Why Every Woman Should take a Women’s Studies Class

by AMBER WATT on Aug 2, 2011

There are few things I remember about the GE courses I took in college. For some, I remember what books I read but not much about them. Others I barely remember taking at all. The curse of GE is that even though it helps you become well-rounded, you’re learning stuff that isn’t really going to stick with you once you go into your major.

My women’s studies class was one GE course I felt was truly worth it.

To all women out there: I urge you to take a W/ST class. If you can’t afford tuition then use the resources I discuss in this article. Opening yourself to any part of a W/ST education, no matter how small, will have a significant impact on your world-view.

Before I get into the “why” reasons, let me tell you about the class I was fortunate enough to experience. It was called “Women and Their Bodies,” was a requirement to get any degree at the university (well, actually you could take nutrition instead), and had two sessions a week – one day was lecture, the other was group discussion.

The required books were *Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks, *Who’s Afraid of Women’s Studies?* by Rogers and Garrett, and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. My professor was a woman who was probably in her sixties, was a little extreme and I don’t remember caring for her all that much. But I did appreciate the education she gave us and how she forced us to really look at how we feel about ourselves.

I wouldn’t say I’d had a sheltered life before college (or maybe I did. What does that even mean really?), but I did have a disconnect from my body. I kind of just let it hang out, covered it up and just made sure to keep it clean and fix it if anything was wrong. Its purpose was purely to keep me alive and moving.

Then came the workbooks and group discussions. The lectures were fine: how women’s history both empowers and enrages (not as much attention is paid to influential females in standard education), passing around organic pads and tampons along with various sex toys was interesting, and a screening of Jean Kilbourne’s *Killing Us Softly* stays in my memory.

But the workbooks were something else. We were to answer over a dozen questions about our periods – from attitudes about it to experiencing it to what kind of products we used. There were questions about pelvic exams, breast exams, eating disorders and body image. I had to draw a little figure of my body and shade in the areas I didn’t like. On the other side, I drew what my perfect body would be. (This, as I look back on it, had a lot more significance psychologically than it should have. Try it, and it will probably upset you.) We were to create a pleasure map of sorts, touching various places in our vaginas and making a diagram of what it felt like at each different spot. I admit, the idea of it was too much for me and I just ended up drawing and guessing. Everything would feel good, probably, right?

What would you do if you found out you were pregnant? Have you ever had an abortion or miscarriage or child?

Sure, it all seemed a bit nosy and invasive, but they were questions and exercises that really made...
you think instead of repress.

That class also made me buy condoms in public (apparently many women are too embarrassed to buy protection) and visit a sex shop. All fascinating experiences.

Women's studies allows you to empathize with your fellow sisters (yes, I'm in the spirit) about what we all have been through, are going through, or may go through in the future.

And it's also a good idea to take because:

**You Learn About Your History.**

*A Century of Women* was a film that was screened in my class, and while I don't remember every female discussed in the film, I know my mind was blown with the amount of strong women portrayed. The poster for the film mentions a lot of women in media, but there are also women in literature, history, politics, art and sports that are discussed. With the rise of feminism and its mainstream acceptance in the last couple of decades (not necessarily support, mind you), it's sometimes easy as a woman to forget just how much you're fighting against patriarchal systems in everything you do. A majority of professions are still male-dominated, and realizing what women have to go through to get to the top is incredibly inspiring because it's a pretty hard fight just to get near the middle.

**You Learn About Your Body.**

As you may have picked up from my account of one women's studies class, you learn a lot about your body. Almost too much, depending on your relationship with it. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was an excellent tool to help with this learning process, and the exercises were obviously the more exploratory segments of body-learning. What really stuck with me, though, is how much you learn about your self-image of your body. Doing some research and some soul-searching into how much the media and other people affect how you see yourself can be absolutely appalling and surprising. Something that wasn't a requirement or exercise but that my professor recommended, was going a month without any magazines, television or films and seeing how you felt about your body during the media cleanse. I did it for a little less than a week and noticed a huge difference in my attitude. The relationship between a woman and her body is constantly developing, but it's important to do everything in your power to make sure it's a healthy one.

**You Learn About Each Other.**

Learning about women's studies is bound to help you relate to and understand others better, and for me, this was even more intensified by a group discussion every week. It was surprisingly wonderful to be able to talk to perfect strangers about private feelings and discover that they shared a lot of the same attitudes, insecurities and fears as you do. It really shows how people are connected even if they can't always open up about it.

**You Learn About Yourself.**


These are all things that we try not to analyze in direct relation to us, but when you look at and ask "is this healthy? Is this benefiting or hurting me?... it's something you're going to want to think about.

So go to the library and check out one of the books or films I mentioned. Think about some of the questions that were posed to me. Draw your body and the body that you think is perfect. Take the things I learned most from in my W/ST class, and see what the experience or research does to your views.

And always remember that the more you learn about yourself and others, the more you understand what it really means to be part of this beautiful thing called humanity. (And dare I say it, feminism. Be proud.)

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