

# Active Learning Tasks for Women's History

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As the concept of widening participation in higher education becomes a reality we are faced with examining our learning and teaching strategies in the classroom/lecture theatre. If students have a more equal access to higher education we must provide learning situations which ensure that what is now a diverse intake with regard to educational backgrounds all have the requisite skills and knowledge to complete their studies. To echo, and slightly alter, the current government mantra 'every student matters'.

Students arrive representing a wide variety of educational and social backgrounds. Their previous experiences influence their expectations of what studying at university will entail. Those straight from school have left behind a more structured environment and now have to self-regulate their lives; others have to suddenly juggle combinations of family life, work and study. Some mature students have long been out of education and lack confidence in their abilities; some students have specific learning difficulties. Most arrive with their own ideas of how to approach learning which may not necessarily be appropriate to their new circumstances. Varied learning experiences and widespread abilities present a challenge to the university lecturer. We cannot 'stream' students by placing them in ability groups yet we have a duty to ensure all receive a learning experience which fits their needs. We should be enabling and encouraging students to make the most out of their higher education years.

First year History students at Worcester undertake a mandatory module '*How to do History*'. This familiarises and reminds them of the skills and concepts which underpin history and offers us the opportunity to become acquainted with the new intake. This project was conceived as a response to concerns raised amongst staff by the increasingly diverse range of students with regard to their educational backgrounds, life experiences, abilities and specific learning difficulties. Also it was a response to an aspect of the modular degree system which can mean that students taking the same module do not necessarily know each other, may never have met, nor will necessarily do so in the future. The days when all students were largely of a similar age, background and ability and lived on campus or in local student accommodation are long gone (if indeed they ever existed). The consequence is that the learning experience on a module can be rather solitary. Familial and work responsibilities mean for example that part time students cannot join a study group outside module time. (WebCT and discussion boards would help here but that is another project). However learning does not occur through simply attending the taught sessions or lectures. The interaction with teachers and with peers is essential to the learning and understanding processes as opportunities via questions and discussion push boundaries and test out theories, beliefs and ideas. Peer bonding is important and was not happening in too many cases.

The academic year 2003/4 provided a good opportunity to rethink the learning and teaching strategies for two modules. *Women: Family, Work and Politics 1780 – 1945* would run in semester 1 for the last time as a level 2/3 module (i.e. attracting a mix of year 2 and 3 students) and re-emerge in semester 2 as a level 2 module called *Women's Experience: Britain 1850 – 1976*. (This reflected our policy of no longer offering level 2/3 modules. Students who had studied the module in Semester 1 could not join the revised version in Semester 2)

I felt that I could test out and evaluate ideas in Semester 1, refine/alter/add new ideas for semester 2 and compare and contrast the subsequent results.

My objectives were twofold. I wanted to:

- create a learning environment where all students felt able to participate
- enable students to become active learners

(I am aware that a brief report such as this cannot hope to explore or do justice to the many issues arising from these objectives.)

## ***Women: Family, Work and Politics 1780 – 1945***

18 students.

11 3hour sessions.

Specific learning difficulties – 2 with dyslexia, one of whom also had a hearing impairment.

Age range – 20 – 56 representing a wide ability range.

- Pre-course preparation – a reading list comprising 3 items designed to set a baseline re knowledge.
- Session 1 – important as to how this was organised and the tasks devised as it had to set the 'tone' for the following 10 sessions.

Introductions – each person introduce themselves offering one reason for taking the module, one 'fear' they had related to the module, and one thing they were good at. This simple ice-breaker relaxed the atmosphere, ensured all participated, and introduced the students to each other by sharing personal thoughts.

This exercise was revisited in the final session as part of the module evaluation and produced interesting reflections for each individual on how confident they now felt about their own abilities.

### **An 'Historical' task**

Artefact exercise – what can we infer about people's lives in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century from these items? (Fox furs, ebony and ivory glove stretchers, bed warmers, calling card case, iron etc)

This was a paired exercise and each pair reported back to the group. It encouraged sharing of ideas and among other things helped me assess their previous knowledge and understanding.

### **Women's History Task**

Each group had a selection of history books, newspapers, journals ranging from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to late 20<sup>th</sup> century and had to answer the question 'Where are the women?' After reporting back to the class the question 'Why should we study women's history?' was then explored.

- Reading was set each week for the following week's session. Each session had an 'active' task. E.g. In pairs reviewing websites; ideas for effective reading etc. The taught sessions were rarely lectures but a more interactive approach was used by asking the group questions relating to their reading and encouraging them to ask questions at any time.
- Evaluation – this was done via talking to the group and a questionnaire at the end of the module. I also reviewed each session after teaching it and made a note of what I thought had gone well, what could be improved, eliminated, altered etc. The students were very complimentary with such comments as 'I have been impressed and have an interest to explore the subject further.'
- Specific learning needs – with guidance from the particular students and the Equal Opportunities Unit plus careful planning and awareness these were embedded in the course. The students with dyslexia preferred handouts on green paper with a certain type and font – which actually was appropriate for the whole group. Subtitles on video material were an option but thankfully the microphone device I wore when teaching when the partially deaf student was in the group worked well enough when placed by the TV set.
- Overall I felt that a good learning environment had been created as evidenced by the levels of participation in tasks, in answering questions and in asking questions when students gave their seminar presentation for assignment 1. I wanted to ensure a more active approach though.

## **Women's Experience 1850 – 1976**

12 students

11 3hour sessions

Specific learning difficulties – 4 with dyslexia

Age range 20 – 51

- Pre course reading.
- Session 1 – ice breaker as before.
- Source work task – 4 groups each with a pack of sources for a specific period so 1850 – 1976 would be covered. Purpose – to give a 5 minute presentation on what their sources infer about women's lives in their particular period.
- Examples of activities in other sessions: -
- Group work – based around video material and source packs.

- Paired work – discussion of various issues, website evaluation – feedback to group.
- Individual – seminar presentation.

Each session began with time for queries from the previous week or from student reading. This was an important time as it is after reflection that queries arise. I also set out the objectives for each session so that the group knew what to expect and what was expected of them.

Now none of this is new classroom practice but attention to detail brought the following comments during student evaluation:

- 'You are made to feel positive about yourself as a student and as an individual.'
- '...not to take anything at face value - to always dig deeper.'
- 'Lectures were like a seminar in which everyone shared their views....'
- '....the exciting and lively way this module is taught.'
- (content) '... holds your mind, you want to find out more.'

It would seem that my objectives were achieved – a safe learning environment in which participants felt able to give voice and thus in turn be active learners. Also this group approached their final essay assignment with far more joie de vivre than was seemly!!