

The returning women's program:

Women as feminists were engaged in education projects and issues in a variety of roles: as students, teachers, mothers, community members. These took place both in formal education institutions and outside of them. Examples include the work of teachers and parents in challenging curriculum, children's books and pedagogy that promoted traditional gender roles, the expansion of girls' educational opportunities into previously closed technical and professional fields, the increase of sports opportunities through Title I, and the fights for women's studies programs at colleges. Teachers organized women's caucuses in the American Federation of Teachers to promote women's leadership, to examine obstacles for our women students and create new programs and opportunities for them.

I'm going to talk about how feminist ideas were brought into a program for adult women coming to a community college in the southwest suburbs of Chicago.

Context:

1. I was part of a broader movement for social justice in education; not only K-12, but in colleges (New University Conference - organizing projects throughout the country) that saw schools as "sites of struggle." Was part of a collective, some members in education, encouraged me to go to the community college to "bring the revolution" to the working class/lower middle class southwest suburbs.
2. In Chicago, a project of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union was formed to bring the women's movement to high schools and community colleges. A paper, "Leading the CWLU Into Outreach," explains the impetus for taking our ideas and work "out." For example Our Bodies Classes were offered at community colleges throughout the Chicago area and were wildly successful., Being part of the CWLU effort provided a context for my work as a teacher at one of the targeted community colleges.
3. A national phenomenon of large numbers of adult women coming to college in transition, in search of better jobs, better lives. I believe that these expectations were partially a result of the women's movement in the air everywhere.

I developed a program for adult women coming to college for the first time. Initially meeting resistance from the administration, the Moraine Valley Returning Women's Program begun in 1974 served working-class women from the southwest suburbs of Chicago. Many were experiencing life changes (a divorce, job loss, violence in the home, raising kids on their own; children entering school, etc); often these women had unsuccessful experiences as high school students and came to the program with worries about their ability to succeed. Most women who did work were employed in service, factory or clerical jobs, and saw returning to school as an opportunity for economic security. Others who had been at home wanted a pathway into the labor force or just a place for themselves. In response to this phenomena and working

with another feminist teacher, we developed the RWP - a cohort of adult women students in a learning community. The women took 3 classes: communications - developing reading, writing skills; "human potentials" which functioned as a consciousness raising experience, discussing personal issues, providing support; and Sociology - a glimpse into the broader world they lived in.

The ideology and practice of women's liberation informed the project, as well as ideas about progressive, democratic education.

These included:

Creating a safe and supportive space for women, a space where they could develop their intellectual talents in community with other women.

Validation of who they were; their life experiences

Seeing the commonalities in their lives - personal as political; naming their experience.

Finding voice, agency, efficacy

Promoting women's leadership

Teachers with a feminist perspective (broadly defined) and creating an egalitarian, non-hierarchical classroom.

Challenge to dominant modes of school/classroom structure - hierarchical, competitive, individualistic, narrowly focused goals on achievement.

Today - 40 years later - these values seem commonplace - in women's studies courses - but this was before there were any women's studies curriculum.

A few quotes from interviews/focus groups I did with women 20 years later.

It sounded comfy. We'd be holding hands.

Girl scout camp and slumber party.

Real talk - women's learning styles.

I've lived through that!

****Before it was just personal (naming their experiences

Did any of these women (over the 25 years I was connected to the program) identify as feminists - some did use that word; most didn't. Did it matter - I don't think so.

Reading letter regarding impact of program on taking on Owens Corning regarding asbestos case.- developing agency; taking action.

As socialist-feminists, we believed that as women begin challenging their role and place it could lead to transformations, not only of their own lives, but of the priorities of our society.

Data - retention; graduation. There is a study showing that these cohorts had the highest retention and graduation rates, compared to the overall community college students, as well as students over 25.