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Is it wise? : the Ursuline Studies Program revisited

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Is it wise? : the Ursuline Studies Program revisited

Abstract

Katherine Keough, chairwoman of the education department at Xavier University in Cincinnati is quoted in USA Today as saying, "It almost smacks of a Chinese mind, a black mind, a white mind, a female mind It suggests that brains are gender-specific or that knowledge is gender-specific" (Manning, 1992, p. 6A). Keough is referring to Ursuline College's use of Women's Ways of Knowing as the basis for its college core curriculum, fearing this may cause further division between men and women (Manning, 1992, p. 6A). Anne Marie Diedrich, O.S.U., Ph.D., president of Ursuline College, disagrees: We're not saying that ours is the only way for women, nor are we excluding men. We believe men and women alike can benefit from learning [using] both [competitive and co-operative] ways. This is an effort to add balance to an educational system that has neglected the female point of view for too long. (Ursuline College, n.d.) What should be the goal of education? Many educators and researchers believe a learning environment must be created that prepares students to become leaders in a democratic society. There is disagreement as to the best way to achieve this. Some believe that a competitive environment in which lecturing, note taking, memorizing, and test taking are emphasized works best. Others believe a learning community where "free spaces...enable people to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identification, public skills, and values in cooperative and civic virtue" must be established (Belenky, 1996, p. 407). Mary Field Belenky (1996) also states that educators should "nurture the development of voice among people silenced at the margins of society" (p. 407).

IS IT WISE?

THE URSULINE STUDIES PROGRAM REVISITED

A Research Paper

Presented to

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by

Connie S. Swift

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Is It Wise?

The Ursuline Studies Program Revisited

Katherine Keough, chairwoman of the education department at Xavier University in Cincinnati is quoted in *USA Today* as saying, “It almost smacks of a Chinese mind, a black mind, a white mind, a female mind It suggests that brains are gender-specific or that knowledge is gender-specific” (Manning, 1992, p. 6A). Keough is referring to Ursuline College’s use of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* as the basis for its college core curriculum, fearing this may cause further division between men and women (Manning, 1992, p. 6A). Anne Marie Diedrich, O.S.U., Ph.D., president of Ursuline College, disagrees:

We’re not saying that ours is the only way for women, nor are we excluding men. We believe men and women alike can benefit from learning [using] both [competitive and co-operative] ways. This is an effort to add balance to an educational system that has neglected the female point of view for too long. (Ursuline College, n.d.)

What should be the goal of education? Many educators and researchers believe a learning environment must be created that prepares students to become leaders in a democratic society. There is disagreement as to the best way to achieve this. Some believe that a competitive environment in which lecturing, note taking, memorizing, and test taking are emphasized works best. Others believe a learning community where “free spaces . . . enable people to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identification, public skills, and values in cooperative and civic virtue” must be

established (Belenky, 1996, p. 407). Mary Field Belenky (1996) also states that educators should “nurture the development of voice among people silenced at the margins of society” (p. 407).

“When we read [*Women’s Ways of Knowing*], it spoke to us It described experiences we had had with our own students” says Ann Trivisonno, head of the Ursuline College Studies Program task force assigned the job of examining the college’s mission and core curriculum (Trivisonno, cited in Gose, 1995). The task force developed a core curriculum of 49 credits, combining the intellectual and ethical development as found in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* with skills needed for a changing society.

This is a study of one college’s answer to the question: Is it wise to base a college curriculum on *Women’s Ways of Knowing*? In this paper the following topics will be addressed: an overview of relevant considerations in the history of women in higher education in the United States, a thumbnail sketch on cognitive-structural theory, the relationship of cognitive-structural theory to Ursuline College’s curricular innovations, and an analysis of Ursuline College’s experiences with *Women’s Ways of Knowing*.

Overview of Relevant Considerations in the History of Women in Higher Education in the United States

Women’s colleges were created for women to have educational opportunities not otherwise available to them. Women’s colleges traditionally have been a place where women’s voices could be heard. Leadership opportunities have been fostered and role models have been abundant for students and for faculty and staff. Students who have attended them have successfully entered male-dominated fields of study in relatively

large numbers (Benefits of women's colleges, n.d.). The friendships and networking opportunities already known to men now have become available to women. The environments have encouraged collaboration and interdependence. The students have been taken seriously and, overall, extremely satisfied with their experiences. The research of M. E. Tidball, Smith, C. S. Tidball, and Wolf-Wendel (1999), Bales and Sharp (1981), Harvath, Moline, and DeBra (1997), Miller-Bernal (1989), Smith (1990), Lentz (1983), and Astin (1977), conducted over a period of three decades, have documented this effectiveness.

Many women's colleges have continued to thrive today. They have remarkably diverse populations, often including large proportions of older, part-time, minority, and international students. These colleges usually have faculty, senior administration, and boards of trustees divided between male and female.

Women's colleges have been leaders in curriculum transformation, working diligently to preserve their mission and develop curricula to meet the changing needs of society. McCarthy (1985) states that these colleges have had "an underlying assumption that to educate women was to improve society--that women were the bearers of culture" (p. 7). Although many of these colleges have considered major changes, few have succeeded. Often, the hard work of faculties has been watered down or totally rejected by other faculty or administrators. Fear of change, territorialism, lack of commitment, and lack of resources such as people, dollars, and time have held colleges back (Stanton, 1996).

Theoretical Basis

Until recently, most developmental research was conducted on and by white, privileged men. In referring to this situation, Noddings (1991/1992) has said, “the male experience is the standard not only in education but, more generally, in all of public policy” (p. 65). Minnich (1990), a philosopher and advocate of curriculum transformation, has concluded the root of the problem with most curricula “is, simply, that while the majority of humankind was excluded from education and the making of what has been called knowledge, *the dominant few not only defined themselves as the inclusive kind of human but also as the norm and the ideal*” [emphasis in original] (p. 523). Clifford (1983) has concluded that with the recent advent of feminist scholars “knowledge will be revised because the political nature of all knowledge is now sufficiently exposed” (p. 167). To relate this to the college classroom, Tarule (1996) wrote that “creating college classrooms that reify and reproduce patterns of dominance is not only obsolete methodology, it is destructive” (p. 299).

Some of the major education philosophers and cognitive-structural theorists to consider this question have been Dewey, Perry, Freire, Gilligan, and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule. Dewey’s “conceptualizations related to reflective thinking” are among the earliest theories to consider alternatives to the traditional ways of teaching and learning (Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998, p. 161). Perry’s research in the 1950s and 1960s described how college students thought, rather than what they thought. He categorized college students into developmental positions ranging from dualism to multiplicity to relativism to commitment and then encouraged faculty to consider a

students' positions when teaching them. Faculty were also encouraged to use collaborative learning in their teaching methods and encourage students to question.

Freire is known for his banker/teacher analogy. To some, teachers have been considered to be the holders of all knowledge and truth whose task is to deposit this knowledge and truth into their students' minds. In contrast, Freire has contended that by creating a classroom climate of trust, encouragement, and respect, teachers are more like midwives, facilitating the birth of knowledge and truth from within each student. Freire has concluded that hidden agendas relating to power prevalent in the banker approach calls for a power shift in which teachers and students engage in dialogue in their quest for knowledge and truth (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 214).

Gilligan researched the moral development of women and men, looking specifically at the concept of relationship. She "disputed the previous models of human growth that did not fit women's experience. The different voices she delineated were not distinguished by gender but by themes of care and justice" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 189). Gilligan (1986) came to the conclusion that "when women feel excluded from direct participation in society, they see themselves as subject to consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose name they are known" (p. 67).

Belenky and her colleagues' research held at its core the questions "Who is the learner? [and] What does s/he bring to the learning process?" (Stanton, 1996, p. 35). They conducted intensive interviews with 135 women, diverse in ages and backgrounds. Five categories emerged from these observations: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge.

Silence is the developmental position of seeing authority as all-powerful. The teacher has the knowledge and the student has no experience. Received knowledge is the position where the student is a good listener and able to recite what the teacher has said. The teacher is always right and there is one right answer. Subjective knowledge is the position where the students' own voice is developing. Truth is individual and personal. Questioning others is a good thing. Procedural knowledge involves analysis and is based in rationality. Knowledge is differentiated. It is through speaking and listening that understanding and reasoning happen. Constructed knowledge is created and shared when student and teacher collaborate. Truth is contextual (Belenky et al., 1986).

Ursuline College

In 1435 the Ursuline nuns of France were, according to Sr. Christine De Vinne, the first to found a women's educational institution "without the sponsorship of male groups. The image that they had right from the very beginning was the image that relied on education for the good of women." Ursuline nuns founded Ursuline College in 1871. Ursuline's mission "emphasizes a strong liberal arts tradition . . . [and an] education [that] . . . fosters the student-professor dialectic with its corollary of shared responsibility, respects the learning needs of individual students, and recognizes the interrelatedness of spiritual vitality and service to the larger community" (College Mission, n.d.).

On July 14, 1999, I interviewed De Vinne, current Director of the Ursuline Studies Program at Ursuline College. Much of the remaining content of this paper is the result of the interview.

Ursuline College, located in Pepper Pike, Ohio, enrolls between 1200 and 1300 students. Approximately 86% of the students are undergraduates enrolled in Arts and

Sciences, nursing, and professional programs. Graduate programs include art therapy education, educational administration, and ministry (Ursuline College: Fall enrollment highlights, n.d.).

Students come from a variety of backgrounds. The college is proud of its diverse student body. Over 50% of the students attend part time. Forty-two percent of the undergraduates are older students. The minority population is approximately 20%. Ursuline is primarily a women's college but 6.5% of the students are men. Men are not recruited by the college, but have been attracted by the reputation of the nursing and graduate programs. Over 50% women characteristically hold faculty and administrative positions. The college has a woman president, priding itself in having a woman in this high leadership position. This has always been a strong preference, according to De Vinne. Several decades ago, due to changes in federal legislation and the affirmative action regulations attached to it, the college dropped "Women" from its name but it is still considered by many to be a women's college.

Ursuline Studies Program

In the mid 1980s a task force composed of students, faculty, administrators, professional staff, alumnae, and the Board of Trustees was formed to examine the college's mission and its core curriculum. The committee reviewed research and theory and then proposed and implemented radical curriculum changes that have held for a decade. De Vinne said the Ursuline Studies Program was designed to improve the fit between the core curriculum and the college's existing mission.

An administrative structure was designed to oversee the effectiveness of the ongoing Ursuline Studies Program. "A director, who reports to the Vice President for

Academic Affairs and is assisted by a committee of faculty,” (Trivisonno, 1996, p. 28) was appointed. In-servicing new faculty, conducting annual workshops, evaluating faculty teaching in the program, and assessing the effects of teaching and learning are among the director’s responsibilities.

The first step in the process was to establish developmental goals based on *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. The task force envisioned “students’ movement from one developmental stage to the next by structuring learning experiences around these goals” (Carfagna, 1993, p. 272). Second, academic goals focusing on the skills needed by students for today’s society were developed. Third, when developing curriculum, faculty were required to include at least three of the established learning perspectives: (a) learning that is collegial, cooperative, connected; it takes into account issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and class; (b) learning that takes place amidst a wide variety of cultures; (c) learning that provides an understanding of individuals in society in relation to the human condition over time; (d) learning that is built around values and meaning; (e) learning that respects the spiritual dimension of life; and, (f) learning that involves inquiry, posing hypotheses, and systematically supporting them (Carfagna, 1993, pp. 273-274).

Finally, a three-stage sequence of courses was developed to fit students’ developmental and academic goals. Stage One, moving from received to subjective knowing, includes a six-credit Introductory Seminar. This course, which is writing-intensive, focuses on education, identity, meaning, and voice. Academic goals include problem solving, analyzing and synthesizing, communicating effectively, and interacting socially (Carfagna, 1993, p. 276).

Stage Two, moving from subjective to procedural knowing, includes an Introduction to Culture course which focuses on the humanities and fine arts in a study of “The City.” Academic goals include responding to beauty, making decisions based on values, and taking responsibility for society (Carfagna, 1993, pp. 276-277).

Stage Three, moving from procedural to constructive knowing, includes a Culminating Seminar which focuses on making decisions based on values and taking responsibility for society (Carfagna, 1993, pp. 277-278).

In addition to the aforementioned anchor courses, students also complete other courses based on *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. A wellness component and a computer competency were also included.

Staff/Faculty Development

A \$71,000 Lilly Endowment Grant, along with college funds, made dialogue and training possible for faculty and staff. Training experts included the authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and Marcia Baxter Magolda.

De Vinne said this process has been a professional stretch for most faculty. They have been asked to work with others outside of their own disciplines in areas such as writing, values, and cultures. They also were invited to shape new curricula along special interests using natural groupings.

A professional stretch was also felt by Student Services and Academic Support staff of Ursuline College. Some classes are team-taught by faculty and nonfaculty colleagues. Residence Life, Athletics, Counseling, Career Services, Student Activities, and Campus Ministry have been among those involved in core classes. The Admissions office has been involved in how to deal with transfer students and whom to recruit.

Academic services involvement includes the Library, Media Center, and the Office of Registrar. Public Relations staff has conducted focus groups and developed promotional materials. Development office staff incorporated the Ursuline Studies Program as part of the college's strategic plan and wrote grants for faculty recruitment, staff development, furniture and equipment, and library and media resources. Even alumni became involved. It is this kind of collaboration and commitment that has led to the program being accepted college-wide.

Effectiveness

The Ursuline Studies Program has placed itself at the center of the issue regarding whether or not women learn and think differently from men. There are many educators who believe it is an effective program, but there are others who are critical of it. Critics of the Ursuline Studies Program fear the thinking based on the premises of *Women's Ways of Knowing* will create deeper divisions among educators.

One critic, Judith Shapiro, current president of Barnard College, is quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, "Even if men and women are socialized to be different, I would still say taking that approach is a dangerous one It is likely to perpetuate differences. I think it can be feminism doing the work of sexism" (Chira, May 13, 1992, p. B7).

Another critic, Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) says, "Saying that we're more maternal and caring and cooperative and contextual just reinforces that behavior It's sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Chira, 1992, p. B7).

Suzanne Sims, president of Springfield College in Illinois, evaluated the Ursuline Studies Program during an internship at Ursuline College in the early 1990s. She said the program is “innovative” and “ahead of its time.” She feels the college’s commitment of time and money to the program will pay off valuably for the institution’s future (Personal communication, June 23, 1999).

Many at Ursuline College believe the program is effective, including faculty, staff, and students. Some are quoted in college promotional materials as saying: “Faculty have expressed a great deal of satisfaction. They see how [the Ursuline Studies Program] works, from theory to practice. They see changes in their students [Students] are learning to identify who they are--consensus-builders [and] non-confrontational Women students thrive on collaborative teaching and men in college can do better in this setting, too These skills are coming to the forefront in successful businesses” (Ursuline College, n.d.).

One student who had attended a coeducational college prior to attending Ursuline College said males had dominated the classroom, faculty had lower expectations of women than men, and there were few role models at the previous college:

When I realized what the (Ursuline Studies 111 course project) required, I immediately identified my two great fears, asking for help and talking to a group of people. As a result . . . I was able to understand why the entire course was constructed in the careful order it was. Ann and Marge [faculty members] dealt with these fears throughout the course by carefully increasing the difficulty of each assignment. In doing so, they anticipated my need to experience a strong

sense of confidence. As my confidence increased, I was able to talk with others I discovered I wasn't alone with my fears." (Ursuline College, n.d.)

The coauthors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* assisted Ursuline college staff with assessment research protocol and research design for the college's 10-year longitudinal study. Three instruments were used during the pilot study. The Measure of Epistemological Reflection (MER), developed by Marcia Baxter Magolda and William Porterfield, was selected for the actual study. Staff was trained in qualitative research interviewing techniques and assisted in coding and interpreting the interview data. Early assessment results have been encouraging. There have been significant themes in the students' interviews including: an appreciation of collaborative learning, valuing and respecting cultural differences, an increase in self-confidence, an increase in appreciation of the liberal arts, using voice effectively, and using social responsibility and advocacy (Carfagna, 1993).

From what students have said, it appears the Ursuline Studies Program was a wise choice for Ursuline College. For example, students spoke of using voice effectively by saying, "I'm not afraid to give my opinion it's just an opinion . . . I feel that I'm heard" (Carfagna, 1998, p. 197). Others spoke of social responsibility and advocacy saying, "I want to be a person that changes the world. I want to be the speaker against violence" (p. 208). Finally, students speaking about an increase in their self-confidence said, "I would like to say that I know myself . . . I am a person. I am worth everything in this world" (p. 197).

Conclusion

Ursuline College's web site boasts the Ursuline Studies Program "is a liberal arts core curriculum aimed at the ways women learn best, and it is the only curriculum of its kind in the country" (Ursuline at a Glance, n.d.). De Vinne said that the program remains unique because "it's a woman's issue" and the old boy's network remains skeptical of change.

De Vinne believes the "jury is still out on the program." She suggests there is a need for ongoing support to maintain the program's viability and liveliness. Although there have been no independent studies to date, she realizes further research is needed.

Success can be measured by benchmarks. Effectiveness is harder to measure. The latter is measured by asking if the institution's mission is being met. De Vinne believes strongly that this has been satisfied at Ursuline College. Overall, she believes the effects of the program has been validated by students' success following graduation. She said, "I think we graduate people who are very, very much more aware of women's issues . . . the good that all of society can reach if there are women in positions of authority and power . . . and the men that we graduate . . . [they are a] special breed of men at an undergraduate level who develop further [than other men]." She is convinced the Ursuline Studies Program moves students developmentally through their learning experiences by remembering the questions "Who is the learner . . . (and) what does s/he bring to the learning process?" As De Vinne said, "It works well here!"

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