Women and Gender Studies 101

Cultural Contrasts

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Office Hours: T/TH 12:30-1:45

Course Description:
This course is designed to introduce you to many of the major themes and issues in Women and Gender Studies—a multidisciplinary field developed to investigate women’s experiences, perspectives, and contributions, and to interrogate the ways that gender functions in everyday society. The class is designed to enable students to think critically and offer analysis not only about the diverse texts and themes we will read and discuss, but also about their own lives. One major goal of the class is to help students question their own assumptions regarding issues of gender, race, class, and orientation, and to recognize the extent to which they do and do not have access to privilege. WGST emphasizes listening to and learning about voices that have historically been marginalized, including women of color, poor, disabled, and elderly women, and lesbian, bi-, and transgendered women. We will also explore constructions of masculinity that both conform to and resist the prevalent norms. Focusing on readings by such a wide variety of perspectives is intended to strengthen an awareness of diversity and focus on crucial issues of social justice by interrogating the notions of dominance and oppression. Our discussions will investigate the nature of power: what it is, who has it, to what extent, how it is defined, and who gets to do the defining.

Course Goals:
Over the course of the semester, students will learn to
1. Differentiate between social constructionism and biological determinism
2. Articulate the meanings of & responses to white privilege and male privilege
3. Understand how core aspects of identity (race, class, etc) intersect with gender
4. Engage with and debate other students respectfully in discussion
5. Gage their own location in relation to privilege & oppression
6. Discover connections between their own life experiences and feminist perspectives & practices

Cultural Contrasts Goals:
1. Students will discover values, beliefs and judgments outside their cultural sphere
2. Students will recognize features of cultural variation (e.g. gender, religion, language, race, etc.)
3. Students will discuss critically their own culture-based values, beliefs and judgments in order to frame them in a comparative context.
4. Students will identify how human cultures develop, adapt and transform

Required Texts:
Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions (3rd Ed) Susan Shaw and Janet Lee
Xerox readings (Provided in class or via Blackboard)

Recommended Texts:
Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics (2nd Ed) Judith Lorber
Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction Rosemarie Putnam Tong
Course Requirements and Grade Breakdown:

Exams 50%
There will be two exams, a midterm and a final, to test your knowledge of the chapters and readings from the textbook. The exams will cover the factual and theoretical information presented by Shaw and Lee, as well as the other assigned readings. In order to do well on these exams, it is important that you read carefully and thoroughly, keeping on schedule with the readings. It will help you a great deal to take specific chapter notes about the key points as you go, rather than trying to cram all the information in at exam time. The tests are designed to help ensure that you meet the course goals and finish the semester with a stronger understanding of key issues, terms and concepts in Women and Gender Studies.

PowerPoint Presentations 20%
In groups of @4 students each, you will be evaluating popular magazines over the course of the semester and giving a twenty-minute PowerPoint presentation in April to report your findings. Some of the groups will be assessing the way that women are depicted in advertisements—focusing on the images themselves and offering a critique and commentary on those images and what they imply. Others will be assessing the articles in the magazines to determine what specific gender messages are being sent to our society regarding beauty, fitness, sexuality, gender roles, etc. The goal is to assess the ways that varying populations of women—ethnic, teen, lesbian, feminist, etc—are presented in current magazines. It’s likely that you’re familiar with mainstream women’s magazines like Cosmo and Vogue, but how are women in other demographics represented? This project will allow the class to explore many types of popular magazines to critique the diverse representations of contemporary American women.

Participation in Oral Discussion/In-Class & Homework Assignments 10%
The two most important things that you bring to this class are 1) Time to read each text closely and thoroughly, and 2) A willingness to engage ideas critically and with an open mind. Come to class having completed the assigned readings. Be prepared to participate actively in rigorous discussions about the content and form of what you have read. It will help you to write down thoughts or questions you have in the margins of the text. Also be sure to bring to class a written list of several questions or points of interest you have about each piece—this will help ensure good discussions. I approach class meetings as dialogues in which we all learn from one another. Don’t look to me for “the answers.” Instead, I look forward to listening to your questions, insights, and interpretations of the texts. Please be aware that non-tolerance of other people’s opinions will not be tolerated! :-) Disagreement makes for good discussions, but be respectful of other people’s differences and listen with courtesy. Due to the nature of the course, we will be discussing materials that some students may find sensitive (abuse, sexuality, hate crimes, homosexuality, etc). If you are uncomfortable having direct and open conversations about such topics, you may want to reconsider your enrolment in this course. It is critical that those in the classroom maintain a safe and respectful space for open discussion; everyone in the class should feel comfortable voicing opinions and ideas.

The “in-class assignment & homework” segment of the grade is designed to offer credit for occasional in class group work that will take place over the semester: in-class exercises, spontaneous writings, and group activities that will be assigned for completion during the class period (or as homework). You are expected to stay focused on the subject assigned during these informal discussions and activities. Although there is a separate grade for “attendance and participation,” your grade for these assignments will also suffer from absences and being unprepared.
Final Research Paper 20%

A) Creative Option:
When reading through the semester’s required texts, I am hoping that some of you will find personal connections in them to your own lives. Maybe you have wrestled with issues of gender, race, sexual orientation, or class identity in ways similar to those of the authors we discuss in class. The creative option for the final paper is a place to explore such ties. I encourage you to seek connections and use the readings, if possible, to open new avenues and insights into yourselves. When using this kind of autobiographical approach, it is imperative (for this paper) that you demonstrate the links between the texts and your lives. In other words, you may not simply use the paper to write uncritically about yourself. You'll need to show specific ways in which the texts correspond to issues you have grappled with or how they have helped instruct you about issues you weren’t aware of—maybe white privilege or heteronormativity for example. The goal here is to illuminate both the texts and your understanding of yourself.

B) Traditional Research Option:
You may choose to do a more formal, research-type paper on a topic of your choice that relates to the issues we have discussed in class. You might, for example, read other works by authors we’ve covered in class, or do further research on one of the themes or subjects that is of special interest to you. The possibilities here are endless. You may be interested in reading further about one of the various feminisms, in doing research on the way women are represented in ads and the media, in exploring how children are socialized into one of two genders, or in investigating the intersexed movement. You might be interested in pursuing more theoretical issues such as discussions about subjectivity and autonomy, the performativity of gender, or the social construction of race and gender.

* As you read the texts, keep an eye out for material that you would like to pursue further. If you are interested in a particular area, come and talk to me about exploring it as your research paper; it’s never too soon to be thinking about a topic, and I can check your progress and give you some feedback and possible suggestions. I will provide a list of possible topics, but you may also come up with a gender-related topics of your own; all topics must be approved by me.
*Note: This paper will be due on the last day of class. It should be 8-10 typed, double-spaced pages.

Attendance Policy:
Because so much of your total grade in this course depends upon in-class responses, activities and discussions, and participation in lecture and debate, your attendance is absolutely crucial. Your input and presence are what will make the classroom vital. You may miss only four classes before it adversely affects your grade. Repeatedly arriving late to class also counts as an absence. You must reserve these absences for those times when you really need them. I will not make decisions about whose excuses sound legitimate and whose don’t, nor allow some people “freebies” and not others. The attendance policy is not negotiable. Please do not ask me to excuse you from class, regardless of the reason. If you know in advance that you will not be in class, it is your responsibility to get the assignments from me or from someone else in the class. You are responsible for making up work that you missed because of absences. If you are absent on a day an assignment is due, you must turn it in early or give it to a classmate to turn in for you. I will not accept late work without penalty. Contact me (or a classmate) to find out what you missed and stay on schedule. Any student who misses more than four classes will have their final grade dropped 1/3 letter grade for each additional absence.
Ethics and Plagiarism:
You have to do your own work and appropriately identify work that is collaborative, borrowed, or copied from other sources, including your own work from other classes. Obviously, when you use graphics, works, words, citations, or even ideas from other sources, including the Internet, you are under the legal and ethical obligation to identify these sources according to citation norms. You may use projects from another class as a base for projects in this class, but you must consult me first if you are doing this. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me. Using work that is not yours and not appropriately identifying it will usually result in an F for the course.

Students with Disabilities:
In compliance with St. John Fisher College policy and applicable laws, appropriate academic accommodations are available to you if you are a student with a disability. All requests for accommodations must be supported by appropriate documentation/diagnosis and determined reasonable by St. John Fisher College. Students with documented disabilities (physical, learning, psychological) who may need academic accommodations are advised to make an appointment with the Coordinator of Disability Services in the Office of Academic Affairs, Kearney 202. Late notification will delay requested accommodations. If anyone has a documented disability that I should be aware of, please let me know as soon as possible.