

INTRODUCTION

Finding a Voice

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Series Editor

The first cohort of students on the postgraduate Women's Studies programme at Bangor began in January 1994. For women in particular it provided a unique chance to combine personal development with work and family commitments. The programme was set up through the vision and energy of Sandra Sherwood in the Centre for Continuing Education, with the support of individual colleagues from other departments: Siân Ashton, Charlotte Williams, Sandra Betts, Kathy Hopewell, Pam Michael, Julia Wardaugh and Lily Crowther.

Since 1994, approximately 80 women have studied on the Diploma/MA course. They are mainly professional women, of all ages, working across North Wales in a range of jobs. While many of them had a first degree, there are a number of women without previous experience of higher education who have successfully completed the course. For all of them, the Women's Studies course was transformational: "It has opened up a whole new way of thinking... I know now that I am capable of going out there and doing more or less what I want" (quoted in Mackie 1999 p50). Two years for the taught part of the course and a further year at least for the dissertation requires a sustained commitment, during which time many students also went through radical personal change. Sandra used to say that in each cohort there would be 'at least one birth, one marriage and one divorce.' In this respect, the feminist pedagogy employed in the course – where students share experiences, relating theory to personal life stories and receiving constructive criticism and support from tutors – is very important.

Creation and Recreation

Women's Studies came into existence in the late 1960s when women in the west began to realise we had been left out of knowledge. "Men had been the knowledge makers and they had validated their own knowledge – about us – by reference to each other" (Spender 1980 p15-16). Women were largely excluded from the creation of knowledge by the male-dominated academic system and its emphasis on positivist 'objective' scientific enquiry. Women's contribution to the world, in whatever area of life, was largely ignored. And when we were the topic of investigation, the findings perpetuated myth and prejudice against women, since, in fact, 'scientific enquiry' was influenced by male subjectivity. Women's ways of knowing, female subjectivity, the possibility of uncertainty, were discounted as serious tools for furthering intellectual understanding.

Women's Studies, then, attempts to redress the balance. It focuses on the experience and lives of women, not only uncovering what has been left untouched but also revisiting existing research or 'knowledge' to analyse it from a feminist perspective, to question it. What does it tell us about power relations between men and women in a patriarchal society? How does gender help to explain certain behaviours and processes which have been taken to be 'the norm' or 'natural'? Through this kind of analysis women have been able to redefine different areas of experience, developing our own meanings of the world and of words themselves (for example, renaming women's work at home or identifying rape as an act of aggression rather than 'natural' sexuality, see Worrell and Etaugh 1994).

This helps us to grow in self-confidence as we begin "to appreciate that the deficiencies are not in us but in the system that has excluded us." (Spender, op.cit.) Underpinning this process is the element of social activism, the promotion of societal change that characterised the women's movement and created the need for new ways of analysing the world around us. And, indeed, the intention is for feminist research to stimulate action and change within the public (and private) sphere, crossing boundaries and forging new alliances, emphasising collaboration rather than competition (see Daniel, 1996).

For these reasons, Women's Studies draws on all areas of academic enquiry and employs an interdisciplinary, holistic approach to learning and research. The programme at Bangor has three core modules. *Women's Issues* looks at gender in the family, the workplace, history, social policy and globally. *Feminist Theory* explores the different feminist perspectives (Liberal, Black, Lesbian, Psycho-analytic, Post-Modernist) which can inform the construction and deconstruction of knowledge. *Feminist Research Methods* aims to equip students with the tools to carry out their own research project within a feminist framework. There are a series of option modules from different disciplines which are taught by specialists: for example, Deviant Women; Welsh Women's History; Women, Work and Community; Women in Literature and Women, Film and Popular Culture. There are student exchanges with the School of Nursing (MSc in Health Promotion) and the School of Education (MEd) to broaden the range of options.

Finding a Voice

For most students at Masters level, writing a dissertation is a daunting task – and many on the Women's Studies programme see this as their greatest challenge and their greatest achievement. The selection of a topic is the first hurdle. In the end, most students chose something very close to their own experience - their workplace, their profession, their client group – and use this to explore how women's self identity, aspirations, roles and relationships are defined and circumscribed by patriarchy. A number of dissertations attempt to identify changes in women's lives: from the impact of world events such as war, through the effects of developments in public policy or new technology, to changes brought about by new personal circumstances – motherhood, the menopause or returning to study.

Feminist research employs ethnographic, qualitative methods, in particular in-depth interviews, focus groups and observation. Such methods raise several important ethical issues which students have to try and resolve. They have or develop close relationships with their respondents and this brings with it responsibility. One issue is the question of confidentiality: will my colleague be identifiable when I write up what she said? There is a concern to ensure that respondents remain subjects, not objects, in the research process. There is the fear of raising unrealistic expectations about being able to influence change as a result of the research. There is a danger of 'opening the floodgates' when talking about personal experience: how can I express sympathy without overstepping my role of researcher into that of counsellor?

It is not easy to maintaining a balance between the subjective and the objective: students need to keep an overview, make comparisons, refer back to key questions and secondary sources. At the writing stage, they have to work hard at finding their own voice, while trying to fairly and adequately represent the voice of others. Many experience an uncomfortable tension between all these aspects of the feminist research process and what they perceive to be the constraints of the academic dissertation format – the masculine paradigm for the presentation of 'knowledge'. It has to be said that none of the tutors have quite solved this particular paradox. Fortunately the students help keep us alive to the danger that Women's Studies can easily become subsumed by the system that it was created to challenge.

Celebrating women's achievement

Because the dissertations are centred within the authors' own experiences and the immediate locality, together they provide a unique insight into the lives of women in North Wales, past and present. As such, they constitute a valuable resource, which we feel should be made more widely available, for the benefit and interest of local professionals, academics, other women – and men.

Publishing some of the outputs from the MA Women's Studies programme is a way of celebrating women's achievements, both those of the students and those of their respondents. In addition, this enables us to celebrate the life and work of Sandra Sherwood, former Director of the programme, who died of cancer in June 2001. She is sadly missed by all who knew her. The monograph series is one way of highlighting the positive impact and influence Sandra had on individual women (both colleagues and students), on academia and indeed, through this, on public life.

The series as a whole reflects a variety of topic and approach while being firmly located in Wales. The first monographs, selected from work by the 1994 cohort, were launched in 2002. This second series has a focus on research carried out within the writer's own workplace and deals with issues around traditional women's work – secretaries, language teachers and older women returning to study after a life centred around their domestic rôle. How have things changed for the better in terms of status, recognition, opportunity? How happy are these women in their life and work choices? To what extent are their choices influenced by preferences and skills as opposed to dominant structures and attitudes? In order to present the work for a wider audience, a certain

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amount of editing has been necessary. This has mainly involved the task of reducing those sections relating to general feminist theory and feminist methodology in order to highlight the specific research questions, original research findings and implications of each dissertation. The voice of each writer has been retained.

References

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Titles in this series

Llafur Cariad, Llafur Rhad

(*Labour of Love, Cheap Labour: part-time teaching of Welsh to adults*)

Sioned Huws (awarded 2002)

The Changing Rôle and the Unchanging Status of the Secretary

Gail Kincaid (awarded 2000)

The First Step: A Study of Older Women Returning to Learn at Access to Further Education Level in a Community Context

Sue Trevelyan-Jones (awarded 2000)

Titles in the first series

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