Transforming Scholarship

Why Women's and Gender Studies Students are Changing Themselves and the World

Michele Tracy Berger
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Cheryl Radeloff
College of Southern Nevada

Read pgs 31-35 and the three block excerpts.
1

THE BIRTH OF WOMEN’S AND GENDER STUDIES AND WHO WE ARE NOW: YOUR INHERITANCE AS A STUDENT OF WOMEN’S AND GENDER STUDIES

Right now, your women’s and gender studies classroom probably feels like the center of the universe. You may either physically sit in a women’s and gender studies classroom or perhaps you access it as an online course. No matter how you interface with women’s and gender studies, you are likely to discover that the type of experience it provides—due to coursework, how you engage in the classes, and the material you cover—is different from your other courses. This chapter takes you behind the scenes to help you understand that what happens in a women’s and gender studies classroom is an outgrowth of activism, debate, and rich intellectual tradition.

This chapter highlights the history of women’s and gender studies, providing some background about why the program is interdisciplinary in nature, who your professors are, and who is likely to be sitting next to you in the classroom.

The Women’s and Gender Studies Classroom
You have probably heard of or read about the social unrest of the late twentieth century. During the 1960s and 1970s, student activists in the US protested not only the war and government policy, but also the very knowledge that was being taught and produced in establishments of higher
learning or post-secondary educational institutions. Students and faculty alike were experimenting with the structure and style of teaching, ranging from consciousness-raising sessions in the classroom to changing the physical structure of the classroom itself—such as seating, moving the space from inside to outdoors, or emphasizing student participation rather than the passive learning model of the "banking concept of education" (see Friere 2001). People experimented with class design to provide a better format for engaging students. This time of transition had a profound effect on the development of the women's studies classroom and teaching practices. You might have noticed that you are often seated in a circle

THE WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES CLASSROOM: STUDENT REFLECTIONS

I think the fact that I felt included and accepted in a classroom discussion about my own gender was important. This way people feel more open to discuss things in a "round-robin" forum. What better of a time to talk about issues affecting women, than with OTHER women, in a WOMEN friendly environment! THAT is why I loved this as my minor!

(Libby, 2007, North Dakota State University)

Being immersed in women's and gender studies classes has heightened my ability to critically reflect upon myself, others, and the world around me. While I have always valued time to reflect, these courses have enhanced the quality and depth of my reflections in many areas of my life, from dynamics at family gatherings and uses of gendered language, to service involvement in the community and a different perspective on history. My degree has shown me how I can pursue my passions for incarcerated women's rights, affordable, accessible reproductive healthcare, creating non-judgmental, inviting spaces for immigrant communities, and women's empowerment during the pregnancy and birthing processes in direct and indirect ways and encourages me to connect and devote myself to these interests as my life and career progress.

(Kimmie, 2011, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

One of the very first concepts introduced during the WOST 101 Intro to Women's Studies Course is the "invisible knapsack." Peggy McIntosh wrote the "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" in 1988 and it resonates just as loudly twenty-two years later as it did then. Often I look back to that document and repeat it as one would a prayer, or a vow, or a mantra.

(Stacy, 2008, Minnesota State University, Mankato)
that creates a space where everyone faces everyone. It might seem strange to you that a simple change like this—seating students in a circle where they can see and hear one another—was unique and transformative. But it was! This new arrangement allowed for a greater accountability for each student, the possibility for rapport to form more deeply between students and faculty, and a more level playing field in which the distance between professor "knowers" and student "learners" was decreased. This arrangement also served as a type of "container" when strong emotions got fired up.

Faculty members in the 1960s and 1970s drew upon a new pedagogy that was more participatory and personal, which later became known as "feminist pedagogy." They helped to develop the concept of "student-centered learning." The new courses offered faculty and students the opportunity to conduct in-depth scholarly work on subjects that had previously not been a part of the college curriculum, or were at the margins of more traditional disciplines, such as domestic violence, women’s roles in historical periods, and women’s literature. By listening to and valuing the experiences of students, topics that may have been largely ignored rose to prominence as they reflected the everyday concerns and interests of students. Rather than being the objects of study (such as wife and mother in nuclear family structures as challenged by Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique; deviant career woman; and/or over-sexualized prostitute or woman of color), women’s studies was able to do more than just "add women" superficially to traditional curricula. Women’s studies courses allowed students to choose what subjects to study, to question how subjects would be studied, to challenge ideas of objectivity and power within research, and to create knowledge that would support the changes occurring on local, state, and national levels due to feminist organizing (including rape laws, domestic violence, women’s health advocacy, women entering non-traditional occupations, wages for housework).

Time Travel: What You Might Have Learned in an Early Women’s Studies Class

We are transporting you back in time to an early women’s studies class to explore the overlapping connections students made in the classroom and in their lives during the 1970s, one phase of the second wave women’s movement. The fight for women’s healthcare provides a useful example.
Let's imagine that you took a class on "Women and Health: History, Tensions and New Beginnings" offered for the first time in 1977. If you were enrolled in this early women's studies course, you might have found yourself investigating and discussing why there were so few women doctors in practice. In the 1970s fewer than 10 percent of all doctors were women. You and your classmates would have focused on the many ways that women faced widespread discrimination both as consumers and providers of healthcare (Baxandall and Gordon 2001). You might have heard from your female classmates powerful anecdotes about feeling ignored, infantilized, dismissed, or ridiculed in an everyday encounter with a male physician. You would have spent time reading new feminist scholarship that critically examined the ways that childbirth had become an increasingly medicalized procedure that benefited the schedule of physicians and hospital staff but left many women feeling alienated from their bodies. You might have been amazed to read historical accounts of the role of midwifery in the US and Britain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Feeling motivated from discussions in class, you might have joined or even created a "women's health group." These informal groups sprang up around the country and "provided direct services, promoted health education, and agitated to change the mainstream health movement" (Baxandall and Gordon 2001: 117). Your professor might have stressed how important it was to gather narratives from women's lived experiences and bring them into the classroom. So, one of your options for a short assignment might have been to interview a woman in your family who was older than you about her experiences accessing and receiving medical treatment.

Toward the end of the semester, one of your longer assignments may have asked you to research and reflect on the ways that current treatment of minority women in the healthcare system were connected to a history of US colonialization. In order to do this you would have to draw on concepts of marginality, the interplay of racism and sexism, and economic discrimination that you had learned from other women's studies classes. The professor would have suggested scholarly articles and books from the established fields of economics, history, and sociology and perhaps new scholarship emerging in ethnic studies and African American studies. Your professor might have also directed you to feminist periodicals, including Ms., but also to smaller magazines and journals that proliferated during the class—d—issues and have run in relatives knew at your experiences and the societ...
during the 1970s. In completing this assignment and as you read widely, you would have seen that there were gaps in the way most disciplines treated the subject of "minority women and health" and, indeed, women's studies, though an interdisciplinary analysis was trying to create new knowledge about women and health, not just by closing the gaps, but by creating new areas of inquiry and novel ways of defining the problems. You would have put into practice the interdisciplinary process of creating an original way of gathering data, incorporating new voices, and generating knowledge that tries to highlight the "why and how" that women experience unequal treatment in the area of health. Toward the end of the semester, your professor might have suggested that for women's needs and concerns to be fully addressed in the healthcare system, it would not be enough just to create more women doctors (the "add and stir approach"), but would require a rethinking of the roles of health, wellbeing, and the healthcare system.

Finally, if you had read the newly published Our Bodies, Ourselves for class—devoted to explicit discussion and photos of sexual and reproductive issues and stressing that women were experts on their bodies—you might have rushed out and purchased this book for your female friends and relatives. You might have said that this book altered everything that you knew about understanding your body, and, moreover, that it provided valuable information to support your active role in making important health decisions. This class could have even triggered a re-evaluation of your emerging goals for employment and spurred an interest in becoming a doula, doctor, midwife, or nurse!

We hope this brief example gives you a sense of the energy and enthusiasm that was generated in those early women's studies classes and how students often found ways to connect their experiences directly to the social movement happening outside the classroom.

**FOR YOUR LIBRARY**


of sexual assault, violence and assault against the LGBT community, representations of women athletes, and the number of women globally living with HIV/AIDS.

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE A FEMINIST: THAT IS THE QUESTION"

In *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, Estelle Freedman unpacks the term “feminism” and traces its roots. Feminism was coined in France in 1880s. The term “feminisme” combined the French terms for woman (*femme*) and social movement or political ideology (*isme*). Feminism, as with other social movements, implies the need for social change. Therefore, those who adopted ideas of social change for women were called feminists. Currently, many people claim a feminist identity, ranging from individuals who actively work for social change and gender equality to those who utilize one of many theoretical frameworks to analyze the world through the cultural products of our society (i.e. music, film, art, literature, new social media), social institutions (e.g. military, education, the state, economy, religion), or internalized and socialized into our very ways of thinking (i.e. gender roles). The label of “feminist” has also been rejected by some women, due to critiques of the claiming of a feminist identity as being limited to a particular group of women, especially women who belong to dominant groups (an example of this would be Alice Walker’s preference for the term “womanist” to capture some African American women’s distinctive expressions of gender identity); questions surrounding biology and identity (“men cannot be feminists, only allies”); as well as stereotypes about the behavior and attitude of “feminists” that are uncomfortable to those who may be less vocal in their work for social justice. There is no one model of feminist identity or expression of feminism. The practice of feminism and struggles for gender equality globally offer an umbrella to a dazzling array of concerns, demands, and interests. Feminism as a manifestation of political and social expression keeps women’s studies accountable; and although the two are intertwined, they are not synonymous. Women’s studies is an academic endeavor that has its priorities within higher education and is accountable to a wide variety of constituencies... including feminist activists.

During your women’s and gender studies class discussions, you may have been asked about your perspectives on feminism as well as whether you identify with this label. You may still be in the process of deciding your personal position on whether you claim a feminist identity. Hopefully this book will clarify some ideas you have about this label and help you make a decision that best fits your needs.
THE MYTH OF BRA-BURNING FEMINISTS

If you have talked to someone about feminism and/or women's and gender studies, there's a good chance that you will have heard the ever-famous phrase "bra burning" at some point. This phrase might arrive in front of you as the question: "Do you want to be like those 'radical bra-burning feminists'?" Or as a phrase, "Those 'bra-burning feminists' were really angry way back when." In many people's minds, feminist activism of the 1960s is often reduced to women burning their bras. You will find in your studies that this idea is narrow, simplistic, and UNTRUE. During the 1960s and 1970s, women and men were actively challenging gender roles and ideas about men and women in society in a variety of ways and places. Yet, the media framing of that decade of feminism was all about bras. So, what did really happen?

Although some people may equate bra-burning as a necessary adjective before the term feminist, there's been a lot of myth-making between the two. Many second-wave feminists took aim at the normative standards of beauty, including critiquing the role of beauty pageants as ritual of reinforcing norms about ideal womanhood. A few days before the 1968 Miss America pageant, a number of women protested (including members of New York Radical Women) and threatened to burn all "instruments of torture" (i.e. girdles, curlers, bras, and issues of Cosmopolitan and Playboy). This was one of the first public, organized protests by women to critique a big and popular event. They did not, however, burn any bras (deciding in favor of fire safety). A reporter quoted Robin Morgan, an activist there, and she indicated that it had been a "symbolic bra-burning." Although no bras were actually burned at this event, the reports in the paper just a few days after the event connected feminists with "bra-burners." Most historians of this time period suggest that very few actual bras were ever destroyed during the women's liberation movement. However, once that symbolic frame was presented as a way to understand "women's libbers" and feminists, it stuck as a dominant one that did bring national attention to the women's liberation moment, thus creating allies. Indeed, women around the world began to protest beauty pageants. But the "bra-burning feminist" label created a frame for parts of the public to delegitimize and dismiss important concerns that many women were raising through the beginnings of a mass movement.

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. There are many forms of violence against women, including sexual, physical, or emotional abuse by an intimate partner; physical or sexual abuse by family members or others; sexual harassment and abuse by authority figures (such as teachers, police officers, or employers); trafficking for forced labor or sex; and such traditional practices as forced child marriages, dowry-related violence, and honor killings, when women are murdered in the name of family honor. Systematic sexual abuse in conflict situations is another form of violence against women.

In a ten-country study on women’s health and domestic violence conducted by the World Health Organization:

- Between 15 percent and 71 percent of women reported physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner.
- Many women said that their first sexual experience was not consensual (24 percent in rural Peru, 28 percent in Tanzania, 30 percent in rural Bangladesh, and 40 percent in South Africa).
- Trafficking of women and girls for forced labor and sex is widespread and often affects the most vulnerable.
- Forced marriages and child marriages violate the human rights of women and girls, yet they are widely practiced in many countries in Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa.
- Worldwide, up to one in five women and one in ten men report experiencing sexual abuse as children. Children subjected to sexual abuse are much more likely to encounter other forms of abuse later in life.

You may encounter in your women’s and gender studies classes facts and statistics about the global gendered nature of sexual violence that may be shocking to you and propel you to learn more and even to become active on your campus. For more information see World Health Organization: www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/.

(e.g., reproductive rights). In my graduate school applications, I quoted Audre Lorde, the self-defined Black, lesbian feminist warrior poet and author who inspired me throughout my studies. She said, “In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower” (Lorde 1984: 112). Those words resonated deeply with me because I felt that coalition-