Gender and the Politics of Information: Reflections on Bringing the Library into the Classroom

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Abstract

New technologies offering different ways to generate and access information, as well as revolutionary changes in how (and why) we communicate, led to an effort to reconceptualize the nature of library instruction. Combining some key tenets of the information literacy movement with core feminist principles and critical theoretical approaches, two academic librarians created a course designed to explore the changing nature of information and to explode the myth of its neutrality. Through discussion of the development of the initial course proposal, the creation of the syllabus and the structure of the class, a case is presented for altering (and expanding) the role of the librarian in the classroom.

Introduction

For a significant portion of my career I had the good fortune to work at an institution committed to supporting an extremely active and multifaceted library instruction program. One critical component of the program was a full-quarter credit course that my predecessor as library instruction coordinator, in collaboration with library administration, had succeeded in incorporating into the undergraduate curriculum about a decade before I arrived. Aware of the obstacles that faced librarians in attempting to mount credit courses (ours was one of only a handful in the country), I made it a priority to retain the course as an integral part of the library instruction program.

After several years of directing the program, during which I provided research methods instruction, in freestanding courses and one-shot appearances, to both undergraduate and graduate students, I became in-

creasingly aware that it was possible for students to attend the lectures, do the readings and complete the assignments without ever once reflecting critically upon the nature of what they were learning about—information. The tools- and strategies-intensive way I had structured my courses and presentations actually encouraged students to *commodify* information without stopping to consider the political ramifications of *facts* on a page or, indeed, how those facts came to be valued to the extent that they warranted being memorialized in print, on paper or in cyberspace. Working in a university that went to great lengths to promote the conscious incorporation of critical thinking skills into every aspect of the curriculum, I was forced to confront the realization that not only was I failing to instill these skills in my students, I may very well have been doing just the opposite. The students left the classroom equipped to search the catalog or find a journal article but no more able to assess the quality of the books and articles they discovered or to think critically about the nature of information than they were when the session started.

This article is a case study of how a major reconceptualization of a traditional approach to library instruction altered the content of the syllabus as well as the role of the library and librarian within the context of an academic department. I will frame my description of these changes in ways that might be applicable to a variety of situations. I will discuss, among other things, the development of the syllabus, the selection of readings and assignments, and the evolution of the course from an undergraduate class to graduate seminar. That said, this piece remains at its core, a story of how a personal "revelation" significantly altered how one librarian used her moment on the classroom stage.

Conceptualizing the Course

My interest in changing what and how I taught coincided with the excitement generated by the first wave of the new information literacy movement. A longstanding and active member of the ACRL Instruction Section, I was caught up in the flurry of activity (and debate) around the move from "bibliographic instruction" to "information literacy."[1] As I contemplated how best to restructure my classroom presentations, I found myself drawn to many of the tenets of the new models for library instruction, especially those that stressed clearly articulated teaching and learning goals and the acquisition of a structured set of competencies. However, I came to understand that while there was much to embrace about information literacy, and there were critical components of it that I would definitely incorporate into segments of my teaching, it was not the panacea I sought. I wanted to use the opportunity that I had to interact with a group of students for an entire quarter, to reach beyond teaching the basics, no matter how creatively one might endeavor to do that. I was also committed to challenging myself to think differently about the na-

ture of information, and I anticipated that such rethinking might lead to an alteration of my role in the classroom.

My response to the challenge I set for myself was the development, in close collaboration with University of California Irvine's then Women's Studies Librarian Joan Ariel, of a course entitled "Gender and the Politics of Information." Joan and I had team-taught a more traditional library research methods course for women's studies in conjunction with the capstone seminar required of all graduating seniors. We, therefore, did not face the difficulties of convincing the department of the need for a library-focused course, nor did we find ourselves in the awkward position of needing to negotiate for time in the schedule of classes. All of that was in place. We were also fortunate to be affiliated with a Women's Studies Program that was open to new ideas and actively exploring ways to expand their undergraduate offerings. With a green light from the program, we were ready to develop a formal course proposal.

This turned out to be more difficult than either of us had anticipated. The challenge was threefold. First, we needed to construct a proposal for a course that critically examined issues of gender, information, and the creation and dissemination of knowledge; and that contained intellectual content deemed appropriate for upper division undergraduates. At the same time, we did not want to sacrifice entirely the more traditional library components that had been at the core of the skills-based course. We were painfully aware that our course might be the only opportunity this group of students had to learn in a structured way about library research. Finally, we needed to insure that the course specifically addressed and put into practice the changing modes of communication that are the very underpinnings of the information revolution. An additional challenge was packaging all of this in a way that would pass muster with the Academic Senate Committee on Courses, since support from the Women's Studies Program was just the first step in the process.

We struggled with framing the purpose, focus, and language of the course proposal. There were few models from which to draw and we were sensitive to the fact that, for this initial foray into course design, whatever we created needed to accommodate the particular needs of our departmental sponsors. At the same time, as librarians responsible for a range of subjects and departments, we understood the enhanced appeal to the Senate committee of a course that would be a template for similar courses in different disciplines as well as courses for graduate students.

The proposal that we submitted for the consideration of the Academic Senate Committee on Courses, a group not widely reputed to be sympathetic to feminist interventions into the curriculum, read as follows:

> We live in a gendered information age in which new modes of information delivery have become almost as significant as the information itself. Through readings, discussions and class presentations, this

seminar offers an opportunity for a critical feminist assessment of information as resource and commodity and of the impact of new information technologies on the ways that women (and men) work, study, play, create and consume. The course focuses on such topics as the gendered nature of information, constructions of identity in virtual reality, changing and evolving gender relations in cyberspace, and the racial, class, geographic and gender distinctions between who builds and who owns information technology. The course explores the enormous social, political, cultural and economic changes brought about by the advent of rapidly changing modes of electronic communication and examines the social and economic consequences of technological mishap and failure.

To our great relief, not to mention surprise, the proposal sailed through the Committee on Courses, and we found ourselves with a course description that we needed to transform from idea to implementation.

Developing the Syllabus

Borrowing a page from the information literacy playbook, we started the actual process of course creation by articulating a set of objectives:

- To investigate the gendered nature of information and "knowledge"—or, put another way, to question the supposed neutrality of information and knowledge, especially computer-mediated information
- To examine the impact of new information technologies on the ways in which information is generated, stored, accessed, and retrieved
- To develop critical perspectives on the Internet and other computer-mediated information sources
- To identify, analyze, and evaluate critical new technologically-based resources in women's studies
- To assess the role of new information technologies in the organization of "women's work"
- To assess the potential for the utilization of information technologies in feminist social change

We consciously diverged from the Information Literacy model by not constructing the objectives in the form of a list of what the students would accomplish by the end of the class. In place of the now familiar language of learning outcomes (based on proficiencies and competencies), we chose to base the objectives on the intellectual content of the course and frame them in a more holistic manner.

Since one of the (unstated) goals of the course was to insure that students acquired useful library research skills, a number of the objectives had a skills-based subtext. For example, the second objective, which called for an examination of the impact of new information technologies on the ways in which information is generated, stored, accessed and retrieved, easily lent itself to a discussion of the structure of databases, the online

catalog or online resources. The fourth objective, which focused on the identification and analysis of technologically-based resources in women's studies, required students to learn not only what was (and was not) available to support scholarship in this discipline but also to understand the architecture and navigation of databases. The more we considered the organization and objectives of the course, the more comfortable we became with the idea of incorporating specific library-centered learning objectives without the necessity of spelling them out.

The next task was to determine the actual structure of the ten-week course, syllabus, readings, assignments, and value-added extras. The first step in this process was to decide upon the format of the class. Since the class was geared to seniors in women's studies, generally a small group rarely numbering more than fifteen students, we had the option of sticking to a traditional lecture format or taking the somewhat riskier approach of a seminar. In an effort to incorporate the skills aspects and realizing that a significant amount of what we wanted the students to get out of the class could not come from assigned readings or even class discussion, we opted for a third way. We advertised the course as a "seminar/workshop" that would meet once a week in the library. Even before we had completed the bare outlines of the syllabus, we had decided to develop a dynamic Web site, which would change as we or the students identified relevant links and added or built-upon discussion questions. We also created a listserve and scheduled workshop sessions in a technology-enhanced classroom to accompany the seminar meetings.

The design of the syllabus posed its own unique set of challenges. Unlike a completely skills-based class, the classic fifty minute one-shot performance, or a one- or two-unit library research strategies add-on to another course, Gender and the Politics of Information needed to speak to a number of possible audiences and satisfy a range of needs and requirements. We set out to shape a syllabus that accommodated instruction in basic skills (which, regrettably, could not be assumed, even for graduating seniors or graduate students), provided a space for (and stressed the centrality of) theoretical perspectives, contained a segment devoted to history, and most importantly, was informed by and firmly rooted in women's studies. The syllabus actually turned out to be a work in progress.

As the quarter progressed, we found that we needed to add or delete readings, tweak assignments, and alter expectations about the amount of work the students would be able to accomplish in a given period of time. These on-the-fly changes, informed by our actual experiences in the seminar, are reflected in the structure of this article, which moves between discussions of decisions made at the earliest stages of course conceptualization and changes that occurred once the class was underway. There was something inherently organic (and non-linear) about the construction of the course and this comes through in the organization of the article.

As with all newly approved courses, Gender and the Politics of Information was "on probation." Soon after the discussion at the Academic Senate Committee on Courses we learned that initial approval for the course had been granted based solely upon its presumed intellectual content. It was perceived as a course that "belonged" to an academic department and not to the library. As librarians we were keenly aware of the level of knowledge and understanding necessary to negotiate the shifting and difficult terrain of the twentieth/twenty-first century library. Unfortunately, negotiating the politics of permanent course approval is equally complex. The incorporation of the skills portion became a covert activity. We needed to devise strategies for presenting information-seeking techniques within the context of the intellectual core of the course. In other words, we had to teach basic skills while maintaining the integrity of an upper division seminar.

We found a solution to this dilemma that turned out to be simple and straightforward. We developed assignments that required the students to learn, use, assess, and teach others about a wide range of library resources—all in the context of a critical examination and evaluation of gender and information. We focused on the final project, a five- to seven-page paper based on independent research as the basis for the assignments. We provided a list of possible topics but encouraged the class members to develop their own (in consultation with the instructors) if they so desired. Whichever option they chose, all students were required to submit a one- to two-page proposal outlining the topic they had selected.

In keeping with the seminar format, basic tenets of feminist pedagogy and our desire for a high degree of participation, each student submitted the project proposal via e-mail to the entire class two days before the week four seminar meeting. When we met as a group, we and the students discussed, or rather dissected, the actual topics, engaging collectively in an exercise that broke each topic into its component parts in order to answer the "who, what, when, and where" questions that comprised the central question. During this session, the students also considered the research challenges each topic might pose and made suggestions for overcoming them.

We continued to refer to the paper proposals as we introduced the library research skills we wanted the students to acquire. Through an interactive conversation grounded in the topic statements the students had prepared, we focused attention on use of language and how that translated into identification and access, types and categories of research materials, and strategies for the evaluation of resources. This proved to be an easy way to introduce the concept of subject headings, keywords, and other possible points of entry. These discussions opened the door to exercises to identify the various packages (books, journals, Web sites, and assorted primary sources) that contain information. In addition, we were able to stress the importance of authority by pointing to the clues available in a bibliographic record, journal citation, or Web page.

Since we emphasized the use of Web resources, we devoted additional time to discussing the challenges the Web presents. While deficient in traditional library skills, the students were quite familiar with the Web. We built on this familiarity during a session devoted to the development of a list of criteria for evaluation of Web resources. Although we tinkered with the final language, the criteria that students relied upon for their work throughout the quarter derived from their own understanding of the elements critical to the evaluation of a Web site. The collaborative work that went into the development of the criteria provided the students with both a sense of ownership of the end product as well as an enhanced understanding of the critical elements to consider when evaluating an environment as dynamic as the Web.

Our working assumption at this early point in the quarter was that we would return to and incorporate the skills-based themes as we tackled the more substantive aspects of the syllabus. Since the final project was, in fact, a research paper, albeit short, we also felt fairly confident that the actual process of identifying, evaluating, and incorporating resources in the paper would serve as the "laboratory" for the skills component of the course. The workshops calendared into the undergraduate syllabus offered the students the opportunity to share searching techniques with each other and to apply the skills discussed in class in a peer-learning environment. We also encouraged the students to use the workshop time to discuss the readings and meet in their small groups to prepare questions for their turn in leading the seminar.

INTERROGATING THE NATURE OF INFORMATION

Although teaching library research strategies was an important, if covert, aspect of the class, it was not the central focus, nor was it the reason we proposed the seminar. Our main goal was to open up a dialog with our students about the very nature of information, and to ask them to engage with us in an examination of concepts and practices we had all come to take for granted. In the initial class meeting, we threw down a gauntlet of sorts that set the tone for the quarter.

We did this by presenting a rather dystopian view of information. Our point was to illuminate the challenges inherent in examining information as the core subject matter under investigation in the course, rather than as evidence to uncover the "fact" of some other topic. Our goal was to introduce and reinforce the idea that "information" was so ubiquitous that analyzing it as a concept/commodity was similar to analyzing the air we breathe, only without the chemical formulas with which to do so successfully. When we consider it at all, we think of information in terms of how it relates to something else—or, more likely, we take it for granted. Information, although packaged, has no corporal form; it is everywhere and part of everything.

With a concept as pervasive and at the same time as elusive as information, the second challenge we wanted our students to confront was to determine what aspects of this entity might be worthy of their critical attention. We pressed them to interrogate the concept of information, to attempt to ascertain which elements deserved investigation through a feminist lens and which they might as well just accept and leave alone.

For the sake of argument, the class collectively agreed to accept the premise that we now live in the Age of Information and that it is incumbent upon us to approach this age with the same scholarly gravitas that we normally reserve for the study of the Bronze Age or the Age of Enlightenment or any other historical epoch deemed worthy of serious analysis. As we developed the syllabus, we elected to make the task a bit less onerous and overwhelming. Rather than embracing the universe of information as the object of study, timeless and boundless, we limited the scope to an examination of the "digital" age, an age which is both more ubiquitous and more intrusive, regardless of race, class, geography, etc., than either the information packages or the technologies that preceded it.

We determined early in the syllabus design phase that providing some sort of historical grounding for the course content would help the class navigate the shifting terrain of information. Although we resisted chronology as the overarching organizing principle of the course, history was the first theme the course addressed. In acknowledgment of and appreciation for the efforts of the early practitioners of academic women's studies, we structured this first theme around the historical figure of Ada Lovelace (1815–52), the true foremother of the digital age. Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron, was a gifted mathematician whose work with Charles Babbage on his calculating machine, the Analytical Engine, opened up the possibility that his invention might be used for complex calculations. It came as no surprise that no one in the class had ever heard of Ada, although a few were vaguely aware of the ADA programming language that bears her name.

Ada Lovelace served as an introduction to the core content of the course; her life (and death) a cautionary tale about women and technology. This iconic figure from the first half of the nineteenth century drew the students' attention to the fact that women had been part of the technological revolution from the very beginning. At the same time, Ada's life, work, and untimely death from uterine cancer vividly illustrated the intersecting themes of gender, technology, and the politics of information.

More importantly, however, for the trajectory of the course, the story of Ada Lovelace built a bridge between an historical figure and the position of women today with respect to technology *and* gender as well as the technology *of* gender. How Ada worked and what she accomplished set the stage for a discussion of what is arguably the most critical and certainly the most ubiquitous innovation in information technology in the modern era, the World Wide Web.

We introduced the class to Ada Lovelace through a chapter in Sadie Plant's 1997 book, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (London: Fourt Estate, 1998), in which Plant both presents factual information on and theorizes about Ada's life. In Plant's quirky musings on Ada, "weaving" plays a central role. Long relegated to the realm of domestic arts, weaving was, in fact, among the first industries to exploit new technologies. Ada's contributions to the development of "computing machines," her work on the Difference Engine and the Analytical Engine, were inspired by Joseph Marie Jacquard, whose invention of a programmable loom completely revolutionized weaving. Ada was fascinated with Jacquard and incorporated that fascination into her work on matrices, networks, and the Web.

Although we probably were guilty of romanticizing and exploiting Ada, she did become the foundation upon which the course rested. Her personal history and intellectual accomplishments served to set the stage for the questions we presented to the class about how women are positioned in relation to technology. The force of Ada's story, part pioneering and heroic, part tragic and melancholy, engaged the students in ways that a simple recitation of the chronology of computing might never have done. It made them anxious to tackle the more challenging aspects of the course still to come. The class adopted Ada, a weaver of networks and webs, as their combination mascot and totem.

With Ada as the class guiding light, Joan and I structured the rest of the syllabus to address the following themes:

- Questions of identity/identities and how information technologies have the potential both to destabilize and to reinscribe identity
- Problems associated with integrating Virtual Life and Real Life
- The implications of a different dimension for the American (and arguably global) system of laws, modes of interaction, social organization
- The challenges posed by the potential to live in parallel universes, and the ways in which straddling these two (at the very least) threatens to privilege certain women (and men) over other women (and men)
- The necessity of moving beyond a Eurocentric model to examine the ways in which information technologies impact the lives of women (and men) globally
- The fundamental changes that have occurred on the "global assembly line" and who is most affected by these changes—and how

As stated earlier, part of the impetus for proposing this class was the uncomfortable realization that information, gender, and technology are all concepts too easily taken for granted. We thought it important to provide a forum for students to think about each of these and to have the space (and the mandate) to examine how they related to, affected, or played off or upon each other. As a way into this investigation, we assigned a set

of readings from Jennifer Terry's and Melodie Calvert's *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* (Routledge, 1997). Terry and Calvert link technology and gender by issuing the deceptively simple challenge to try getting through a day without machines. They then up the ante by asking the reader to ponder the possibility of getting through a day without gender. The students responsible for facilitating the discussion of these readings took it a step further as they drew their colleagues' attention to an even more provocative question: is gender itself a technology? We realized the benefit of working with a group of upper division majors and minors in women's studies, who came to our class with a shared background in feminist theories. All quickly grasped the notion that both technology and gender are constructs that demand interpretation and analysis.

While still in the early phases of the course, we wanted the students to understand and grapple with two opposing perspectives on what shifts in modes of communication and the transfer of information actually mean. For this, we relied on an article by Anna Sampaio and Jenni Aragon, "To Boldly Go (Where No Man Has Gone Before): Women and Politics in Cyberspace" (*The Politics of Cyberspace: A New Political Science Reader,* 1998). Sampaio and Aragon divide the theoretical universe between modern and postmostmodern, arguing that the modernist perspective posits that new information technologies are merely extensions of traditional print and speech media and as such do not require any alteration in how we think about or analyze them. McLuhan was right then; he's right now. The opposing postmodern view is that the Internet, with all its potentials and pitfalls, represents entirely new modes of communication and opens the door to hitherto unforeseen forms of social interaction.

We encouraged the class to examine what the acceptance of either of these positions would mean in terms of how we might understand and evaluate information. In particular, we urged them to question which formulation best and most clearly describes the world in which we live. Not wishing to be prescriptive, we encouraged debate in class and discovered that the students were quite adept at supporting either position.

ADDING THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION

With a bit of history and a dash of theory under our belts, we ventured forth to explore the remainder of the terrain of gender and the politics of information. We selected identity/identities as the second major organizing theme. In a section of the syllabus we called "Bodies, genders and technologies," we began an examination of how technologies altered views of the body and challenged the very idea of corporeal reality. Through such readings as Donna Haraway's classic "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html) and Mark Poster's "Postmodern Virtualities" (http://www.hnet.uci

.edu/mposter/writings/internet.html), the students tackled dense and difficult literature and engaged with thorny questions about the possibilities of the existence of other forms of being and the reality of alternate subjectivities.

In acknowledgment of the level of difficulty these readings posed, we altered the format of the class for the discussion of Haraway and Poster. The ideal pattern for each class meeting was to have a team of students develop questions, post them in advance, then lead the seminar. For Haraway and Poster, however, we created the questions, distributed them via both the course listserve and the class Web page, and led the discussion. This session was the one exception to the seminar standard we had set as it turned out to be more of a lecture than a conversation. In hindsight, this was probably not the best decision. The seminar format was one of the real strengths of the class. It encouraged participation and fostered intellectual curiosity and risk taking. While the students managed to shift gears back to seminar mode by the next class meeting, lecturing caused a diminution in the sense of collaborative investigation that had been apparent at the beginning of the class.

Continuing with the theme of identity/identities, we moved to somewhat firmer ground with readings and discussion that focused on the ways new information technologies were altering the very idea of personhood. Taking our cue from a now-famous/infamous 1993 *New Yorker* cartoon whose caption read "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog," the class engaged with materials about MUDs (multiuser domains), MOOs (MUD Object Oriented), and expanded definitions of multitasking that encompassed, in one delightful example, writing a term paper, communicating with friends, and assuming the personae of a small furry animal. This particular module provided an opportunity to wrestle with the numerous ways in which virtual reality serves to separate the idea of gender from the physical "fact" of a human body. The class used the readings assigned for these sessions, most notably Sandy Stone's "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures" (*Cyberspace: First Steps*, 1991) and Sherry Turkle's groundbreaking book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), to interrogate the meaning of gender as well as the possibility that, similar to gender, information might be as much construct as fact.

Debating the Distinctions between the Real and the Virtual

One of the themes that stimulated the liveliest seminar discussions focused on the potential for regulating life in the new information environment. In a segment we called "Patriarchy, Protections and Policing: Comparing the Real and the Virtual," the class examined cases of misrepresentation, sexual harassment, censorship, and the possibilities and

limitations of laws and law enforcement in cyberspace. We selected two articles that illustrated the problems associated with regulating human behavior in the virtual realm, Julian Dibble's disturbing 1993 piece "A Rape in Cyberspace," first published in the *Village Voice* (http://www .ludd.luth.se/mud/aber/articles/village_voice.html), and Leslie Regan Shade's contribution in *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies* (Sage, 1996), "Is There Free Speech on the Net?: Censorship in the Global Information Infrastructure." We used these selections, one a graphic depiction of a "crime" against women committed in a virtual community, the other a cogent warning about the dangers of importing Real Life (RL) censorship into the virtual world, to address such questions as: "How real is the virtual?"; "Should laws and regulations designed to deal with Real Life be applied to Virtual Life?"; "Do women need legal protection in virtual communities and when does protection become either unequal treatment or censorship?"; "How do you (or can you) equate a rape in cyberspace with the physical act of rape?"; and finally, "Are there limits to freedom?"

In order to vary the format and to encourage the class to examine positions that they might find uncomfortable, we structured the discussion of these questions in the form of a debate. Dividing the class in half at the end of the previous session, we rephrased one of the questions as a debate topic: "Resolved, women need legal protection in virtual communities" and assigned pro and con positions to each group. Since there was a considerable amount of group work required for the class, we recommended that the class use the student-led workshop sessions between seminar meetings to prepare for the debate, marshal their arguments and determine who would speak when and about what. It turned out to be one of the most animated sessions in the entire quarter as students challenged their own perceptions and preconceived notions of how laws can and do shape gender relations, in VL and RL alike.

WOMEN'S WORK IN THE DIGITAL AGE
After several weeks of theorizing about information, gender, bodies, and the boundaries of the real, the final themes brought us back to the politics of information in a very concrete sense. These themes addressed the interrelated questions of who creates information and who produces the means by which we access this information. In the last sessions of the seminar, "Women's Work/Women's Voices in the Internet Age" and "Gender, Capital and Politics in the New Millennium: Dystopian and Utopian Moments," we looked behind the screen to expose the realities of the new global assembly line where women labor to build the circuit boards that make possible our virtual worlds—the dystopia and utopia of the information revolution.

The readings for these final conversations were drawn in large measure from Zillah Eisenstein's *Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism and*

the Lure of Cyberfantasy (1997). Of all the components of the class, this one resonated most strongly with the students, all of them female and the majority coming from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Sub-continent, parts of the world most adversely affected by the poorly hidden secret of the vast differences between the owners of the technology and those who built it. Admittedly this was a sobering note upon which to end the course. However, if the students took nothing else away from the quarter they devoted to Gender and the Politics of Information, we sensed that they left with a commitment to train a critical feminist lens on the brave new world of cyberspace.

Transitioning to a Graduate Course

Joan Ariel and I had the privilege of offering Gender and the Politics of Information as an upper division undergraduate course for two years. Soon after the second time we taught the course, I left UC Irvine for UCLA. When I arrived, the newly-established PhD program in women's studies was looking to expand its course offerings and approached me about teaching. New to UCLA and learning the ropes of a management position in the library, it took me almost two years to carve out the time to offer the course.

Although to my surprise much of the actual content translated easily from an upper division class for senior majors and minors to a seminar for doctoral students, I did need to make some significant adjustments in structure and expectations. First, the UCLA doctoral program was quite small; instead of the fifteen to eighteen students Joan and I had worked with each quarter, there was an intimate group of four. In addition, as doctoral students, each came to the course with a fairly well-developed sense of what it was they wanted to work on. I needed to organize our conversations around the content I wanted to teach (library skills included) while at the same time remain cognizant of the fact that this particular group of students needed to be doing work that directly connected to or informed their core research projects. On the other hand, I was able to require more reading. Items that had appeared as supplemental in the undergraduate syllabus were now required. Whereas we had provided prompts in the way of prepared questions to assist the undergraduate students responsible for facilitating discussions, I left the graduate students to their own devices. When their turn came to lead the seminar, they were free to organize the session in any way they chose. Finally, what had been for the undergraduates a five- to seven-page paper became, in this new iteration, a fifteen- to twenty-page paper preceded by a proposal and central question statement and an annotated bibliography of relevant print and Web-based sources. We devoted the last two weeks of the quarter to paper presentations and discussion.

Although I thoroughly enjoyed the undergraduate version of Gender and the Politics of Information, due in no small measure to the opportunity to team-teach, I found the graduate course a more satisfying experience. While the graduate students' facility in negotiating the library wasn't all that superior to the undergrads', the level of understanding that they brought to the readings and discussion and their willingness to challenge me, each other, and the words on the page (or screen) indicated a level of sophistication and intellectual maturity that changed the nature of the exchanges across the seminar table and, by extension, the nature of the course.

Since Joan Ariel and I first proposed a course examining gender and the politics of information, the virtual world has undergone a sea change. The explosion of blogs and the advent of Wikipedia appear to have increased the democraticizing potential of the Web. As I prepare to offer the seminar after a five year hiatus, I will of course incorporate these significant changes into the syllabus. Yet in spite of—or perhaps because of—the new information frontiers, many of the core questions we posed when we first taught the course remain. Gender remains a primary category of analysis when considering how information is generated, transferred, and accessed. Information has not become less subjective or less commodified; if anything, it is now more so. Most distressingly, the gulf between the owners of technology and the largely female workforce in the global south whose labor makes that technology possible has only widened. There is still a need for the space to raise the questions we first put on the table and in the syllabus almost a decade ago.

I would argue that librarians need to integrate these issues into a range of library instruction settings. This calls for a reconceptualization of what we do in the classroom, accompanied by an increased familiarity and comfort with new ways of understanding and discussing information. While much of this reeducation can and should take place on the job, through reading, conversations with colleagues, and observing how our students conceive of and utilize information, we need to begin this reconsideration in library school. While it might be a hard sell to convince library school faculty and administrators to add yet another course to an already crowded curriculum, the benefits may well outweigh the scheduling challenges. Increasingly, academic librarians are called upon to assist students in navigating a rapidly shifting landscape. Obviously, the more we know about the politics of information, the better able we will be to provide this critical guidance. Incorporating information about information into the professional training of the subsequent generations of librarians may well reinforce the bridge between the library and the classroom, helping to hone our students' critical thinking skills while underscoring the significance of our contributions to the academic enterprise.

NOTE

1. The ACRL Instruction Section (ACRL/IS) Web site (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/informationliteracy.htm) contains links to definitions, competencies, bibliographies, and peer consultants and speakers.

Ellen Broidy recently retired from the position of Head of the Collections, Research and Instructional Services Department at UCLA's Young Research Library, where she also served as the Librarian for Anglo-American History and Women's Studies. Prior to her tenure at UCLA, she was History and Film Studies Librarian and Coordinator of Library Education Services at the University of California, Irvine. Dr. Broidy has written on issues related to feminist librarianship and women's studies and LGBT Studies in an academic library context. Recipient of the 2005 ACRL/Women's Studies Section Career Achievement Award, she is the author of "Cyberdykes, or Lesbian Studies in the Information Age" (*The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century* [New York: Feminist Press, 1996]), entries on Libraries and Archives in *Lesbian Histories and Culture: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 2000) and several articles and book chapters on library instruction. Currently back at the UCLA library on post-retirement recall, Broidy is continuing her work with women's studies and history and serving as a mentor to two CLIR postdoctoral fellows.