

KNOWING, NEGATING, TRANSCENDENCE: AN EVALUATION OF THE LEARNING, UNLEARNING PROCESS IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

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Wise women talking:

"Tell me, who is more important, students or teachers?"

"Neither, for students are teachers and teachers are students."

"Then tell me, what is it to learn?"

"It is to change to be free."

from *Mo*, a woman less wise

Sixteen months of engagement in the Women and Development Masteral Program at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in the Hague affect life's rhythm, expand the mind and multiply experience. This paper is the final product, the pause in the momentum of learning, the chance for an act of rebellion.

My experience, both past and present, is central to this act. The target of rebellion is the issue of women learning about themselves and their societies, understanding the need for change, making solid commitments to act in the context of academic isolation — this being what it seems most of the time. The institutionalization of the processes of learning about, for and by women in the formal academic setting such as the ISS, can speed up the project of women's liberation. Lessons and insights from my experience with the Women and Development Program can guide the path by which my own university sets about establishing its own Women's Studies Program.

I would like to redefine the concept of policy in academe. The current paradigm of policy-making is a constriction to the development of feminist policy. Policy is the term I choose to use, this time, but with reservation, for lack of a more appropriate, academically acceptable word. Policy formulation, in my view, is an exercise that has been separated from the responsibility of action and is more acceptable if perceived to be emanating from an expert, objective position. In negating this, I would like to reaffirm the need for action and change which is a dialogue. It is a dialogue that expresses the

continuum of relationship forged among all who became part of the experience of learning and a continuum of the learning process *per se*. These are thoughts in process; in working my ideas out on paper, I would like to speak of my experience which to me is 'associational' experience, experience that is subjective, collective, varied, dynamic, and related.

In this dialogue, rather than address policy-makers or an institution, I would like to address women, specially women who consciously participate in changing the word and the world. This may include women in education, women development workers, women philosophers and artists, and women political activists. I would also like to address men. Men who fight imposed hierarchy, men with creativity and imagination, unconfined by a static state of notions of knowledge, power and struggle. This dialogue is not a policy essay; it is a story. It is told in the first person rather than the more objective third person. In this form, it is a reaction to the definition of the word to mean an act of thinking and feeling deeply.

The stories of this paper are continuations of past stories recorded by earlier participants in the Women and Development Program of the ISS, the historical account and insights of program staff, and the coffee session sharings with some co-participants. Mainly, though, they will draw from my experience of working in academe as well as my participation in the broader movement for change of which the women's movement is a part. They must be seen as a limited account of some of the major concerns of the Program which may be the subject matter of further evaluation and action.

I would like to note that rebellion is surely a threatening act. It therefore has its drawbacks but the risks, at this time, is overwhelmed by the advantage of seizing the rare opportunity to be involved and inspired by 'passionate knowledge', the passionate participation of the knower in the act of knowing.

Statement of Position

The forging of a standpoint, my partisanship, makes the act of rebellion necessary and possible. I would like to present these statements of partisanship. In the last eight years that I have tried to teach in the university, I have always lost confidence in my own abilities and have always questioned my role as the teacher in teaching others. You can imagine how I've survived the academic environment all those years feeling like this! I think I managed to survive, that is, not merely survive, but reaffirm certain life principles from which I have drawn energies to overcome feelings of inadequacy but also to create a new, if not another, path to knowledge. I have always thought, though not so firmly articulated, that the student is the boss, to use a very definitely male and authoritarian word. I cannot order him/her to learn. I have found that even with threats of disqualification which ultimately spells a waste of money, students will fail to attend classes, read

the required readings, pass their papers, accompanied by all the ingenuous excuses they can devise to stretch one's patience, and to humor teachers for some allowance extended towards their failings. Thus, it has been my preoccupation in recent years of teaching to employ more persuasive methods to make students stay and be inspired to know. This, I would say is the teacher's main accountability. Like the political activist involved in changing the world, I believe that the teacher by choosing to be in this profession commits to be part of the process of change by making change attractive to young minds or to others not so young. I see my contribution to the task of changing the world, so to speak, as projected on possibilities of drawing inspired work and forging solid commitments from students who can multiply the ranks of those who consciously and intelligently participate in this task. Student motivation to learn cannot be presumed. The development of this, for me, may be achieved through the exercise of teacher's authority but is unproductive in the long run if viewed from the bigger project beyond the classroom walls.

Methods that provide opportunity for students to interact more closely with each other and the world outside the academe contribute to not only making the classroom situation more interesting and dynamic but also create the vital links that develop students' responsibility to each other and to others in general. Group work, field work, group evaluations are some of the crucial fields of learning in this process. Furthermore, I see the role of experience as vital to the development of content in teaching. The experience that students bring to the classroom is a major resource of the learning process. This does not so much refer to stored experience in books and library shelves as to the stories of students about their lives, their relationships, their views and their struggles. Viewed this way, students and student participation determine in a major way the success of any educational undertaking.

This "experiential learning" implies a building of a different type of relationship between teacher and student. The image of a teacher overwhelms a student. This is, I feel, a major block to learning. Coupled with the authority of teachers to judge and evaluate a student, the image may be indestructible. Not many would dare pose a challenge to this image. On the other hand, to identify with students where a teacher lets go of his/her prerogatives and shares power can be misunderstood and abused. In the creation of a new way of learning, all actors must be prepared so that the experience becomes viable. Time and a system for periodic checks must be drawn to guide the path. The restructuring of the teaching environment as well as some struggling for space from the wider academic community is required. This must be seen as a gradual, creative process where consensus is built from areas within the system that provide certain autonomy and the possibility of change. Only then can the substitution of words signifying teacher and student to others such as advisers and participants be fully

meaningful.

I recall my temerity to alter in any way the method of teaching and the way of relating with students and senior faculty other than what were established during my first few years of teaching in the university. But my participation in the wider social movement for change made change in the academe also necessary and gave me the courage and support to look at this change as part of a political project in the broad sense. As such, the position that knowledge is not neutral and that the educational system is the site of power struggles for defining and controlling the world became increasingly apparent. Thus, gaining access and control over the system had to include conscious planning and a strategic perspective. I adapted the organizing approach in creating the space within academe to accommodate certain shifts in power relations within it. Together with some students and like-minded teachers, we formed other small groups among other students, teachers and researchers to plan and discuss ways of handling classes, doing field work, complementing classroom learning, making course requirements relevant and reasonably manageable, evaluating teachers and students, and improving teaching materials. We also thought it necessary to participate by holding key positions in College committees to ensure some amount of influence over decision-making at the policy and planning levels of the College. This way, I saw the links between changing the world and the word made stronger. The sense of isolation that academic work is so prone to - - for example, to criticize from an ivory tower, exercising so-called objective detachment, the separation of theory from action - - is, to a significant degree, minimized. There is a possibility of unity in diversity among sectors of academe critical and appreciative of the need for change in the educational system. The past eight years of teaching thus came to bear on my experiences with the ISS Women and Development Program and its attempts to practice what it preaches.

First, A Self-Criticism

The chance to formally do studies on women, specially on feminism, presented itself as an exciting and relevant opportunity for me at a time when my own University had taken steps to seriously consider the establishment of its Women's Studies Program, and at a juncture when the Philippine women's movement was gaining an appreciation of feminist theory as vital to organizing Filipino women. At ISS, I set out eager to immerse myself in new learning. In the process, though, I faced some personal stumbling blocks. It took me more time to adjust to my new surroundings. It was specially difficult to overcome a sense of isolation and the on-and-off personal sense of relevance for the academic project that was so important as a motivating factor in any of my undertakings. This is a feeling that never left me even as I learned to put it aside when the the rush for writing papers

became more pressing.

In many ways, I also failed to establish a certain consistency in terms of my choice of focus of learning. Everything was new. Where to begin, what were the priorities, how to structure the experience in terms of time and resource allocation, how to practice discipline these were areas I had to address, but not so effectively. At the beginning, I was keen on actively participating in course development and improvement, in assisting in setting-up mechanisms and structures for student participation, and in reaching out to the wider student body in support of student academic and welfare issues. I also saw the opportunity to allot more time than I would normally to read a wide range of materials. But the lack of a focus made me lose time and energy on matters that caught my attention on the spur of the moment, to the detriment of more serious matters.

In the latter part of the course, a sense of cynicism, a negativeness paralyzed me and became my justification for non-involvement, and instead made me embark on a pursuit of individuality. This was easy enough to fall on since the general atmosphere I sensed from the ISS and the larger Dutch community was non-involvement and individualization. I then found it difficult to connect politically to others from the Third World with similar backgrounds and colonial realities. I had only brief periods from which deep relationships with a few co-participants were forged. All these reinforced a sense of myself in isolation in the academic environment. It was disempowering.

The greater achievement for me was in participating in discussions on the personal lives of a few close co-participants in which issues of relationships and women's issues were probed. These sessions were also occasions when we reflected on the Women and Development Program, on the ISS and on Dutch society with much insight that were not captured in our regular class sessions. More importantly, without much prodding, our discussions led us into a reconstruction of ourselves and the futures we hoped to have. In this manner, we developed unity and respect for the cultural and political differences we inevitably discovered.

Issues of methods and style: their implications on Women's Studies develop the structure for participation in the course. Those who were highly motivated to continue this way pursued group activities on their own, finding that the bonds of friendship drew them closer together and complimented their own academic agenda. This left others needing more formal support, frustrated but still generally accepting the rationale that these problems of participation were given constraints and that covering the identified content area of the course was paramount. A greater majority, I observed, watched as the issue resolved itself with a sense that their own positions would be validated as the issue lost steam. Thus in this instance, I found that the value placed on participation, as made explicit in all class lectures, in processes

of learning and empowerment as well as the stress on one's own experience as sites of knowledge production, was not operationalized in our own situation.

What does it mean therefore, and what does it take to create the alternative feminist paradigm in processes of knowledge production? How can teachers tap the diversity of knowledge and experiences of students from countries and cultures so different, and respond as well to their multiple and different expectations? How important is student participation to the building of Women's Studies theory? How can a theory of Women's Studies be translated into action in the conduct of the Women and Development Program at ISS? How can we organize students in a class to take a major role in their own learning?

These all seemed very difficult to me but some clarity was offered by Marcia Westkott:

We know from our classes in Women's Studies the importance of pushing criticism past itself to the visions that the criticism suggests. Unless we do that, we offer no hope for directing the anger that is often generated by the critical awareness, and we are left with paralyzing fury or hopeless resignation" (Is this another moan course?, a Women's Studies major asked on the first day of class). To push beyond criticism, however is not to relinquish it, but to hold it in tension with vision. The criticism indicates to us an absence or a problem which our imagination can transcend. This transcendence is a visionary transformation of the conditions which we oppose, a new world view rather than a mere extension or arrangement of present structures. Feminist vision is thus, not a feasibility study, but an imaginative leap that stands opposed to sexist society. As negations of the conditions that we criticize, visions both reflect those conditions and oppose them. In the words of Josephine Donovan, "The feminist critique is thus on the cutting edge of the dialectic. She must, in a sense, be Janus-headed: engaged in negations that yield transcendences".

The tension between criticism and action, between theory and experience, I find, affects relationships of all actors involved in the learning process. I saw it coming when a particular lecturer was acting quite overtly in the role of the gatekeeper of knowledge. Many felt that the lecturer could not trust us, that it was better for her to assume we would all be weak and commit errors than go against academic standards. Moreover, what reasons can some of us have to cheat? If, certainly, we are the knowers as we have often been told, what threatens us in the academic exercise, enough for us to fulfill the prophecy that some of us are weak? Then, perhaps, some of us distrusted each other as well. There were all sorts of differences that

¹Bowles, Gloria and Klein, Renato D., *Theories of Women's Studies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston and London, 1983. p. 213.

could cause distrust and divisions. How were we to overcome this?

Other expectations in terms of building relationship with each other focused on the social activities. Why is it that some lecturers never attended these gatherings? Are these activities mere rituals or are they part of Women's Studies? What type of other activities will bring some of the personal barriers between lecturers and students down? As we buckled down to resolve the problem of lack of or too much participation, time became the overriding concern. In the same manner, would lecturers have time to give (or would there be issues of prioritization over their other concerns,) for socialization that is deemed crucial to the alternative learning process?

Is it possible for lecturers to invite us to their homes? Can we know of the wider society outside the classroom thru an open observation of the lives that others have structured for themselves? Can reaching out to students who normally feel isolated in a foreign environment be too much to ask? Is it putting theory into practice?

If we are asked or invited to open what we normally consider our private lives in classroom sessions, is this reason for our learning? What about their lives? Many claim that the realm of the private is an area of struggle for feminists. Speak out sessions are described as tactics where women collectivize experience to come up with a different understanding of their natures and realities. Does the academic world confer on some the prerogative to be mere observers to the unraveling of privacy or does Women's Studies enjoin all, particularly the academics, to unravel as well?

To trust each other, to be able to capture relationships among women lost in the dominance of the male in our lives, to know ourselves and each other so that directions for change and empowerment can be defined — all these seem vital to Women's Studies as it proceeds with the task of reconstructing knowledge and its production. How is this to be done? In the academic world, standards are always set. There is a standard format to be followed, a standard set of requirements, a standard procedure to be followed for evaluation, etc. What do these standards play in building up the acceptability and credibility of Women's Studies in mainstream social science? Making standards and keeping them in a way would ensure survival of Women's Studies in the academic world. But the possibility of legitimizing alternative practices in setting standards that allow for forging agreements solely between students and lecturers should be explored. For example, in the area of course grading, the possibility for self and group grading may be studied. These assessments may either be quantified and weighed in proportion to the grades a student would get from the lecturer. Thus, the act of valuing, of judging, is as well a collective experience. My experience, which may have its cultural limitations, points to the empower-

ment that students feel because their valuations, their judgements are considered. Power sharing in the area of setting standards and judging how people have measured up to them result as well in a distribution of responsibility to other actors in the learning process.

Women have to struggle for space in social science. As women develop feminist theory, they also wage a battle to preserve the right to develop such a theory. What price do we pay for surviving in academe? Can women cope with the rigor imposed by the social science discipline? What contradictions, dilemmas lie to ensure women's survival in the stringently academic setting? How much of given academic limitations become justifications for inaction or temerity in waging a struggle? My past experience has shown that struggle for survival in the academic world is farthest from being an individual struggle. Acts of domination through processes of marginalization can most effectively be countered through collective struggle. The forms of this struggle may differ depending on some cultural variables. Academic survival is not so much a struggle for material resources but for space and autonomy, though material realities also shape our decisions.

At this point, before examining certain options either for further study, experimentation or adaption, I would like to emphasize the links of the major issues I have identified to some other general implications for the academic, both as student and lecturer, engaged in Women's Studies.

It has often been stated that Women's Studies was born out of and is inspired by the women's movement. This link, I believe should not be lost in the academic world. The problems identified by Women's Studies should be drawn from the priorities of the women's movement. In other words, as Gloria Bowles puts it:

"Women's Studies emerged out of a political movement and very practical concerns. To pose the problem first and then devise the method has always been our way and I would not like to see these origins in experience change. For me, then, the choice of the problem is crucial. Of course, this assumes an ability to recognize problems. For that means, what do we need to know in order to survive? (This takes us to such problems as nuclear power and ecology.) And, if we do survive, what do we have to know in order to live relatively peacefully and happily together? (This takes us to such problems as the relationships between people of different sexes and races and classes.) Now these are very large questions and very political ones. They are quite unlike most of the questions the academic disciplines are asking now. Yet our concept of Women's Studies forces these questions upon us. These are the questions which are real to us, we who are both scholars and members of the women's community. Our constant reassertion of this link, a vigilance,

even, will help to keep Women's Studies from becoming just another academic discipline, removed from the daily worlds of all of us.²

Both students and lecturers, I feel, cannot go into Women's Studies with the sole intention of building a career on it. It is not a fashion that development workers can show off when they go back home and be perceived as experts who know women and who can do something for them. More so, it is not another area, yet unexplored, that research projects can be drawn up for. I feel that Women's Studies must build up the aware and committed woman, the woman that recognizes knowledge not for its own sake but one that is dynamic and is used for changing realities and constructing visions. Given this, a graduate of Women's Studies, I believe, must organize. The academic must not only support an organization or be involved in advocacy work but also belong to an organization. The processes of empowerment are doubly enhanced and safeguarded as the two pillars of change, awareness and organizing, strengthen their links through work that includes academics as well as organizers or political activists.

The learning process is also an unlearning process. Individualization cannot easily be avoided by mandating group unity or believing that competition among women does not exist. An inability in the learning process to function in groups or to shy away from active involvement in order to control the learning situation is a signal that the politics of struggle that Women's Studies brings to bear on all those who take it is not being internalized in the processes of learning and unlearning. Many participants of the program come from a tradition of community work and living in their own countries where individualization is harder to develop. I was told that it was surprising that though back home we always found ourselves relating in groups, it seemed this could not easily be replicated among ourselves in the ISS Women and Development Program. The relationship between theory and practice, the personal with the political, the women's movement with Women's Studies, represent challenges of articulation and action for Women's Studies everywhere.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Weathering the Storm

From the areas covered in the conduct of the ISS Women and Development Program, my recommendations will focus on activities that provide possibilities in the exercise of student participation, group work, faculty-student relationship, course evaluation, course requirements, field work and synthesizing exercise. I support past recommendations for the program to allot time, space and resources for the continuation and improvement of the introductory exercise. Planning for the exercise could be expanded by the formation of a class committee which would join staff in finalizing programs and arrangements. The program should start with exercises that could bring out the factors of cultural differences as well as

²*ibid.* p. 42.

some others that perhaps may earlier be identified by the preparation committee as possibly influencing the building of trust and openness crucial to the objectives of the introductory exercise. Similar opportunities should be made available at the middle of the program and the end as well. I think that this will ensure the growth and maintenance of a level of trust and openness within the group concerned.

Workshopping in class can be better maximized in terms of the personal level of sharing of experience and realities among staff and participants. I suggest that longer periods be allotted for this exercise with lecture sessions shortened. The availability of appropriate handouts may allow the possibility of shorter lecture periods. Perhaps, part of workshopping may involve the discussion of a specific topic that would have otherwise been given in a lecture. Regional workshops may be organized to highlight situations and women's actions in particular parts of the world.

The objectives and conduct of tutorials need to be clarified in terms of how groups can assist individuals and enhance the process of learning. I feel that tutorials would function better not as a direct aid in writing a set paper but more so as an opportunity for further discussion on points raised in class that requires more elucidation. These discussions should be more practically rooted in the sense that they should draw on more direct relationships to addressing current issues in the countries of participants.

I suggest that, as much as possible, classrooms be structured to actually depict an equal relationship between staff and participants. The staff acts as lead discussant but the participants should be supported in their efforts to speak out, share experiences and struggle in theory construction. Participants should face each other in a circle so that each one has a view of each other and can take responsibility for keeping each other interested and active in discussions. Breaking-up any hierarchical image depicted in the classroom setting may help facilitate smoother relationships between participants and staff.

Perhaps some of the time and resources allotted to partying can be pulled together in undertaking an overnight 'speak-up' session with staff. Life histories may be drawn and work experiences may be shared. Group dynamic games modified culturally may be part of the program. Staff and participants may also work out a brief cultural presentation to the class.

I suggest a review of course evaluation methods and grading system. There should be less emphasis on grading papers as a measure of learning. Perhaps, class participation may be given some value. Group grading and self-grading can also be other areas worth looking into in the examination of the system. I realize that this is an area that many academic institutions tightly control for fear of contamination or a lowering of standards. I think, in

most cases, standards are lowered by poor teaching more often than by poor-quality papers. Modifying grading is another way by which power-sharing between participants and staff may be achieved. Course evaluation parameters should be more reflective of the concerns of Women's Studies to alter processes of learning. Questions as to participation, innovative teaching methods, group work, etc. may be highlighted.

There is an overriding concern for the production of so many papers. Perhaps, if papers could be less in quantity but more integrative, there would be an amount of depth achieved in their content. The practice of providing options on topics to be addressed by papers should be continued. There should also be conscious effort to advise participants that references play a part in the construction of papers but that one's own analysis and contributions weigh much more. I feel it should not be a requirement to quote.

Field work should be given more time. It should not just be inserted into the schedules of other activities. In the overall, perhaps looking at the length of time and the bulk of content that the program has set out to cover as well as its stress on a process of learning, the entire program can be lengthened or shortened. The time structure, as of now, seems to leave a lot to be desired.

The practice of spending a couple of days altogether for the synthesizing exercise was very refreshing and productive. I propose that it be maintained for the batches to come. Some cultural programs can also be held at this time for the better working relationship of all. Flexibility of choice of paper topic is also advisable.

The ability to struggle and to survive in any setting is premised on determination as well as the identification of a viable and necessary project. The beginning of a Women's Studies Program in my university is another indication of the viability and necessity, world-wide, of a Women's Studies Program. My insights from several years of teaching have been valuable guides in assessing my own experience with the Women's Studies Program in the Hague. As I ended my course work and brought back with me the voices of other women from outside my own background and reality, I am gratified in the thought that all of us together, more consciously, will try to continue producing new knowledge about and for women, that can free all women, and transform society.