a real divergence of views. For example: in the formation of the curriculum committee, it became clear that not only did each member come to it from a different discipline with different loyalties but each of us also had a different status within the political/economic structure of the university. The process of discussing our existing resources along with having to rationalize our curriculum provided us with the long-overdue occasion for addressing basic questions concerning Women's Studies. One of our major issues, characteristic of the kind of concerns interdisciplinarity always raises, concerned the question of exclusivity and concentration. Given a limited number of courses needed for a degree, should students in Women's Studies actually concentrate on an established discipline with supplementary courses in Women's Studies within that discipline? Or, on the other hand, should students take variegated Women's Studies courses in several disciplines and be responsible for synthesizing the material through some interdisciplinary seminars? We finally resolved this by structuring various possible programs, which will not be detailed here. Our final conclusion, however, was that students, regardless of the level of concentration they gave to Women's Studies, would be required to take a minimum of three interdisciplinary courses which address, among other things, methodology. Our deliberations brought us to conclusions similar to Alfred North Whitehead's when he describes three cycles of education in *The Aim of Education.* The first is the cycle of 'romance', when interest in a subject is stimulated. Comprehensiveness and variety are sought rather than specialized rigour. This stage corresponds to our inter disciplinary introductory course. The next cycle is that of 'precision'. Here the students apply themselves to a more rigorous examination of a chosen discipline or set of disciplines. This is where our own students will take courses in related configurations of disciplines with a focus on Women's Studies. The last stage is that of 'generalization', where the experience is synthesized and ordered.[10] We can see this later process as taking place continuously, but also being carefully monitored and developed in the three required interdisciplinary courses: the introductory course, a mid-level seminar examining comparative methodology, and a final seminar of an inter disciplinary nature, focused on a theme relating to Women's Studies and involving a large number of faculty from diverse disciplines.

This program is still in the process of development and will be going through committees in the university for some time still. It comes at a time when there is a situation of retrenchment in all education in North America. There is a decline in population, and this is particularly evident in the schools of anglophone Quebec, where we serve a particularly shrinking community. It is difficult to predict how this program will finally look. It must also be emphasized that inherent in the very structures of universities are many traditional obstacles to the development of interdisciplinary programs.

IV. *Structural Obstacles to Interdisciplinarity Within the University*

Over the past few years, Women's Studies courses and programs have begun to proliferate in the curricula of many colleges and universities in North America. Most of the accredited university courses seem to be given under the aegis of known and established disciplines (e.g. Psychology, History, Literature, etc.); they often reflect the particular interests of specific university teachers rather than a global academic commitment on the part of an entire institution. Sometimes, modest Women's Studies programs are offered within centres or departments of interdisciplinary studies. Frequently, Women's Studies circumvents the usual academic path and appears in a configuration of non-credit offerings within the vast spectrum of courses offered by those lucrative Continuing Education or Adult Learning Centres which are attached to many post-secondary institutions. The purpose of these observations is not to duplicate the excellent work done in both Canada and the United States to record the kinds of Women's Studies programs currently offered.[11] Rather, I wish to demonstrate that the Women's Studies courses and programs which have surfaced throughout North America are developing well beyond the idiosyncratic needs of this or that teacher or institution. Indeed, a modest industry has already evolved around Women's Studies, and excellent scholarly work is being produced at a rate greatly in excess of any one person's ability to keep up with it. Yet, despite the very encouraging evidence of Women's Studies in diverse settings, there are many unanswered questions concerning its status within the university context, not to speak of its own particular epistemology.

Often whole courses and programs, which have been initiated under tenuous and highly vulnerable circumstances, gather momentum by attracting many keenly interested students. However, the people offering these courses are frequently forced to exert so much energy on ensuring their survival from academic session to session that other issues become less urgent. The issues to which I'm referring here are: the interfacing of Women's Studies courses within a specific program; their interfacing with courses within the other disciplines; the ideology of Women's Studies and criteria for hiring personnel and judging the validity of courses; the educational objectives of placing such programs within male-dominated institutions, etc.

Now, to be sure, it can be convincingly argued that all university courses are in tenuous situations because of economic recession and a declining birth-rate in North America. However, the old adage of 'last in, first to go' applies especially destructively to many of the newer university programs which have been inherited from the optimistic liberalism of the 1960s, such as Black Studies, Third World Studies, Women's Studies, etc. These subjects have neither a tradition of power within the university nor the history of a place in university epistemology to reinforce their position. The only relatively new 'disciplines' that seem to survive are those supported by an influx of money from industry or government agencies, which can quite often be fairly independent within the university structure owing to their funding resources. Here I am referring to Bio-Chemistry and some of the newer computer-based interdisciplinary pursuits within Commerce faculties. The fact is that traditional disciplines are rarely asked to justify their existence in quite the same way as newer fields. Indeed, as we will see, they are accepted as the *sine qua non* of the modern university:

> In practice, the curriculum of a university is in a large part inherited; it is seldom thought out as a whole, and there are powerful forces resisting its revision. Much is taken for granted rather than argued out. Changes in knowledge (as reflected, for example, during the last hundred years not only in the "exponential growth" of knowledge as a whole but in the answers given by students to the changing range of questions in examination papers) are expressed within an existing curriculum: they do not modify the whole. It is usually only in new universities that there is any real possibility of a general review of curriculum.[12]

One of the methods of eroding interdisciplinary or experimental programs is to give them a limited time for growth and then to 'review' them using criteria inherently contrary to the programs' objectives and axiology. It is clear that interdisciplinarity poses a great threat to the traditional university and has the potentiality of undermining its socio-economic *status quo:*

> The universities are often radical in their approach to society and conservative in the way they themselves reflect society . . . namely in what and how they teach. The fundamental reason lies no doubt in the fact that academic disciplines are the basis for the organization of knowledge for teaching purposes. For the disciplines are not only a convenient breakdown of knowledge into its component parts, they are also the basis of the organization of the university into its autonomous fiefs, and of the professions engaged in teaching and research. Thus, to meddle with the disciplines is to meddle with the social structure of the university in its entirety.[13]

Professor Apostel goes on to emphasize the difficulty of effecting change in the institutions with long-established structures:

> One of them [difficulties], however, should be broached right away, that of institutional structures. The organisation of universities into monodisciplinary Schools or "Faculties" which jealously protect their branch of knowledge, constitutes a major obstacle. No mistake should be made about it, however. While changing the institutional structures of universities is a *necessary* condition, it is by no means *sufficient* for introducing interdisciplinary teaching and research. That is true whatever the level of innovation involved and no matter whether the country involved has a centralized or decentralized system of higher education.[14]

Very often there are specific institutional obstacles which are difficult to overcome. Faculties and departments are established, the economic pie is divided accordingly, and unless a new department is heavily endowed by an external source its inclusion means dividing the pie into more – hence smaller – portions. Also, often universities have real space problems; the organization of space is often a

> result of improvisation, chance circumstances or external constraints and rarely the result of a concerted plan. . . The size of some campuses and the way in which the disciplines are distributed on them make some kinds of connections perfectly illusory. A fifteen or twenty minute walk is sufficient to discourage even the most willing of students, especially when, as is generally the case, their time tables do not allow them enough interval between classes. Moreover, the layouts of even the most modern universities are rarely based on an interdisciplinary model for the simple reasons that such a model does not as yet exist except in the mind of a select few.[15]

For instance, universities are frequently designed with many large lecture halls but relatively few small work areas and conference rooms. The latter, of course, encourage close student/professor contact as well as peer teaching among students. While university rhetoric often describes the university as a place for free exchange of ideas, the very architecture of the institution frequently makes such declarations hollow. For example, many lecture theatres are so designed that while the teacher can hear the students' questions and the students can hear the teachers' answers, the students cannot hear one another. This creates a rather inhibiting and awkward situation where either the professor must repeat every word the questioning student has said to the rest of the class, or engage in a two-way dialogue to which the rest of the class is a rather puzzled audience. Clearly, in such cases, the questions tend to be perfunctory and easy to repeat to the whole group, and not extensive.

In addition, there are clear motivational problems concerning the teachers, most of whom want to succeed in the university context according to its value structures. Women, already at a disadvantage, want their belated share of the tangible and intangible rewards offered by the academic professions. Indeed, considering the psychological, social, and institutional obstacles women must overcome to succeed in university, they must on the whole have acquired the skills needed to gain the much-sought-after rewards; their survival indicates this. Given the power of people's needs for validation in their work, and the values particular to validation within a university, the teacher of Women's Studies is often placed in profound inner conflict by this choice. If teachers of Women's Studies are attached only to that precarious field of study, their survival depends entirely on the survival of the program. If the teachers have a dual allegiance – to a traditional discipline/department as well as to a Women's Studies program – they often live the fragmented life of their sisters, the proverbial housewives. They are isolated from other Women's Studies teachers by their attachment to different departments, and detached from their

departments because they teach Women's Studies. Their time (a most important commodity in academic circles) is fragmented by vying academic structures and demands: one a powerful discipline with entrenched values, power, tenure lines, and criteria of success; the other, a new precarious addendum to the university curriculum, frequently fighting for its survival year by year and frequently with no tenured positions in its ranks. Pressures to publish in the established discipline, and thus retain a foothold in the entrenched discipline/department, are strong and persuasive. There is also often a deprecatory attitude, claiming Women's Studies to be lacking in 'real' substance, which apparently is clearly the property of the established disciplines. Hence, Women's Studies is often tacked on at the end of the vita, of the professional commitment. Many academics now teaching Women's Studies teach it over and above their course loads. While this form of volunteerism has very respectable roots in housewifery, the WCTU, and the women's movement itself, it is most unproductive in the university context. It ensures that Women's Studies be perpetuated as small 'dead end' programs. With neither prestige nor tenure lines attached to positions in Women's Studies, it cannot be seriously entertained as a legitimate field of work for students considering their own futures. Courses in Women's Studies taught by volunteers might inform, might raise consciousness, might cause enthusiasm, but they tease people into a *cul de sac* where these issues can be examined only with the status of a 'hobby', while the real energy will be turned to 'serious' studies which lead to paying jobs. Clearly if this state of volunteerism perpetuates itself, jobs in the field will not open up. Furthermore, if the value-system rewards scholarship with the teaching of graduate courses, ambitious professors will work to attain those courses within the regular disciplines where there is a future and a clearly defined system of reward. As well, volunteerism in a time of retrenchment is provocative to faculty associations, which are anxious to create more jobs within an academic community threatened by the ever-increasing longevity of its professors, the number of graduate degrees awarded each year, and a diminishing student body. One feels almost petty in criticizing those teachers who idealistically work above their assigned load rather than to rule. While their idealism is admirable, it is misplaced: the immediate rewards of disseminating Women's Studies is outweighed by the danger of maintaining those very structures that ensure its being thwarted beyond a very marginal growth.[16]

Given the very radical changes which interdisciplinarity would instigate in academic institutions, one must examine the receptivity to such changes of those teachers already entrenched in the university structures. Is it indeed possible for the majority of teachers, trained in traditional disciplines and having taught in them for years, to overcome their initial resistance to interdisciplinarity and be receptive to its possibilities in their own situations?

> Interdisciplinarity is first and foremost a state of mind requiring each person to have an attitude that combines humility with openmindedness and curiosity, a willingness to engage in dialogue and, hence, the capacity for assimilation and synthesis. Furthermore, it is a discipline in the ethical sense of the word and demands from the start that the representatives of different sciences accept teamwork and the necessity of searching together for a common language. It is no cause for surprise that teachers who have been accustomed since childhood to individualistic behaviour and studying rather isolated "subjects" don't readily accept the idea of changing over so completely and after years of practice based on handing down a certain type of knowledge – which they may often quite rightly have regarded as appropriate and efficient – and sometimes overhauling completely the contents, spirit and methods they use in teaching. What is true for a majority of tenured professors is also true for a good many junior faculty members, who have fixed habits and prefer the easier alternative of not displeasing the "boss" and risking their career on what seems to be a mere adventure, and thereby bolt down the system from one generation to the next.[17]

This situation of professorial receptivity is a central issue surrounding the creation of interdisciplinary departments and/or universities. An examination of the complex social, economic and psychological motivations in maintaining the *status quo* might explain the weak position occupied by many interdisciplinary or experimental programs in many universities. Moreover, the 1970 report on interdisciplinarity to which I have already so extensively referred, postulates an interesting 'law' which claims that 'the ability a university activity has to get organized as an interdisciplinary activity is inversely proportional to the length of time since this activity has made its appearance in the university system, and directly proportional to how recent it is and to how much resistance there is to its being accepted as a repository of knowledge'.[18]

V *Some Conclusions Concerning Women's Studies and Interdisciplinarity*

The medieval university was characterized by the understanding that knowledge could be obtained through a rigorous interpretation of the world. While there were various areas of specialization in preparing students for professions such as law and medicine, curriculum was seen holistically as the pursuit of the highest order of knowledge which would lead to a more profound understanding of and communication with God. After the Reformation, when the sciences were developing, there were new subjects and new objectives to education. The universities freed themselves from ecclesiastical control over an extended period of time; and by the eighteenth century, a definable academic profession had begun to emerge with its fields of specialization or discipline. Technological advances changed the focus again during the nineteenth century, and the universities became even more specific and task-oriented.[19]

In some senses, Women's Studies occupies a very particular condition within the university context. Since very little rigorous effort has been made to examine its interfacing with other disciplines on a widespread basis, its application to a specific and/or task-oriented program of study has still been left virtually untouched. One can imagine that it would be useful to students entering any of the 'helping' professions or to students in Commerce, etc., but it still has not reached the level of a prerequisite for any other program of study although it applies itself specifically to the culture and experience of fifty-one per cent of human kind. We have an enormous amount to do in this area: we must accumulate data; we must exhume historical works and material; we must evolve methodologies and an epistemology. As well, Women's Studies should be integrated into elementary, secondary, and collegial education where its advance will meet obstacles that are manifestations of the same epistemological biases found in institutions of higher learning. We are, however, at an advantage over our male colleagues of the past. We at least have the model of their efforts to assist us, and to be rejected, where necessary.

It is edifying to look back at one of the first questions attending the subject of women's education. This was: what should women learn? What is suitable knowledge for women? Originally, when there was a defined division of labour, the range of women's knowledge and the appropriate area of study were quite clear. A good woman 'holds a distaff in her hand, and her fingers grasp the spindle', the book of *Proverbs* succinctly tells us. There is no evidence of Biblical males wanting to grasp the spindle; in other words, the preserve of woman's knowledge was clearly defined within her domestic duties.

It was only when women wanted to know what men knew that the question of women's knowledge became sensitive. In this context, women began to justify their need for knowledge in order to survive in an increasingly complex and competitive society. Women had to be circumspect in expressing the need for more knowledge and approached men's traditional preserve in a miasma of self-justificatory statements. For example, in 1763 in England, a Mrs Bathusa Makin wrote and published a book entitled *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts and Tongues with an Answer to the Objections Against this Way of Education.* She stated her case in this way:

> I do not deny women ought to be brought up to a comely decent carriage, to their needle, to neatness, to understand all those things that do particularly belong to their sex. But when these things are competently cared for, and where there are Endowments of Nature and Leisure, then Higher things ought to be Endeavoured after. . . Had God intended women only as a finer sort of cattle, he would not have made them reasonable.[20]

Mrs Makin foresaw the reluctance men would have to share their knowledge and hence the power they possessed. Hence she had to contrive a 'female' justification for a proposed curriculum gleaned from the prevailing masculine educational model. She did this by introducing an element of domestic intention to every subject undertaken by women in her school, which was 'lately erected for gentlewomen at Tottenham-high-Cross, within four miles of London, in the Road to Ware.' The very manner in which she contrived her justification, however, turned out to be a rather crude but nonetheless viable description of an interdisciplinary curriculum based on a holistic concept of the student and arising from the student's needs in day-to-day life. She would teach her students:

> To buy wooll and flax; to die Scarlet and Purple requires skill in Natural Philosophy. To consider a field, the quantity and quality, requires knowledge in Geometry. To plant a vineyard, requires understanding in Husbandry. She should not merchandize without knowledge in Arithmatick; She could not govern so great a family well, without knowledge in Politicks and Oeconomicks; She could not look well to the wayes of her household, except she understood Physick and Chirurgeny; She could not open her Mouth with wisdom and have in her Tongue the law of kindness, unless she understood Grammer, Rhetorick, and logic.[21]

Now although it is true that we have correspondence, dating from the mid-fifteenth century in England, which indicates that some women were very able in running highly diversified rural estates in their husbands' absence,[22] there had been little evidence of effort by females to devise and justify a female curriculum before the seventeenth century. Certainly no one was seriously suggesting that women themselves were worthy of study, except for an odd treatise on midwifery; there was also the sub-genre of various misogynous works on the evils of women as well as an occasional work in praise of those rare good women of history. Thus the original problem attending women's studies emerged from propriety. What was appropriate for women and for what purpose? Where originally it was sufficient to know the household arts and 'Principles of Religion' as well as 'all Manner of Sober and Vertuous Education', it was becoming increasingly obvious that women must learn more of the world around them.

By the mid-nineteenth century, egalitarians of all shades and persuasions were certain that if women had an equal education to men they would attain social equality. About a hundred years later, in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, having had access to and success in traditional male universities, indicated that equal educational exposure could not entirely solve the problem of inequality between the sexes.

> The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) – who always regards the self as the essential – and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome?[23]

De Beauvoir aspired to answer these questions in her great classic work, and stated that

> . . . from woman's point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live; and thus we shall be able to envisage the difficulties in their way as, endeavouring to make their escape from the sphere hitherto assigned them, they aspire to full membership in the human race.[24]

Yet, twenty-five years later, de Beauvoir has had occasion to question her premises of the past. She seems to conclude that learning what men have learned is not enough, since women have been learning to see the world through men's eyes rather than perceive it through their own apertures with the lenses of their own female culture. In an interview with J. P. Sartre in 1975, she asked him:

> . . . est-ce que les femmes doivent entièrement rejeter cet univers masculin, ou s'y faire une place? Est-ce qu'elles doivent voler l'outil, ou changer l'outil? Je veux dire aussi bien la science, que le langage, que les arts. Toutes les valeurs sont marquées du sceau de la masculinité. Faut-il, pour cela, complètement les rejeter, et essayer de réinventer, à partir de zéro, radicalement autre chose? Ou faut-il s'assimiler ces valeurs, s'en servir, à des fins féministes?[25]

The question of what women ought to know has been the subject of much educational reform and discussion over the past hundred and twenty-five years. We have seen the development from the 'accomplished lady' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through the general democratization of education (with its attendant difficulties and continual need for re-evaluation), to the widely held contemporary myth of Western society that females and males receive identical education and educational opportunities in our public education systems. Later on, we will examine the whole question of this supposed equality and refer to that increasingly growing body of data which indicates that this equality is illusory at best. Clearly, the continuing existence of sexism, in both the structure of our educational institutions and in the content of curriculum with its in-built biases, creates an environment conducive to self-fulfilling prophecies of low expectation for the females served by this system.

Whatever has been considered appropriate for women to learn, the question that still remains is how Women's Studies fits into the male academy. This academy has always had a vested interest in determining the nature of knowledge and mystifying that knowledge in order to ensure its own contrived guardianship of it. There is inestimable power in determining what is worth passing along as knowledge and what should be dismissed as 'superstition' or as simply 'invalid'. In our particular epistemology, that which is most highly valued is called 'objective' or 'cognitive'. While the traditional disciplines appear always to have been with us and to be informed with absolute value, they can also be regarded simply as schema and categories pragmatically created in an empirically verifiable world by a power group sharing a common set of values and objectives. These categories form the basis for the structure and economy of our academies, as we have already discussed, where they are supported as immutable disciplines through an extensive and variegated system of vested interests.

Now the problem attending Women's Studies is that it does not fit conveniently into any of these pre-established categories. Even in the eighteenth century, Mrs Makin saw the need to yoke together diverse categories of knowledge for her female students. If women had been creating categories, perhaps the phenomena that have given rise to economics and biology would not have become differentiated into these precise categories or disciplines. Clearly, then, the present division of academic knowledge frequently functions as a force preventing Women's Studies from achieving full 'disciplinehood' within its own interdisciplinarity. Because of its newness and the emotionally charged nature of its contents, as well as the institutional obstacles to interdisciplinarity in general, Women's Studies is in the exciting position of having to explore new fields of knowledge and to instigate change in the educational milieu in order to accommodate this knowledge. This implies that those people who involve themselves in the process of Women's Studies and its establishment within the university must always keep their objectives clear by undergoing a continual process of self-evaluation. We must: ". . . recognize and take advantage of the critical role of education in reproducing the economic order. It is precisely this role of education which both offers the opportunity for using schools to promote revolutionary change and, at the same time, presents the danger of co-optation and assimilation into a counterstrategy to stabilize the social order."[26] Women's Studies is in the rather contradictory, but nonetheless tenable, position of arguing the case of its own validity within a system which must be radically changed in order to accommodate it. The other choice, as we have seen, would be for Women's Studies to argue its own finitude and choreograph its own disappearance.

1 Heinz Heckhausen, 'Discipline and Disciplinarity', *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities*, ed. Leo Apostel *et al.*, Paris: OECD, 1972, p. 86.
2 Arlie Russell Hochschild, 'Inside the Clockwork of Male Careers', *Women and the Power to Change*, ed. Florence Howe, New York: McGraw Hill, 1975.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
4 Leo Apostel *et al.*, eds., *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities*, Paris: OECD, 1972, pp. 49-50. Hereafter cited as *Interdisciplinarity.*
5 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
7 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 90.
8 Len Doyal, 'Interdisciplinary Studies in Higher Education', *Universities Quarterly*, V. 28, no 4 (Autumn 1974), p. 474.
9 *Ibid.*, p. 471.
10 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, New York: The Free Press, 1967, Chapter II.
11 There is much work being done here. However, I would like to single out particularly the following works: Florence Howe, *Seven Years Later: Women's Studies Programs in 1976*, Washington: The National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, June 1977; the on-going reports in the *Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women;* Janet Willis, *Learning Opportunities for Women in Canada: Perceptions of Educators*, Toronto: Canadian Committee on Learning Opportunities for Women, August 1977.
12 *Interdisciplinarity*, p. 218.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
14 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
15 *Ibid.*, pp. 193-4.
16 This information was culled from several group discussions at the founding convention of the Women's Studies Association, San Francisco, January 1977.
17 *Interdisciplinarity*, p. 192.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
19 *Ibid., pp. 186-7.*
20 Mrs Bathusa Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts and Tongues with an Answer to the Objections Against this Way of Education*, London, 1763, pp. 22-3.
21 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
22 I am here primarily thinking of the Paston women, in mid-fifteenth century Norfolk, of *Paston Letters*, ed. J. Gairdner, London, 1872-5, 1901.
23 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley, New York: Bantam Books, 1968, pp. xxviii-ix.
24 *Ibid.*, p. xxix.
25 Simone de Beauvoir, 'Simone de Beauvoir Interroge Jean-Paul Sartre', *L'Arc*, 61 (1975), p. 11. Translation:
'. . . should women entirely reject the masculine universe, or make themselves a place in it? I mean this as well in science as in language and the arts. All values bear the mark of masculinity. For this reason, must we completely reject them, and try to reinvent from zero something radically different? Or should we assimilate these values, lay our hands on them, and use them for feminist ends?'
26 Samuel Bowes and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*, New York: Basic Books, 1977, p. 246.