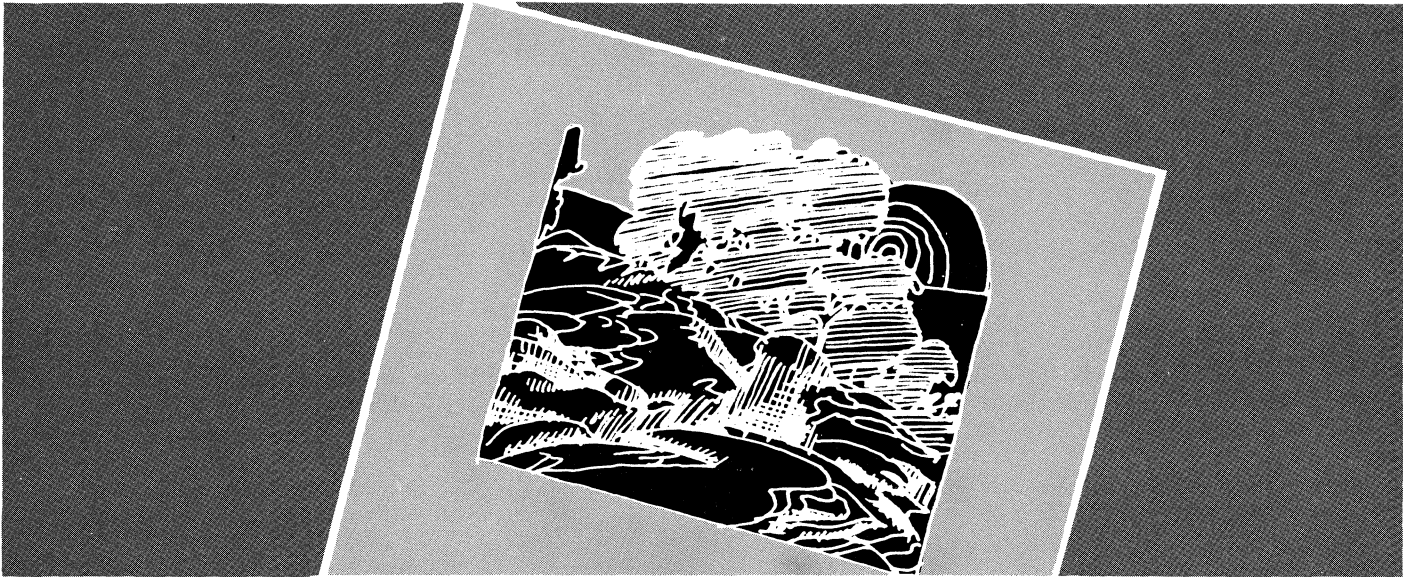


# Women's Studies: a Rural Route to Learning

Melody Hessing



## Route rurale numéro combien?

Dans ce texte, on nous parle de l'enseignement d'un cours sur les femmes dans un milieu rural en Colombie Britannique. Les étudiantes racontent comment ce cours a affecté non seulement leur propre attitude mais aussi celle de leurs familles.

Women's Studies as an accredited academic enterprise is something new in many parts of Canada. The hinterland, the area serving the urban society, suffers a cultural, financial, and ideological disadvantage unrecognized by many of the people who live there. Residents of many 'interior' communities are connected with the world and even their neighbours through the centralized media links of CBC and urban newspapers. *As It Happens* doesn't happen here. And when it happens is usually later, if at all. Activities and events that are marginal to the mainstream of Canadian culture (and Women's Studies is a case in point) go unrecognized and unrecorded.

The consequences of this urban, centralized production of knowledge are especially critical for rural women. Lack of access (both socio-economic and geographical) to participation in the production of this ideology contributes to women's sense of powerlessness.

The potential for Women's Studies to reconstruct this peripheral rural status is recognized by BC feminists. The Women's Studies Association of British Columbia attempts to bring together instructors and students of Women's Studies throughout the province. Women's Studies offerings exist at many community colleges, and 'Distance Education' and correspondence courses are now available to women in remote areas. This helps to diffuse knowledge that is traditionally processed, stored, and presented in urban areas only.

Accredited academic courses exist within the context of an intellectual tradition and an institutional setting. Such a location of the educational process has implications for Women's Studies courses, the method of teaching them, and the specific content. Do Women's Studies courses address the needs and interests of rural women? How do women in isolated settings respond to feminist course content?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by presenting the experiences of a small discussion group taking part in a Women's Studies course in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. Although this area has been marked by rapid development and urbanization, its rural and hinterland character remain.

## *Description of the Course*

The Distance Education program operating out of Simon Fraser University offers as one of its courses 'The History of Women in North America, 1830 to the Present'. The course is an upper-division correspondence course which was put together by Dr Anita Fellman of SFU, and operated through the Department of Continuing Education. Students throughout the Province register, receive textbooks, readings, and a guideline/text through the mail. The course is composed of ten modules, or areas of reading and study. After the completion of each of these, the student submits written essays to the marker for evaluation.

Despite the advantages of this type of course—widespread geographic participation and the adaptability of material to the student's individual pace—there are problems. Basic communication difficulties and misunderstandings arise in the initial registration process. Students' reading of materials and responses to essay questions may be off-target. Further, the traditional intellectual isolation of women can be mirrored and even reinforced by this highly independent learning process. And perhaps most important, the social nature of learning is absent from the solitary and individual character of this form of education.

In an effort to resolve these difficulties, SFU initiated an experimental tutorial system in which a local tutor would act as liaison or resource person between the students and the University. The tutor arranged, when and where possible, for periodic discussions with course members. In the Okanagan area bi-weekly meetings were arranged to discuss the readings and the essay questions of the current module.

Certain structural features of these meetings were important to the learning process. The relatively non-hierarchical nature of discussions was directly related to this. The tutor had not been directly involved in the creation of the course, and was not responsible for formal assessments. This contributed to an informal exchange of information and an egalitarian framework for discussion.

Students' age and experience and geographic location were also integral features of the learning process. While the ages of group members ranged from thirty to sixty, all students had raised, or were in the process of raising, children. Students and tutor were from middle-class affluent backgrounds. Naturally, these common experiences were influential factors in the issues and process of the discussions.

The final meeting of the group was tape-recorded and the following section is derived from this discussion of the members' experiences and perspectives of the course. Their reactions to course material may provide further ideas and criticism for the instruction of Women's Studies in hinterland areas.

### *On Taking a Women's Studies Course*

When the subject of the motivations and experience of taking a Women's Studies Course were discussed by the tutor and students, various themes emerged in the discussion. The issue of women's identity, once the traditional role of childrearing has been carried out, is one example. As one woman observed: 'We are all at this crossroads, where our kids are gone, and we *can* go out to work, and our husbands don't want us to. I think we're at the stage where we're looking for something else. My friends are all sick and tired of macramé and weaving and the whole bit we've been through.' Members of the group observed that they had already exhausted the time-filling activities available to women in their community.

In addition, as the tutor observed, 'Doing handicraft means that you have that product right there, whereas if you're taking a course, you're taking it for credit, which has the long-term goal of a degree.' The women agreed that 'There's a goal, but we don't know what it is, but at least you're working towards *something*. You know you are, nobody else does. We showed our handiwork for years and everyone oohed and aahed and said how great it was; now we don't need that outside admiration, now it's your own satisfaction.'

The women also shared the fact that their social life in the community had changed in many ways. People might, for instance, think that they were simply 'far out' for returning to school, or perhaps anti-social for not being readily available for coffee. One woman's friends treated her study as a joke: 'They just kill themselves laughing to think I'm home studying.' As well, their husbands may be ridiculed about the women's return to school. In the following situation, however, we can see that this kind of attack can also lead to a more positive relationship between the husband and wife:

'I've thought that I have more respect for my husband, because he puts up with a lot of ribbing from his friends about "letting" me go to school. Or, there's this insinuation that he can't control me because I'm going to school, or that he's sure long-suffering 'cuz he puts up with it. . . I get these looks that say, "So you're going to school—your poor husband—I bet he's neglected. . ." although they can't really say that.'

Enrolment in a Women's Studies course provides the student with the socially recognized goals, seriousness, and status of a university education. Institutional and academic affiliation enhances the enterprise of this study. The accumulation of academic credits and pursuit of a degree convey the liberal connotations of 'self-improvement'. Taking a course, in spite of the minor hurdles, is a step up the ladder. It is the first step that many women take in the struggle to realize their full potential in the society at large.

The very act of enrolling in a course is a significant act in the hinterland. In spite of the implied passivity of 'taking' a course, university enrolment implies participation in a world outside one's community. School, education, and courses exist outside

the home. 'Taking a course' for women involves participation within a formal, bureaucratic, and competitive world. Women students leave the protection of the home, even though this leave-taking may be done at the kitchen table, with the simple tools of pen, book, and paper. Taking a course assumes a penalty of family neglect, with only the dubious rewards of credits, grades, 'satisfaction', knowledge, and social support and stimulation. Taking a course implies a commitment to outside work, a claim on one's socially visible time.

### *The History of Women from a Feminist Perspective*

The content of the course deals with the history of women from a feminist perspective. The following comments by the tutor and students focus on the relationship of feminism to the traditional 'objective' academic perspective:

'You said that this did not seem like a history course. Surely the issue is that it speaks to you as an individual and as a woman rather than just as a student? There's more of a *personal* experience in this course.'

The woman responded by recalling that:

'When we were taking that French Revolution History course, you could see how it was connected to the basic issues of Human Rights and so on, but it wasn't personal—it was so far removed, it was almost two hundred years ago. Even though the beginning of the suffragist movement in the States was a long time ago too, somehow you take it personally, don't you? Remember that question, "If you had been a pioneer wife, how would you have. . .?" You had to put yourself in that place. . .'

It was generally agreed that much of the academic material had been formulated from a personal perspective in this course. The questions were written in such a way that students had to become involved and they couldn't respond in the traditional detached academic mode. The final comment from the tutor concerned feminist philosophy with regard to the teaching of history:

'What feminism has done is to reconstitute issues which have been seen traditionally as personal, individual problems into something that's socially and historically based.'

Although group members had registered for this course as a 'history' course, their discovery of the feminist content, and their gradual acceptance of that perspective generated much discussion. Naming a course Women's Studies, or the History of Women, has political ramifications. Feminism, in addition to rendering the personal political, constitutes the personal as academic/intellectual. Individual women's lives become the stuff of intellectual debate, the topic of research, and the subject of seminars. The lives and work of girls and women are recognized as worthy of academic pursuit. Thus, to the student, the History (Herstory) of Women becomes the study of our kind. It posits our biography as intellectually vital and valid.

### *The social setting — hinterland education*

The group meeting provides women with an opportunity to exchange information relative to the course material. It also provides a supportive social network that is crucial for women who are living in a conservative rural area where social pressures and constraints are very real.

The women discussed their need for the support of the group, suggesting that it would be 'really difficult' for anyone taking this course to do it on her own, without having someone else to talk to. The women in the group agreed that they wouldn't openly admit they were taking a feminist course. It was generally agreed that other friends were either uninterested or antagonistic. When asked why, one woman responded:

'Because it threatens them. You know when you've spent your whole life doing something . . . and thinking along these lines, and someone comes along, you feel they're being radical and stepping on your toes. Society is still saying that we should be home.'

The close-knit social networks of small communities provide obstacles to any deviation from the status quo. The lack of social anonymity serves as a restraint to innovations in lifestyle. Women contemplating the horizons of liberation through the impetus of Women's Studies require the support of other women. One woman commented:

'I think it's worse in a rural area, in a small town like this, because they know you. Plus, the women are really insulated in the village. They don't have the contacts that they'd have in a larger city; even if you didn't have much money, there, you could always go to the Y. Here there's nowhere to go.'

The social organization of rural areas places additional burdens on women. The absence of adequate daycare and the sheer distances demand a *mother's* constant vigilance. The increased maintenance of a rural home, with fruit trees, chickens, large yards, and gardens creates an additional rationale to keep women at home. The lack of driving skills or the use of a car is a minor handicap in the city. But it impedes and defines social interaction in the hinterland.

#### *Women's Studies and social change*

The group meetings of this course provided students with a supportive social setting. The members of the class gained access to the content of a feminist and academic course of study and also came to understand and learn this material through dialogue with other women. Each woman in the group was important in the process of receiving and transmitting this new knowledge. The spin-off to families and friends and the implications that this had in terms of social change were frequently cited by the women as a vital part of the course.

'You say to yourself, "I'm going to go out and change the world, but things don't work that way. I know I can't change the world but I can change myself, and for some reason, my husband . . . he offered to do the dishes last night, and I couldn't believe it. That's something!"'

Women's Studies courses are given within a social context, which is especially relevant in hinterland areas. Students receive support and a broader spectrum of experience from a group-learning situation. This is especially important in rural areas, where relatively conservative concepts from the urban mainstream take on a radical and revolutionary character. This social location of course participation presents unique problems to rural women students. The development of 'hinterland' perspectives in course content, organization, and instruction will recognize local, rural communities as a domain of study, observation, and research. The experience of this course emphasizes the need for a diversity of Women's Studies programs and calls for a recognition of the importance of social networks in hinterland areas.



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