

THE ROLE OF JOURNAL WRITING IN TEACHING WOMEN'S HISTORY

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Introduction

As part of a new General Education Core Curriculum at Shenandoah University, the history department took advantage of the opportunity to propose innovative, freshman-level seminar classes with low enrollments. Recently our university had also established a Women's Studies Program geared toward undergraduate minors, so I proposed to teach a course on women's history through the General Education core to expose newer students to this subject. After three semesters teaching this course, I discovered that a journal-writing requirement is an ideal pedagogical tool for acclimating new students to college-level work, a vital method for exploring women's history and gender studies, and a promising way to gain direct and evaluative feedback from my classes. By creating and sustaining a critical and reactive journal throughout the semester, students can construct a space where they can learn how to "test the waters" academically: They can create sophisticated and informed arguments and ruminate on the role of gender in their own lives as well as in history. The private space of the journal can be an ideal site in which to begin critical exploration—the type that will serve them well throughout their college years.

The Course

"History 111: Women's History" covered the period from 1600 to the present. I used Sara Evans's *Born for Liberty* (New York: Free Press, 1989) as the primary text, and I supplemented lectures by using Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Press, 1985).¹ Both books were appropriate for this introductory, freshman-level course. Evans provocatively relies on a "private" and "public" sphere model for studying women's history; she explores how women have largely been confined to the "private" or domestic realm and how, over time, they have struggled to create and define their place in the "public" sphere. Importantly, the dividing line between the two spheres has been and continues to be both rigid and permeable.

I used this model to build a pedagogical tool, one that my students returned to both in class discussions and in their journals. At the beginning of the semester, I drew a simple chart with "Private" on one side and "Public" on the other with a solid line

¹I have not assigned the Jones book to students yet, but I will add it as a required text next fall. As a public historian as well, I assigned *Her Past Around Us: Interpreting Sites for Women's History* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2003) by Polly Welts Kaufman and Katharine T. Corbett. The essays in this edited volume cover historic sites devoted to women and methodologies for future interpretation on the American landscape. My students responded positively to this book, especially the cutting-edge concepts of looking at cultural landscapes as gendered spaces.

dividing the two. As we read each chapter of the Evans book, we would end the class trying to determine whether the solid line could become dotted, or concluding whether or not women made gains in civic, public life, and when they were forced back into the private sphere.

For their semester-long assignment that culminated in a final project, I decided to have each of my students research a local woman and use their work to design and place historical markers on sites associated with these historical figures. I hope that their work will also contribute to a women's history walking trail in the future. I also required my students to write about these projects in their journals.

Journal Assignments and Expectations

I had the students keep a handwritten journal in any format that they preferred (e.g. binder, wire-bound notebook, and so forth). They handed in their journals every two weeks, and I required that they write two pages (back and front or four sides) per two-week period. A perfect journal grade for the period was five points, for a total of 35 points (out of a possible 100) for the semester. Thus, a consistently comprehensive and insightful journal was a significant part of their grade.

The most important requirement, I told the students, was to *analyze* the readings and class discussions and not write purely reactive entries, although this type of response was certainly appropriate in moderation. As the ability to create a critical analysis is easier said than done, I had students begin at least one sentence per entry with "I argue that . . ." This forced the students to begin to at least attempt an original argument. For example, when we discussed Republican Motherhood—a term describing an American Revolutionary-era materialism that assured upper-class white women that they could fulfill their civic responsibilities by becoming self-sacrificing mothers who would educate their children—particularly their sons—one student tried to determine the reason for the invention of the term:

I argue that the concept of Republican Motherhood was only created to distract women and keep them from fighting for their role in the political arena. I believe that men realized women could use their new-found political knowledge to step into the political arena and were threatened by this.

This is a sophisticated response to learning about gender issues in Revolutionary-Era America, the contested division between the private and public spheres in women's history, and theories of patriarchal power, and it revealed a promising critical argument.

Another student used her journal on several occasions to discuss historical themes and then tie them to her present situation as a woman living in a patriarchal society. She wrote of Republican Motherhood:

How many women felt qualified to discuss/argue politics with other men in coffee houses, public meeting houses, considering the lack of education, subservient level in society of the slave/poorer classes of women, and the masculine, Revolutionary notion of the dutiful, yet unseen paragon of Republican Womanhood? Hmpf, men ... we've all been there. But really, as a woman now, I sometimes get the same treatment from relatives, co-workers, even professors—all men—in a much less fervent degree of course ...

This type of response was fairly common among my female students, and I did not discourage them from including these types of emotions in their journals. "Venting" is appropriate not just because it might have helped students release frustrations about gender inequality where they might not have another outlet, but it also helped my students make connections with women of the past. I responded to my students' empathy by asking them to suggest something that women in the past could have done in the face of prejudice and exclusion. I then encouraged them to consider what can be done in the present, in their own lives, and in the future. What were the societal limitations then, and what are they now? Who creates them and why? And, how can one respond to them?

When we covered the women's suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of my students started to understand more fully the inherent contradictions of women's "places" in society.² Discussions of Jane Addams, founder of Chicago's Hull House (established in 1889) and one of the individuals responsible for laying the groundwork for modern-day social work, elicited profound interest and pride. But, at the same time, we discovered that her work—along with that of other settlement house workers and Progressive-era advocates pushing for child labor and working-women reform—fit into a private sphere definition. So although women were making gains in very public spaces (as Addams's story makes clear), they were not really advancing their cause when they took on a "maternal" role in the "public" sphere. One student wrote:

I argue that women were not considered to be smart enough to vote, but were smart enough to be the moral fibers of society. Why would you put someone in charge of society's morality that was not smart? This whole thought is such a contradiction to me.

²I also showed the class the film *Iron-Jawed Angels* (Home Box Office, 2004). Although critics did not receive this movie favorably, my students enjoyed the visual introduction to this period. The film recreates excellently Alice Paul's brutal and shocking treatment at the Occoquan Workhouse of Virginia in 1917.

American society's measure that women's intelligence was based on their roles as mothers rather than as active citizens and that public life was not considered a morally acceptable place for women are difficult concepts to grapple with, but I decided to record them in a journal of my own to help stimulate discussions on this topic and many others during class. Another student wrote:

... while women like Jane Addams were doing in the public sphere, they were still marginalized and social work was still seen as women's work. Were women like Jane Addams necessarily trying to get into the public sphere, or did it just happen because they were in a public line of work trying to help people?

As my students continued to address these essential and insightful questions, I assured them in my journal comments that they were on the road to creating sound and provocative arguments. Questioning the unequal treatment of women sometimes led to genuine anger in both the journals and the classroom, so I encouraged students to transform their negative responses into persuasive, critical arguments—that anger was okay and that it could lead to strong opinions and nuanced interpretations of women's history.

The requirement that the journals had to contain "I argue that ..." phrases served an additional role: It provided practice for creating arguments in the students' other written work. In their first assignment, a three-page paper in which students had to locate a primary source focused on a specific period in women's history and create an original argument based on it, students again had to begin their papers with this phrase. The majority of my students did not create arguments successfully in their first drafts (they all had the opportunity to revise their papers), but I believe that the reiteration of the phrase at least encourages students to think in terms of deriving critical thought from their own minds and not relying on secondary sources. One student wrote a fascinating paper using her knowledge of runaway slave advertisements and colonial women's history to argue that "... although white women in the eighteenth century did not form close bonds with their children, African American [enslaved] women formed bonds that were much similar to that of white women in the nineteenth century and beyond." She provocatively used her sources to support this sophisticated and controversial argument based on ideas she had expressed in her journal entries.

I also wanted my students to become aware of and appreciate the contributions of women to American history and to our local community and to see examples of their accomplishments in the face of marginalization and discrimination. As I read the journals and sensed negative emotions, I wanted to make sure that I concentrated on more *positive* aspects of women's history. I decided to take my students to our local Montessori school for a first-hand visit to an institution influenced by the late nineteenth-century Italian educator, Maria Montessori. My students were able to interact with an elementary class to grasp and appreciate Maria Montessori's

progressive ideal of a sensory-driven, experiential form of learning and her lasting pedagogical influence. One student wrote of the experience:

It was the most awesome experience to me. I had previously learned about Maria Montessori's techniques, but I had never seen them in action. Maria's techniques have made me totally re-examine my ideas on learning. It is so fascinating to me that she could develop this wonderful system on her own. It makes me feel so empowered as a woman.

All of the students responded favorably to this visit, and they appreciated the opportunity to be off campus, even just for one class period. I enjoyed the fact that my students were not only learning about a prominent woman in history and her legacy, but about our local community as well. The students viewed theory in action and, as the above comment demonstrates, saw role models whom they could emulate.

Evans's "private" and "public" sphere model continued to influence our class sessions and the students' journals well into our study of the twentieth century, and especially in our discussions of women factory workers during World War II. Students viewed an excellent documentary, *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Direct Cinema Limited, 1980), showing the war-era promotional films designed to draw women into the world of factory work and telling the real-life stories of ethnically diverse women who worked as "Rosies." Students saw how the private sphere was "used" to draw women into their patriotic duty—to work for the war effort through domesticity. A student observed:

Instead of cutting the lines of a dress, this woman cuts the pattern of aircraft parts ... this type of propaganda stressed the private sphere's daily duties, cooking, cleaning, etc. I cannot figure out whether the press thought they were "glorifying" women's work and therefore showing its importance or simply using the analogies as a tool, playing off the cultural norms of women. However, even if the press were glorifying the activities, it does not bring more power to women. I argue that by "glorifying" they simply bring to attention the fact that women weren't receiving the respect and attention they deserved for the activities that should already have been deemed as important.

The film to which my student is referring shows a lovely woman in a dress cutting fabric to make another dress and then switches to the same woman in overalls cutting metal to create an airplane, demonstrating how the work in a factory was really not that much of a stretch for women since they already had learned the necessary skills from their domestic duties. My student argued, quite provocatively, that previously undervalued work—domestic work—had become valuable (and easy to learn how to do) because it contributed to winning the war, but the presence of women in factories

did not guarantee them any degree of "power." These films, as my students commented, reinforced a different vision of Republican Motherhood—a civic responsibility centered this time not so much on education of the young, but still in a self-sacrificing, patriotic pose focused on the domestic sphere. This historical episode as well as those that followed in the semester kept motivating my students to wonder in their journals: How much has the history of women progressed even today, and why have they been denied equal degrees of "power" in American society?

Conclusions

The more personal entries from my students ranged from outright anger at the lack of women's history in textbooks and in college courses to questions of their own futures as women and possibly mothers. As we pursued our discussion of women breaking through their prescribed roles in the private sphere into the public sphere throughout American history, some students questioned women's dissatisfaction with the private sphere, and wanted to know whether some women weren't happy to fulfill maternal, domestic roles. I realized that as a professor, I was perhaps looking at women's history too narrowly, that maybe I saw it as a unidirectional struggle for recognition and rights, a one-track journey for inclusion into public life and equality, and not, as it turns out, how all of my students were interpreting it. I was forced to respond to entries such as this one:

I want to be the ideal housewife and be able to do all of the domestic things like cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and do them well. Does that make me outdated? Does that hurt the evolution of the freedoms of women? I also want to have a career and earn my own wages so that I am not completely dependent on my husband.

This response forced me to realize that the journals were also creating private spaces for the students to respond to me directly, usually with constructive criticism. Hence, the journal-writing assignment helped me as a professor to expand my own definitions of feminism and to better embrace the diversity of the dreams and decisions of my historical sisters and my students. I had tried to welcome all opinions in my class and to avoid tendentiousness, but the journals' prompt feedback (as opposed to evaluations completed on the last day of class) helped me become more aware and sensitive of my students' perceptions of the content of my lectures. I also appreciated that the journals gave my students forums to discuss issues such as this one that they perhaps would not have been comfortable discussing in class or in my office.

In the three times I have taught this course, approximately ninety percent of the students have been women, creating an open forum for discussion of gender issues and providing, I believe, an extension of a "comfortable," more private atmosphere that was available in their journals. But our classroom setting also benefitted my male students. I observed and was told by some of the men in the classes that they appreciated and

unexpectedly learned a lot from the course. One male student told me, for example, that since he was en route to becoming a very successful CEO of a company in his future, he now knew that he needed to more fully incorporate women's lives into his ambitions. He said he became more sensitive to issues working women face, including flexible work schedules and child-care needs. He and a few other male students also wrote on their evaluations, in emotional terms, that they understood better and appreciated more fully the experiences of their mothers, both professionally and personally.

The only negative student comments I received revolved around the course's workload; students suggested that having to do research outside of the university's geographical boundaries was difficult. Among the many favorable comments on written evaluations were gratitude for having been exposed to women's history, the need for further gender equality, and the hopes that they, like women (and men) in the past, can become facilitators of social change in their own lives, their communities, and maybe even nationally and globally.

In conclusion, the history of women's journal writing is a vital segment of American history. Diaries and journals are valuable and credible as sources of the experiences of women over time and are essential historiographical records. The private space of the journal was often the only place women could turn as they struggled with rigid gender-role differentiation and exclusion from the public sphere. As such, it allowed for an inward, psychological examination that helped them cope with everyday life. In my classroom, journals can serve the same purposes as well as provide spaces where students can become critical thinkers and writers as they explore the roles of women in the past and their own roles in the present and future.