

The Ghosts of Women's Studies and the Project of Interdisciplinarity

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Abstract

This paper recalls an earlier moment and space of interdisciplinarity: the existence and disappearance of the Women's Studies M.A. at Manchester Metropolitan University, within the context of a brief history of women's historically recent access to University education and the consequent debates about whether women's education should be the same as that offered to elite men. Women's studies opened up for a short time a space for creative interdisciplinary work and these inheritances should not be erased but might contribute to thinking about interdisciplinarity beyond and against the marketization of University education.

The fact that the flows of power now instigate interdisciplinarity, when the earlier focus on Research Excellence promoted a closing down of interdisciplinarity and a conservative focus on the disciplines makes me, like Sara outside Abraham's tent, laugh. And that laughter may call forth others from the attics and cubby holes and long lost offices in buildings soon to be - if not already - abandoned to make the gleeful sound of laughter which shakes settled assumption and opens up new ways of knowing. Women's Studies was accompanied by the laughter of women coming from behind closed doors. The not-knowing what we were doing, on the part of those who were not involved, made others scared and no doubt led to a number of sighs of relief when the M.A. Women's Studies at this University closed.. It was not only those outside the tent of women's studies who were nervous though. Inside the tent also the laughter was sometimes nervous, the atmosphere often tense and cross-campus meetings before the time of email and Skype especially stressful. The first paper we presented as a collective was called 'Frightening Each Other to Death.' Another early project was called 'Memory Work', based on the consciousness-raising methods developed by Frigga Haug. Many of the women staff who took part in Women's Studies have retired, or are Professors elsewhere. But some of us remain. Living ghosts, it might be said, hiding in the light of the shining new spaces of interdisciplinarity.

One way to write this paper would simply be to give an account of the Women's Studies M.A. here at MMU, and the movement it was part of, associated with a wider women's

movement and with the challenge to the existing authorisations and divisions of knowledge within Universities.

That will form some part of this presentation but the purpose here is to draw on those memories to offer an inheritance of questions for the current project. To do that means to draw the line of the family tree longer and through the female line, as Luce Irigaray says. We need the pictures of our mothers and great grandmothers to surround us still, sensible transcendent yet. Girton College, founded in 1869 by Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon, was the first college in Cambridge University to offer a degree level education to women following exactly the same courses as the men. Newnham College, founded shortly afterwards by, proposed a different curriculum for women, based on a sense of new emerging knowledge 'suitable for women.' Just a little time later—in 1976- Girton College had agreed to become a mixed college – on the basis of an acceptance that Sex Discrimination had now been made illegal. In 1977, a syllabus was therefore being taught to undergraduates in the Faculty of English as part of a new and controversial paper on English Literature after the Second World War, which contained no female writers except in its final session which was curtly entitled 'women'.

Margaret Beetham, the first course leader of the M.A. Women's Studies at MMU recalls (also in the 1970's) going from course to course in the last week of term giving the only class on 'WOMEN'. Experiences such as these which led to the emergence of women's studies as a movement across disciplines and as an enquiry into the formation of knowledge itself which could so discount a part of humanity. The tensions of 'sameness' (what might be called assimilation) or 'difference' (as less-ness; as 'otherness') emerged over and over again in our approach to subject teaching, to research and to pedagogy. Women's Studies allowed questions and practices which were marginal in other research and teaching contexts to become central. Much of the thinking which was engaged in Women's Studies then became central to other discipline areas but often at a cost of the politics. This depoliticisation which made the idea of 'feminist methods' all too assimilable especially within newly emerging sub-disciplines and branches of knowledge with, for example, ideas about 'reflexivity' and 'situated knowledges' becoming routinized across a range of practice disciplines.

But for a moment- let us return to those early women's colleges and the long struggle, after the colleges were established, for the Universities to agree that the women, who had undertaken the same courses and passed the same examinations as men, might put letters (B.A./M.A.) after their names. It is possible to read of this moment in Virginia Woolf's deliberations in *Three Guineas*, her meditation on how to prevent war and how to respond to the request to donate money to the rebuilding of a Women's College. Woolf replies to the request in terms which are powerful still.

Citing the Master of Trinity's memoirs and his reflections on Cambridge's achievements Woolf says:

'...Cambridge may be quoted as an example of practical results which come from research for its own sake. 'What has your (women's) college done to stimulate great manufacturers to endow it? Have you taken a leading part in the invention of the implements of war? How far have your students succeeded in business as capitalists? How then can you expect 'very handsome bequests and donations' to come your way?' (Woolf, p. 38)

If I send money, Woolf asks, shall I ask them to rebuild the college on the same lines, to rebuild it but build it differently, or shall I 'ask them to buy petrol and rags and Bryant and May matches and burn the college to the ground.' (Woolf, p. 38)

It was certainly said that Women's Studies set that match to the curriculum, to the Canon, in the humanities and perhaps to Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge too. The period in which the long struggle to authorise women's access to Universities was taking place was also the period of the establishment of other women's colleges focussed on specific work with children or with the poor.

It is now, largely as a result of the Women's Studies movement, more widely recognised that the emergence of social science and social work, of psychology and Special Schools, happened hand in hand, and that whilst the founding fathers of social science- the Chicago School- were celebrated, the founding Mothers of schools of nursing or social work or education were not. For women like Eleanor Rathbone working in the settlement movement and establishing programmes at Liverpool University and the LSE, or Jane Addams and her partner, Ellen Gates Star, founding Hull House in Chicago and setting up the Sociology School in the University there was no theory/practice divide. In consequence, they all but disappeared in the birth-narratives of the modern disciplines of social science and education.

Alice Salomon (after whom the Hochschule, now a prestigious University, in Berlin was named) was a strong advocate for women's rights. She founded the 'Social School for Women' in 1899 which was renamed for Salomon's sixtieth birthday in 1932. By 1919, sixteen 'Social Schools for Women' belonged to the Konferenz Sozialer Frauenschulen Deutschland and were publishing monographs on the condition of the poor throughout the 1920's until the Nazi period. Salomon was then banned from teaching and soon left Germany as a result of the anti-Semitic persecution. Salomon argued for the distinctive contribution of vocational Fachhochschule which was distinct and different from a University. She explicitly resisted the idea of developing programmes for Social Work at a University level, claiming that university education was too theoretical, lacking such opportunities for personal development as were needed in Social Work (Fürsorge). Contrariwise, the leaders of social pedagogy (Sozialpädagogik) located their practice in Universities within the conceptual framework of educational sciences, led by Herman Nohl, authorised by the work of Dilthey. (Hemäläinen, 2003).

Homerton College, for most of the twentieth century, was a women's teacher training college in Cambridge. It was a mixed college from 1852-1896 and then was a women's college in Cambridge for 80 years. It had its roots in the Dissenting Academy and from the 1850's the teaching of theology was separated from the training of teachers. Students from this college were not admitted to degrees from the University of Cambridge until the 1970s. The ranking and hierarchies of practice-based knowledges and their association with women accompanied these histories. The enquiries instigated by an earlier interdisciplinary project ask whose knowledges count and can be authorised as knowledge and why?

Adrienne Rich in 'Disobedience and Women's Studies' reminds her hearers and her readers that erasure of such questions, and of the attempts to meet across other lines of privilege, can only support the currently dominant systems. Women's Studies existed in order to enquire into issues of how knowing might be ordered differently so as not simply to repeat and reinforce existing systems and prevailing patterns of power and exploitation. For Rich, that involved a change of identification, a move away from the existing authorities and loyalties to them (disobedience), and a finding of connections especially beyond 'whiteness.' (Rich, pp. 80- 84)

Back then, to the question of different ways of knowing, which haunted women's studies and which will trouble any critical interdisciplinary studies. Precisely because we could not take

for granted the questions of what knowledge or whose knowledge which are too often unquestioned within the walls of established disciplines, we found that women's studies became a space for creative thinking. Though women's studies, always marginal, has now largely disappeared from the British Academy, the radical re-thinking enabled in its spaces has moved out – always unacknowledged- into more traditional areas of study. Two examples, from many, come to mind.

The rhetoric of 'situatedness' has become a catch-all for many kinds of qualitative enquiry and derives, I think, from the address by Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway to the claims of science and the Hegelian argument, made by Sandra Harding, for the 'privilege of partial perspective.' (Haraway, a, (1991; Harding,, 1986). There was something to be said about 'experience' in Women's Studies and how it troubled the objectivity of science and not just at the moment of application. Now science is dominant across the social sciences and applied fields, with evidence-based practice and measurement of impact dominating every area of study in the University, including the traditional domains of women's work of care and education and nurture of the young. It is shadowed only by personal narratives of 'situatedness' or of 'reflection' which create the framework for innumerable qualitative case studies.

'I love data analysis' the leader of a college mentor team said to me recently. Practice development is being informed by research, using data about attendance and retention . What more can we ask? Except perhaps the questions prompted by a sense of unsatisfactoriness, that something more, that does not yet have a name and so cannot yet be quantified, is going on at the edge of consciousness, in that college? Call it hunch? Intuition? Or the source of the kind of knowing and enquiry promoted by Women's Studies.

Both the impact measures and the personal narratives fit well in a University governed by marketability and how else can it be governed now if it is to survive? There has been, alongside the democratisation of the University, with a mass Higher Education system now in place, a marketization of what counts and is authorised as knowledge. So where does a critical questioning of these patterns emerge now? Women's Studies methods may have been thoroughly assimilated into the Higher Education market, but what will the ghosts of that social movement invite us to remember now...?

Something about what is new and emergent perhaps? That is yet to be born and is not simply a mirroring and reflection (our buildings seem made of mirrors and screens now) of what already is.

And that this requires attention to the pause, the hesitation, the stumble as well as the awkward or stubborn silence.....

Something about the way what isn't said in the new authorisations of the market could question what is closed down, open up somewhere new...

And that this will happen through finding ways of connecting the personal and political, the local and the global...

Let me finish with two examples of how we used feminist work in Women's Studies here at MMU : the work of Frigga Haug on memory work and the work of Donna Haraway on 'diffraction' and on the Women's Studies class room

Frigga Haug developed a method of investigating the common experiences of women which sought to make a connection between the personal and political through a process of remembering, reflecting and collective writing concerning power, dominance and hegemony. A topic may be announced or a research question enabled and this needs to be of burning interest. The groups who collaborate on the work will not be bigger than twelve and if more women are interested, more groups can be formed. A remembered scene linked to the theme is chosen, written in the third person and analysed from a perspective which explores and opens up vacuum and contradiction, the 'I' and the 'others', the nature of the categories and 'common sense theories', the presence of emotion, the nature of verbs and actions present in the text and so on. After discussion and analysis participants then make a second draft of the text. 'Each woman' says Frigga Haug 'can examine her own texts, how she makes compromises, how she falls in line and submits so she does not lose her ability to act in contradictory structures.' Such a method and form of writing cannot readily be subsumed as a 'research method' only as it crosses between pedagogy and consciousness raising and therapy too and could be experimented with in the context of the Women's Studies classroom.

Similarly, the work of Donna Haraway prompted a move away from a metaphor of 'reflection' to a metaphor of 'diffraction' in encountering a collective project of reading in the direction of 'sensitively specific and powerfully collective women's liberatory

discourses.’ The space of women’s studies becomes a space for the investigation of power-charged difference within an emancipatory project. ‘Inclusions and exclusions’ says Haraway ‘are not determined in advance by fixed categories of race, gender, sexuality or nationality. ‘We’ are responsible for the inclusions and exclusions, identifications and separations produced in the highly political process called ‘reading.’ (Haraway, b, p. 123) Haraway insistently links the local and the global, the personal and the political, in a ‘bush’ of women’s knowing.

Such an attention to the practices of writing and of reading and their collaborative nature was enabled in the space of women’s studies. The collaboration was in furtherance of local and global political goals, beyond those of the University in which the work happened.

However this practice was inevitably not readily accommodated by the University at that time and so, quite rapidly, it disappeared.

Is it possible that the questions of all kinds of ‘other’ knowledges than those which are readily marketed and commodified might reappear in the new forms of interdisciplinarity....

Perhaps..... especially if questions and themes are enabled to emerge from conversations occurring at the margins and with those whose perspectives and passions are currently rendered abject, unauthorised or disallowed. In order to ‘count’, it was necessary to move away from Women’s Studies. Now it seems that interdisciplinarity may ‘count’ once more. However it is necessary to recognise that research which engages with the perspective those who have been rendered socially abject may itself become abject. Strategies of celebration, a reconnection with partially erased inheritance may therefore become essential for this to happen.

Woolf, from the perspective of the outsider, seeking to give money to prevent war, put forward the idea of a new college, a poor college:

‘Obviously then it must be an experimental college, an adventurous college. Let it be built on lines of its own. It must be built not of carved stone and stained glass but of some cheap easily combustible material which does not hoard dust or perpetuate traditions.What should be taught in the new college, the poor college? Not the arts of dominating other people, nor the arts of ruling, of killing of acquiring land and capital. They require too many overhead expensesThe poor college must teach only those arts that can be taught cheaply and practiced by poor people such as medicine, mathematics, music, painting and literature.

It should teach the arts of human intercourse: the art of understanding other people's lives and minds and the little arts of talk, of dress of cookery that are allied with them. The aim of the new college should not be to specialise and segregate but to combine.....The teachers should be drawn from good livers as well as good thinkers.....there should be no difficulty in attracting them....' (Woolf, pp. 39-40)

I wonder if this might offer a brief for interdisciplinary applied research yet.....

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