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The pedagogy of gender studies

Between experience-based learning and scholarly dialogue

Anna Lundberg & Ann Werner

This specific text deals with the education methods of gender studies. It discusses what happens in a gender studies classroom, what the processes of learning and challenges are like and what are considered to be the important pedagogical aspects. It also discusses how instructors of gender studies work in various ways to create good conditions for learning, for all students, and it brings out difficult issues in learning processes involving critiques of power, as well as the strengths of gender studies education methods.

Gender studies is a relatively young discipline, although there are high levels of competence among its instructors and researchers; it has achieved good results in external evaluations of its programs (HSV 2007, HSV Decision 12/06/2012, Reg. no. 643-03443-11) and in competition for research funding. The basic features of the discipline include a critical approach aimed at change, as well as an active and conscious relation to power and identified hierarchies. It is possible that the discipline's background and connection to feminist activism, in addition to its critiques of traditional analytical methods, have contributed to gender studies being questioned in the media on a regular basis (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2007:26). One of the discipline's strengths is its consistent and clear focus on critically approaching scientific inquiry, specifically with regards to issues of power and social responsibility. This is consistent with some of the most central formulations in the Higher Education Ordinance/Qualification Ordinance regarding students' abilities to formulate critical discussion, as well as the "insight into the role of knowledge in society and the responsibility of the individual for how it is used" (Higher Education Ordinance 1993:100, Annex 2).

Gender studies' contents are multi- and cross-disciplinary, since gender research is conducted within several empirical and theoretical contexts. However, one common denominator is that gender theory and methods are based on a well-founded critical and dynamic discussion of power structures in research, society and culture. Judith Butler (1994) called gender research a field without "proper objects" of study, i.e. gender studies can and should study almost everything. This definition of gender research is based on the idea that it is impossible to separate power structures and ideas of gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, etc. from each other. This is an idea that has characterized Swedish gender studies in recent years (De los Reyes, Molina & Mulinari 2002, Lykke 2005).

Considering the interest in power and critical creative thinking within the discipline, it logically follows that educational methods and curricula in gender studies both require continual development, and a continual focus on power awareness. Gender studies instructors and students work towards being reflective, using their experiences, questioning hierarchies, uncovering unequal systems, networks and practices and creating alternative structures, not least within their own discipline. Gender studies researchers who are active in subjects other than gender studies also conduct such work. This applies not only to the contents of the discipline and the research connected to it, but also to how it is taught in the classroom. Within higher education, equal

opportunity laws ensure that students are not treated differently. Providing students in higher education with equal opportunities requires types of instruction that do not exclude groups and individuals, instead ensuring that all students can have their say. This legislation can be seen as a starting point for discussion concerning the development of the types – and not just the contents – of instruction.

This publication (*Gender studies education and pedagogy*) aims to highlight a few aspects of the pedagogical and educational work conducted in gender studies and research by 1) explaining the ideas behind gender studies instruction practice and 2) providing concrete examples of strategies and methods from the gender studies classroom. The contents and methods, which are described here, are based on solid research. We believe that gender studies provides conscious and thorough approaches to different types of hierarchies and power structures within instruction practice, and that these approaches might be enriching and thought-provoking even for readers outside the discipline of gender studies.

Pedagogical and didactic aspects of gender studies

The subject of gender studies is characterized, as was mentioned earlier, by pluralism, and is strongly diversified. This may well be viewed as one of the strengths of the discipline. Gender studies, as a subject for research and instruction, bridges disciplinary boundaries between the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, and the discipline both borrows from and lends itself to other disciplines. Gender studies cannot therefore claim to own or be the origin of the methods of power critiques or of the theories aimed at change which are used in its classrooms. However, it must be emphasized that instructors of gender studies work continuously towards the improvement and further development of methods of power critiques. The didactics, i.e. the instruction methods, strategies and approaches that can be found in Swedish gender studies, have their historical roots in both activism and pedagogical critical theory. Paulo Freire (1976) is a key thinker within critical pedagogy who believes that oppressed groups must own their own learning and their own history and not be taught authoritatively by others. Another important thinker within critical pedagogy is bell hooks who in her trilogy on learning has written about critical thinking, experiences and methods concerning gender, class and race hierarchies in the education system (hooks 1994, hooks 2003, hooks 2009). Kevin Kumashiro (2002, 2009) has also had a major impact in Sweden, particularly with his perspectives on queer/norm-critical pedagogy. At the same time, methods and strategies from feminism, anti-racism and queer activism from the 1960s onwards have inspired the fields of power-critical and innovative pedagogy and didactics that inspire gender studies today. It is therefore difficult to draw a clear line between anti-racist pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, gender pedagogy, norm-critical pedagogy and other types of power critique. However, these have focused on different issues during different time periods. After initially focusing on oppressed groups during the 1960s and 1970s, power-critical pedagogy has increasingly come to emphasize the role of the teacher, the meaning of self-reflectivity and the interplay between didactics and the contents of learning (Bromseth & Darj 2010). The driving forces within gender studies are its diversity and the learning processes it employs, and it is important to note that there is not one universal pedagogy or didactical approach uniting gender studies programs, or active gender studies researchers, in Sweden. However, it is important to distinguish gender studies pedagogy, which is characterized by that which was described above, from teaching about gender, which may be conducted using a range of pedagogical methods without any reflection on power.

Instruction about a research field which involves power critique, whilst at the same time working towards counteracting power inequalities and creating alternatives in the classroom, places great demands on the instructor. Gender studies teaches the critique of power, and the contents of the instruction can often have a powerful impact on the students, something which is touched upon in many chapters of this publication. On the one hand, gender studies is a highly theoretical, critical subject and, on the other, it is a subject with interests in concrete social, cultural, political and economic conditions - conditions which touch upon the intersection between personal and public spheres. These elements, all characteristic of the subject – elements which concern power systems running across public and private spheres, lived experience and scholarly discussion – lead to many gender studies students becoming strongly engaged in their studies, both emotionally and intellectually. From an educational perspective, this requires pedagogical work which takes into account both the emotional and the rational parts of the learning process. This creates an interesting duplicity, where the teacher on the one hand is an authority and on the other works with methods and teaches theories which question that very authority.

The pedagogy of gender studies: highlighting five aspects

This publication has been produced as a result of collaboration between editors Anna Lundberg and Ann Werner, the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research represented by Josefine Alvunger and Inga-Bodil Ekselius, and Janne Bromseth, Anita Hussénus, Ulla M Holm, Renita Sörensdotter, Kerstin Norlander, Nina Lykke and Berit Larsson. On 2 May 2012, we met in Göteborg for a workshop where the theme was the pedagogical methods and didactics of gender studies. Various people were invited to participate in the workshop, following suggestions from the publication series reference group.

During the meeting, we discussed the aspects of the pedagogical methods and didactics within gender studies which could be interesting to highlight. The publication's target group was also discussed. The themes which arose constitute the framework for this introductory chapter and those that follow.

The five chapters all contain both discussions and reflective text as examples of didactic methods. The highlighted examples are taken from the teaching of gender studies as conducted at Swedish HEIs. Many more examples and authors were possible – and we encourage the reader to delve deeper into the reference lists and to test and develop the methods and arguments that are presented there. The purpose is not to present a complete picture of educational methods within gender studies, but rather to give specific examples and suggestions from the field.

In Chapter 1, Kerstin Norlander describes the method known as empathetic reading. In a subject such as gender studies, where both examination and a critique of power relations and established knowledge are central elements, it is important that the student not only learns to read critically, but also to read carefully. To read empathetically is to carefully gain an abundance of perspectives; it is to understand and acquaint oneself with different perspectives in order to be able to answer/discuss/handle/criticize. In short, it is about scholarly attentiveness. Norlander writes: "The basic idea is that readers must understand a text on its own conditions first, before they express an opinion about it. Thus, the method means that readers must challenge their own preconceptions, which may sometimes be difficult, but which opens up the possibility of exciting reading adventures and the conquest of new knowledge." The method also means that the student practices the important art of providing constructive and well-founded criticism.

In Chapter 2, Nina Lykke writes about intersectional gender pedagogy. The chapter is tied to an idea – central to contemporary gender studies research: that power structures and ideas concerning gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, etc. intersect each other and that these power relations, which work in concert, also have a place in the classroom. One of Lykke’s objectives is to increase awareness of this; she concretely links the discussion of intersectionality to the classroom setting and to didactic methods with roots in feminist peace activism. Lykke’s chapter also emphasizes the importance of students being trained in, on the one hand, the examination of their own perspectives and, on the other, being able to shift to/imagine the perspectives and starting points of others. Lykke terms this transversal dialogues.

In the third chapter, Anita Hussénus, Kristina Andersson and Annica Gullberg write about the instruction of gender studies within other subjects and disciplines. As has been mentioned previously, gender studies as a teaching and research subject crosses several disciplinary boundaries; its methods both borrow from and lend themselves to other subjects and its contents add important perspectives to other fields of education. The chapter written by Hussénus, Andersson and Gullberg is based on a practical research project conducted within the teacher education framework with a focus on natural science disciplines. The chapter is linked to the critical approach of gender studies through its examination of the way in which the natural sciences are viewed as disciplines for which boys have a more natural talent. The chapter presents methods to in part deal with experiences of this unequal situation in the classroom, and in part provide prospective teachers with tools to handle the situation in their future profession.

In Chapter 4, Janne Bromseth and Renita Sörensdotter highlight norm-critical pedagogy as an opportunity to change the way teaching is conducted in teams. Starting with the pedagogical developmental work conducted by the team of teachers at the Division of Gender Studies at Stockholm University, the authors discuss how teachers and students position themselves in the power structures of the classroom. The chapter presents and discusses norm-critical pedagogy and experience-based learning as two ways of challenging dominance and discrimination in educational contexts and of promoting inclusive teaching. Working in what is known as ‘tutor groups’ is one type of instruction used and developed within gender studies at Stockholm University. This method is also described in the chapter. The process of working within teaching teams is highlighted by Bromseth and Sörensdotter, who describe how pedagogical development work can be consciously shaped as a group process.

In the fifth and final chapter of the publication, Berit Larsson begins with what she views as the focal point of gender studies teaching: crossing boundaries and (self-) reflection. She poses the question: What purpose does gender studies serve? Apart from the self-evident relevance of the discipline to social and political research in an unjust and unequal world, Larsson considers the discipline essential in assisting students in becoming independent in both thought and action. What is interesting is not what the students know, but what may be done with what they know. Larsson connects lived experience with the lessons learned in higher education. She stresses the importance of teaching power-consciously about power insofar as instructors also have to place their own position under scrutiny. Just as in Chapters 1 and 2, what is emphasized here is the importance of honing the student’s ability of self-reflection and of crossing boundaries. This enables gender studies students to learn how to handle an abundance of perspectives as well as conflicts of interpretation.

Gender studies pedagogy moves between knowing, being and doing, between experience-based learning and scholarly dialogue, between self-reflective knowledge

and cross-boundary science. It makes pedagogical work a dynamic field which is in motion and full of ideas. We believe these five chapters reflect this.

*We hope that you enjoy this publication.
Anna Lundberg and Ann Werner*

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