

Women's Studies in an Alternative Setting

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Les Études de la femme dans une situation parallèle.

Nous sommes nombreuses à croire que les études de la femme et l'apprentissage dans un contexte non-traditionnel se rehaussent mutuellement. Une expérience faite pendant une fin de semaine au Centre Lacolle—une maison de campagne qui appartient à l'Université Concordia—a étayé cette proposition. J'ai organisé dans cet endroit une tranche de mon cours: 'La Femme et la littérature', et il en est résulté un engagement plus profond de la part du professeur comme des étudiant/e/s, ce qui a rejailli sur les connaissances acquises.

Cet article décrit l'organisation et l'intendance de cette fin de semaine et son application au cours dans son ensemble.

Concordia University runs the Lacolle Centre — a house in the country — to provide an alternative environment for learning. In January 1977 I was teaching a course on Women in Literature and I decided to take advantage of this different environment. The results of this weekend away support the view that Women's Studies and non-traditional learning situations and methods enhance each other. What follows is a description of the planning for the weekend, a summary of the weekend itself, and its application to the rest of the course.

Planning for the Weekend

The students decided that what they hoped to get out of the weekend was enjoyment and closer friendships. They would also learn group skills, and hoped to be able to incorporate this learning into the course as a whole. They were all women, ranging in age from their late teens to mid-forties, and most were not taking literature as their major for their degree.

The book chosen for analysis during our weekend retreat was Brontë's *Villette*. The first part of this course had dealt with the psychology and the biology of women and female social roles in literature. In this novel, Charlotte Brontë's characters range from childhood to old age, and she provides the reader with a complete and comprehensive background of social life and its psychological implications. Reading this

novel would provide a natural link with the first part of the course and also give us a base from which we could examine contemporary issues pertaining to Women's Studies. On the other hand, the remoteness of such central material as the situation of the governess, the Victorian image of the 'lady', the conventions of female-male communication, would emphasize the importance of examining the intellectual and social situation out of which the novel emerged. Also, the existence of a dozen fine biographies on Brontë ranging from one by Mrs Gaskell to one as recent as 1977, would illustrate the enriching effect that increased biographical knowledge can have in demystifying the woman artist.

Charlotte Brontë's book is a rich territory for considering the interaction of what Elaine Showalter has described as the three major categories and phases of writing in a subculture:

- the internalization of the aesthetic and social views of the dominant culture (for women writers, termed 'Feminine' writing by Showalter);
- protest and advocacy of minority rights (termed 'Feminist' writing);
- and 'self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity' (termed 'Female' writing).¹

In this way, *Villette* would provide a base from which we could assess the place of woman in Brontë's society and in our own.

Preparatory Work

Students were tested on their pre-reading of *Villette*, assigned some background material, and asked to submit topics for possible group investigation. Planning Committees were formed and the Design Committee presented a tentative plan, proposed appropriate accreditation for participants, and alternative assignments for those who could not come. All students were asked to hand in a brief written statement of what they expected would happen on the weekend. This was interesting when compared later with what did happen. Most of the students expected to 'get to know other people', 'have fun', and 'relax'. Few, if any, expected much 'academic learning', and one or two worried that it might be, academically, a 'waste of time'.

The Weekend Itself

A blizzard of epic proportions delayed our arrival by several hours and prevented six students from arriving at all. Hence, out of a class of twenty-eight students, there were thirteen on the weekend. Exhausted from the hazards of our trip, liberated from normal responsibilities, and starting to make contact as friends, we found the academic objective low in priority. However, after dinner I offered to talk to the group about Brontë's life, works, and evolving critical reputation, using the direct source-material wherever possible. This established intimacy with, and objectivity toward, Brontë. It also evoked discussion of psychological, social, and artistic issues until we realized that we had been in session for three hours, well past midnight. The students were enthusiastic about applying and developing their learnings next day in a study of *Villette*.

Next morning, the students formed three groups to examine *Villette* respectively as a novel of psychological development, as a social novel, and as literary art. The groups worked all day at high energy, with growing concentration and excitement, coming together as a larger group for lunch (which one group prepared while discussing the text in the kitchen — perhaps an unconscious learning from the Brontë sisters?).

In early evening the first group's presentation and discussion took place. After dinner the second group gave its presentation. After a break, everyone was sufficiently stimulated with success to want to continue with the third group's presentation, even though it would again take us beyond midnight. The quality of the group presentations was extraordinarily high, better than any that these students had done in individual written form. While enjoying themselves immensely the students had put in a fourteen-hour working day.

Needless to say, we all slept late the next day. Before leaving, we spent an hour and a half examining the weekend. We discussed: what we had learned academically, what we had learned as a group, what our responsibilities were to the rest of the class — and to the course as a whole. First, each person's private written evaluation of the weekend was shared with the group. Evaluations showed that the weekend had been 'a roaring success'. Students remarked that it was a unique 'sharing experience', by 'a group that didn't really know one another when they came'; that 'a bond of friendship and understanding had been formed which would have been impossible to establish over a series of classroom lectures'; that 'sharing our discoveries and questions widens our boundaries and clarifies our ideas'.

Participants expressed amazement at 'the enormous amount of academic material we covered and explored' in 'an environment that both facilitated working and allowed for sharing in a way that is usually unavailable'. . . 'it seemed more like indulging in interesting and stimulating conversation rather than working in the conventional sense'. . . 'a classroom situation could never have brought all those ideas out' . . . 'areas of the novel were discussed and studied which under normal classroom circumstances would have been impossible'.

Several remarked on the value of the work in small groups, on the insights into 'my own behaviour, thoughts, and feelings when interacting within a group' and on 'the way other people function in a group intellectually and interpersonally'. One person said 'the weekend has given me more confidence in myself' and 'the ability to express myself'. Another remarked that now 'I realize everyone has much to contribute to the class as a whole and no one should keep silent because they feel their ideas are unimportant. I say this because I, myself, have done this several times'.

Many noted the 'high degree of co-operation', the 'flexible, intuitive, and smooth' way in which the group organized itself. This was the first time they had 'lived with a group of women', and they valued 'learning about people's ideas of themselves as women'. One student appreciated 'talking about my values and experience with older married women who were ready to discuss, disagree, and listen'.

In subsequent group discussions students suggested that psychological, social, and aesthetic criticism employed in a feminist analysis of a novel resulted in a high degree of integration of material normally segregated by discipline or by time constraints within a course. It was also felt that students responded both intellectually and emotionally in a particularly powerful way because a group of women were living together in order to study a woman novelist writing about women. The students felt that the weekend would not have been the same had men been present. Finally, the fact that a third of the group was older had been an asset. Each generation had been able to explore the interests and values of the other. And in the working groups the older women had sensitized the younger to the psychological and social situations of the four important older women in Brontë's novel.

Application of the Weekend to the Course as a Whole

We then discussed how we could bring the weekend workshop and all of its positive elements to the class as a whole. We decided to have groups of two participants talk about the weekend to the class. We mimeographed summaries of our presentations from the weekend and then brainstormed essay topics for exploration by the non-attenders. By arranging chairs in a circle we could approximate the milieu created on the weekend. And for future classes we would break into small groups to work on the next two novels. Finally, we wanted to evaluate the changes as we proceeded and decide whether we would continue in the new way.

These steps were implemented with surprising success. The groups were enthusiastic and self-critical. The content of presentations improved steadily. Of course, there were problems. Some of the better students realized that their individual achievement must not only be shared with, but sometimes sacrificed to, the group. Because of this the class agreed that the group work should not be the only method of evaluation.

One obvious problem was the lack of sufficient class time. The students found that the group method was cognitively and affectively more rewarding, but much more demanding. A couple of students commented in their final course evaluation that this course had taken much more of their time and work than had any other courses within their major.

For me, acting as a facilitator was more consuming of time and energy than lecturing; but it made me a better listener. In fact I became part of the group that was learning. I was particularly pleased that the non-literature majors, who had at first avoided aesthetic and literary topics in favour of the psychological or sociological approach, were, by the end of the course, vying to join groups working on the 'art' of the novel. This was because the presentations had been so impressive in this area. The class as a whole became very interested in the recurrence of certain images in these novels. Our experience of literature written by women was totally changed because of this new involvement.

The success of this weekend workshop leads me to hope that teachers of Women's Studies courses will encourage the development of alternative academic structures to interact with traditional ones and that we will continue to explore alternative learning environments.