

NEW FUTURES

Changing Women's Education

Mary Hughes and Mary Kennedy

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
EDUCATION AND GENDER



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Volume 11

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MARY HUGHES AND MARY KENNEDY

First published in 1985 by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd

This edition first published in 2017

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-73736-5 (Set)

ISBN: 978-1-315-18103-5 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-04084-7 (Volume 11) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-17476-1 (Volume 11) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

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New Futures

Changing Women's Education

Mary Hughes and Mary Kennedy



Routledge & Kegan Paul

London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley

This book is for women who work and learn together

Also from Mary H. – to Isabel for yesterday;
Jane for today;
Annie Rose for tomorrow

First published in 1985

by Routledge & Kegan Paul plc

14 Leicester Square, London WC2H 7PH, England

9 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02108, USA

*464 St Kilda Road, Melbourne,
Victoria 3004, Australia and*

*Broadway House, Newtown Road,
Henley on Thames, Oxon RG9 1EN, England*

Set in Baskerville

by Columns of Reading

and printed in Great Britain

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any form without permission from the publisher,
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in criticism*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

New futures.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

*1. Adult education of women – Great Britain – Ad-
dresses, essays, lectures. 2. Women's studies – Great
Britain – Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Hughes, Mary,
1951- . II. Kennedy, Mary, 1931-*

LC1666.G7N48 1985 376'.941 84-22347

British Library CIP data also available

ISBN 0-7102-0612-7 (c)

ISBN 0-7100-9988-6 (Pbk)

MOVEMENT

Towards not being
anyone else's center
of gravity.

A wanting
to love: not
to lean over towards
an other, and fall,
but feel within one
a flexible steel
upright, parallel
to the spine but
longer, from which to stretch;
one's own
grave springboard; the outflying spirit's
vertical trampoline

Denise Levertov

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Poem: 'Movement'	xii
Introduction	1
 Part I	 7
1 Lifecycles: A Positive Model of Fragmentation	9
2 Women's Education – Women's Studies	24
3 Where Women are, and Where are Women in Adult Education?	43
 Part II Case Studies	 55
Section 1 Access	57
1 The Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Northern Ireland <i>Dorothy Eagleson: additions by the authors</i>	57
2 Women in Literacy and Adult Basic Education: Barriers to Access <i>Juliet McCaffery</i>	62
3 Education of Asian Women <i>Saroj Seth</i>	69
Section 2 Courses	75
4 Breakaway: A Discussion Group for Women <i>Sally Griffiths</i>	75

5	Sandwich Course for Part-time Tutors of Dress or Embroidery at Loughborough College of Art and Design <i>Hilary Tinley and Sue Walker</i>	78
6	Women in Public Life – Leadership Training <i>Gill Boden</i>	82
Section 3	Extending the Subject	86
7	Working with Childminders <i>Sue Owen</i>	86
8	The Sheffield Clothing Co-operative – PREMTOGS <i>Beverley Evans</i>	90
9	Women and New Technology – Where are we going? – A New Course for Women in Liverpool <i>Rita Cordon and Liz Cousins</i>	92
10	Women and Skill Centres – The Deptford Experience <i>Madeleine Dickens</i>	95
Section 4	Women in Centres	99
11	Chinese Women on Merseyside <i>Anne Chiew Yean Khoo</i>	99
12	The Women's Education Centre, Southampton <i>Pauline Imrie, on behalf of the Women's Education Collective</i>	102
13	The Totnes Women's Centre – A Personal Experience <i>Diana Derioz</i>	104
Section 5	Processes	110
14	Women and Education Group, Manchester <i>Joy Rose, on behalf of the Women's Education Collective</i>	110
15	The Workers Educational Association (WEA) and Women's Education <i>Ally Jones</i>	113
16	Liverpool Women's Education Centre <i>By Themselves</i>	118
17	The South-West London Women's Studies Group <i>By Themselves</i>	126
18	New Opportunities for Women – Setting up a Course – A Personal View <i>Pat Bould and Clare Manifold</i>	130
19	'The Changing Experience of Women' at the Open University <i>Diana Leonard</i>	135

<i>Contents</i>	vii
Part III	143
4 What sort of Education? What Sort of Culture?	145
5 Dilemmas of Innovation	160
Appendix: Safe and Sound	172
Bibliography	176
Index	182

Acknowledgments

We owe thanks for help, support and ideas to so many that we hope they will feel included within the dedication. But we are especially grateful to the following:

- to the Case Study writers who trusted us and helped make this book better;

- to past and present students for teaching us so much;

- to women working in adult education, especially in the ILEA, in the Extra-Mural Department, London University, and the WEA who have shared ideas and struggles, given advice and extended our horizons by their example;

- to those who gave of their time, and allowed us to try out ideas in interviews: Caroline Bailey, Joanna Bornat, some students from Hillcroft College in the summer of 1983, Enid Hutchinson, Phoebe Lambert, Margaret Marshall, Barbara Saunders and Jack Taylor;

- to Pippa Brewster, John Ford, Renate Duelli Klein, Bill Kennedy, Ruth Lesirge and Dale Spender who read the drafts, and offered constructive criticisms and encouragement;

- to Mary Cooper, Rita Hann and Sue Castagnetti who patiently typed and re-typed our messy manuscripts: without them we could not have survived into print;

- for specific help in finding books and material we thank Beverley Campbell, Howard Fisher, Elizabeth Gerver, Elaine Pole, Rose Taw and Jane Thompson;

- and finally to our families and friends for their support, patient endurance, and for keeping the coffee pot replenished.

Any mistakes and omissions are ours.

We are grateful for permission to print the following extracts: To Denise Levertov for her poem, 'Movement', from her book, *Life in the Forest*, copyright © 1978 by Denise Levertov, reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. And to *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, University of Chicago.

Introduction

This is a book about movement, about breaking the silence of women in education. It raises issues about where women are, where they might be, and how education as a process can be used for women. We focus on women and have not given specific space to men, because books about education for adults are generally written for and about men; women appear as a special sub-species in the index. Yet women are there and in the majority, unlike the situation in further and higher education. It is often easier to argue the case that women are discriminated against when they are absent – in parts of the work force, for example, or not differentiated from men in the statistics. But in adult education women are present, therefore we have the problem of convincing men and women that there is discrimination and that the kinds of education women have is not necessarily right or appropriate: neither in the present nor for the future. But change is possible and is essential. We cannot know exactly what the end product might look like if women determined their own education. But we predict that being involved in the process, planning and deciding upon their own learning would make women aware of the limited choices open to them at present. We suspect they would insist on doing things differently.

Wherever women are or come from they all lead fragmented lives because of the multiplicity of roles they have and the expectations put upon them. This fragmentation is potentially a positive characteristic, which, if it were transferred into men's lives as well and acknowledged as important and valid, could result in a reshaping of attitudes about life and work patterns. It would also relate more appropriately to a time where full-time employment will probably never again be a reality, and relationships between women and men will, of necessity, have to change. We have tried to point to some of the dilemmas involved in creative change by

suggesting a radical re-appraisal of the education of women, which must have repercussions for the education of men and children as well.

There is a difficulty about defining what is women's education. It has always been decided for them by others, according to the prevailing stereotypic expectations of society, of who women are and what their roles should be. They have to fit into acceptable moulds according to their class, their age and their servicing role in the family. Biology gets in the way. In many senses Rousseau's prescription still subtly influences education today:

A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console him, to make his life pleasant and happy, *these are the duties of woman for all time*, and this is what she should be taught while she is young. The further we depart from this principle, the further we shall be from our goal, and *all our precepts will fail to secure her happiness or our own*. (Rousseau: 1982:328) (our italics)

This is an example, we think, of the dominant (male) ideology providing its own interpretation of the purposes of education, which neglects women's views and needs.

Today the debates over education for women differ in content from those of earlier centuries. These were originally concerned with whether women were educable (did they have minds even?). What kind of education was suitable for them and to what end, and at what level (compare early nineteenth-century attitudes on the education of the working classes)? If they were to be admitted to higher education would this over-tax their brains and bodies, unwoman them? Or, at the other end of the class scale, would general education lead them to neglect their female duties in life? So both schools and evening institutes in the latter half of the nineteenth century provided domestic education within the 'separate sphere' tradition. This is where the case more or less rested until the advent of the modern women's liberation movement in the late 1960s. Currently it is, at least in theory, conceded that girls and women have the right to equal access to all kinds of study and subjects, although the expectations and practices are such that this will not radically alter the existing educational provision. And indeed in adult education women still continue to take up the arts, languages, humanities and social studies, particularly in university adult education, alongside a

minority of men. They are also the majority in the domestic and recreational subjects provided by the local education authorities (LEAs). But now feminists in education have begun 'The task of creating knowledge in which the experiences of men stopped being the measure and called the one of "people". Women were to be seen as "people" too, and it was women's questions that were being asked' (Duelli-Klein: 1984).

Feminists thus joined the radical education debate questioning the double standards of education and challenging its claims to neutrality and balance and its hidden class, race and sex bias. They have begun the process of uncovering the conscious/unconscious and internalised male centredness of our society. By doing this feminists are challenging the misogynous bias and illogicalities embedded in education and other institutions.

Our proposition is that all education must recognise the full contribution of women, not only as object but as subject too: that men should be studied differently; that there is no such thing as sex-blind subject disciplines; or that the education process is neutral.

It is true that there is some confusion about the term women's education. This has been used to describe traditional female education centring around the home, and physical, art and recreation subjects. This limiting definition obscures the issue since women's education must be much broader, drawing upon many disciplines, than merely educating women to continue as they always have. We identify four strands in women's education: extending traditional subjects both male and female; education that is positive discrimination; women's studies/feminist studies classes for women about women and by women; and a feminist dimension in all education and its practices. It is not just a question of simple equality or more access to more of the same education, but a qualitative change of emphasis where the many dimensions of women's experiences and knowledge, alongside those of other races and cultures, are taken as natural, normal, and universal.

In education this difficult process has been generated by women's studies. These are an integral part of women's education and of education generally, but they have a different purpose and mode of being within it. Women's studies are difficult to define because there are as many different definitions as there are of education. Our own working definition is that women's studies/feminist studies are the study of power and gender relationships

between women and men, past and present, and that they take a contextual approach, meaning that both the content and the process of learning together as women are equally important.

New kinds and forms of education are essential if people are to adapt to and have some influence in the post-industrial society that technology will force upon us. For the last two hundred years education has been linked to the needs of an industrial, work-directed and individualist consumer society where technical and economic needs were paramount. Today we think that the new frontiers for education are in the social and psychological areas, and concern for the quality of life. The recurring argument is that women's experiences and knowledge are a liberating example for a new kind of society and new flexible forms of education.

This book takes up the ideas and experiences of women in order to involve the reader, as well as the adult educator, in fresh ways of educational thinking, seeing and doing. We have tried to get away from the commonly held assumptions that where women are seen and discussed they are analysed en masse rather than as individuals or groups coming from varied cultures and religions, generations and lifestyles, and economic backgrounds as do men.

We would have liked to have followed the lessons learned from the women's liberation movement more closely in the process of making this book – taking a collective and co-operative approach in writing it. But this was not possible because we wished to include examples of women's educational initiatives and practices from all over the United Kingdom. Distances, time (we both have full-time jobs) and money made this impracticable. So we have opened up the central section of the book to enable women both individually and collectively to write in their own voices about their educational experiences, and because what they say is important and useful. We have tried but were unsuccessful in finding a case study where black women wrote about their experiences of learning together as black women. Little space has been given to the concerns and issues of minority women – not because we were unaware of this omission but we lacked the knowledge and experience to do this ourselves. Also we felt strongly that minority women would want to state their case in their own ways. It would have been racist of us and only a token gesture if we had discussed their issues from the outside in a cursory manner.

For ourselves the struggles, the exhilarations, the despairs and the delays, combined with the fragmented lives we both lead, have

been a learning experience. The sharing of knowledge and new ideas in a non-competitive manner symbolises for us how the women's liberation movement has influenced the ways in which women study and write together.

We have tried to move the arguments and evidence for women's education forward, relying greatly on the ideas and work already done by other women. In a way we have posed more questions than we have answers for at present, but we hope that by suggesting new approaches, floating embryonic ideas, others will take these up and develop them more fully.

Part I