

## Teaching Idea 13: Introducing Gender Studies

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### Background and Concept

This seminar provided an introduction into gender as a crucial analytical category of difference in cultural theory and as a key issue in the investigation of social life. Through a multi-methodological and interdisciplinary design, the course offered an introductory overview of some key theoretical texts and concepts in the fields of gender, identity and culture. Following an intersectional approach, the seminar paid specific attention to the intersections of gender with other axes of difference, such as race, class, age and sexuality. Particularly, the seminar focused on the ways in which identities are constructed, granted visibility, or marginalized and on the role of the media in these processes. With this emphasis the seminar encouraged students to more fully comprehend the ways in which social stereotypes and cultural norms are produced and to critically reflect on the political consequences of social exclusion. As final assignment students produced research proposals for a possible bachelor thesis in the area of gender studies and presented them at the student conference “Exploring Gender Studies”.

The design of the course was specifically tailored to address several issues that I encountered during my other teaching assignments at the Justus-Liebig University. For one, I had become aware of the fact that students had a desire for a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which gender and identity interrelate. They felt, however, that most of the courses in the current curriculum discussed gender only as one factor among many and insufficiently explored it in depth as a fundamental category of analysis. Furthermore, students frequently expressed their insecurities when it came to choosing a topic, structuring and planning their bachelor theses. Therefore I designed this course a) to familiarize students with the key concepts, terms and issues regarding gender and identity, b) to strengthen the area of gender studies within the existing curriculum of the JLU, and c) to provide students with the necessary methodological skills required to successfully develop their BA theses.

I was very much pleased with the outcome of this seminar and the positive feedback I got from the students. As I see myself more as a facilitator than as an instructor, this seminar was structured around peer-learning and horizontal feedback. This was achieved through the student conference, which gave students the opportunity to present their work in a conference-like setting and get substantial feedback from their fellow colleagues. The conference also had the crucial function to provide the students with the opportunity to improve their presentation skills and to gain some initial experience in the organization of academic conferences.

As I am a strong advocate of research-based learning with a focus on real-life social practices, I encouraged students to apply theoretical frameworks discussed in the seminar to a practical example of their choosing. Students managed this task successfully and produced highly creative and critical ideas for possible Bachelor theses. These covered a wide variety of topics including

the “Don’t ask, Don’t Tell” policy in the US military, the role of gender in the New Right in Germany or the representation of women in hip hop culture. I regard it as one of the main accomplishments of this course that students learned both about the wide applicability of gender in the area of academic cultural investigation and the relevance of gender as an identity category for social life outside the class room.

This seminar managed to familiarize students with essential aspects in the areas of English Studies and Cultural Studies at large and provided them with crucial methodological skills that will be beneficial to their future academic performance beyond the scope of this particular course.

### **Assignments and Requirements**

Students had to hand in a weekly homework of about 150-200 words answering questions regarding the text of the respective week.

As final assignment students drafted a proposal of about six pages for a possible Bachelor thesis in the area of gender studies, including an abstract, research questions, methodology, originality of their project and a literature review. They presented their projects at the 25th of January 2014 at the conference “Exploring Gender Studies”, which the students organized themselves.

### **Central Questions**

The course evolved around the following questions that served as thematical guidelines throughout the discussions, sessions and the conference:

- Why and how is gender functioning as a primary organizing principle in society?
- How do gendered structures of power and authority operate?
- How do “gendered scripts” for dress, appearance and behavior emerge among different social groups and across different cultural sites? How do these scripts work to produce normative assumptions about gendered identity? What role do the concepts of the body, performance and representation play in these processes?
- How does gender intersect with other categories such as class, race, age and sexuality?
- What role do the media have in perpetuating as well as challenging dominant conceptions of gender?

### **Thematic Aims**

By the end of the course the students should be able to

- Understand and engage critically with central debates in the field of Gender Studies.
- Define, utilize and reflect on basic terms and concepts central to this field.
- Apply a variety of methods of analyzing gender in society, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources.
- Apply concepts and theories of Gender and Cultural Studies to life experiences, concrete media texts and social processes.
- Communicate effectively about gender issues in both writing and speech, drawing upon central Gender and Cultural Studies scholarship.
- To understand how gender is related to social systems of oppression such as (hetero-)sexism, homophobia, racism, ageism etc.

## Didactic Aims

- To encourage students to think early and critically about possible topics for their Bachelor theses.
- To provide students with the necessary skills they need to plan, structure and execute a successful Bachelor thesis.
- To make students familiar with the structures and aims of an academic conference.
- To improve their communication and representation skills and give them the opportunity to present their work in a conference-like setting.
- To give them the chance to benefit from horizontal peer-feedback.

## Self-Evaluation. Rewards and Challenges of the Course.

While I enjoyed teaching this course very much, it was both challenging and rewarding in many ways. I deliberately designed the final assignment in a way that gave students the freedom to apply gender as an analytical category to their specific interests and fields of study. A positive experience was that students took up on this chance. Students who are becoming teachers were, for example, drafting projects about gender-related issues in the class room, while my international Turkish students talked about the concept of orientalism or LGBT rights in Turkey. This furthered the integration of theory and practice and ensured that students engaged in topics that were meaningful to them personally and relevant academically.

A challenge was posed by the students' different levels of knowledge. Whereas some students were familiar with issues of gender, others lacked basic knowledge and terminology. However, by ensuring that the theoretical concepts were continuously applied to practical examples, the course managed to even out those differences in knowledge levels. For example, 'the Spectacle of the Other' was discussed in relation to the representation of race in a hip-hop documentary and gender-performance was discussed with the help of concrete advertisements. Thus, students familiar with the basic concepts were introduced to new fields of application, while students with no prior knowledge were familiarized with the basic terms and approaches. An additional challenge was posed by the limited time frame of the course. As gender is an infinitely wide field of investigation, the seminar necessarily had to leave certain aspects and debates aside. With the discussion of some key concepts such as 'hegemonic masculinity' by Connell and 'performativity' by Butler, the seminar theoretically favored depth over breadth. The limited number of texts, however, also provided the productive opportunity to concentrate on key theories and aspects. Research-based learning and academic rigor was further ensured through the weekly homework and the extensive written feedback I gave students in response to their written proposals. However, through the ample variety of topics discussed at the conference, ranging from gender mainstreaming in international organizations and the construction of love and romance in popular culture to the influence of homosexual parents on the performance of children in the classroom, students also learned about the wide applicability of gender. This combination of close theoretical readings with practical examples turned out to be a fruitful didactic approach that provided students with a holistic understanding of gender as both analytical category and social practice.

A further very positive experience was how well the emphasis on horizontal learning and peer-feedback was perceived by the students. The seminar in general, and the conference in particular,

were characterized by lively, productive and sometimes controversial discussions that provided the students with some crucial and useful feedback regarding the feasibility of their projects. About the chance to present their work in a conference-like setting, I got solely positive feedback from students who appreciated this innovative and creative form of assignment. I guided students through the process of thematically clustering the different conference panels and discussed with them at length the structures and aims of academic conferences. Thus, the conference presented the chance of a first step towards the building of an academic CV. Furthermore, it offered the possibility for extensive peer-feedback, and, through the thematic variety of the papers presented, a broad overview of different fields in which gender as analytical perspective could be applied. Another means through which I tried to further a horizontal rather than vertical learning-experience was the invitation of a former student, who successfully completed a bachelor thesis in the area of Gender Studies at the English Department after taking my course on Gender, Media and Consumer Culture in the winter semester 12/13. This student shared her personal experiences about the process of assembling and researching a Bachelor thesis in the area of Gender Studies talked about the opportunities and challenges such a project poses. Thus, students had the chance to talk in an informal way about their concerns and fears. The positive feedback I got from my students during the course is also confirmed by the evaluations. I am especially pleased that student felt that they gained a good overview of the topic and that the seminar was structured to accommodate their needs with regard to pace, content and scope. That students felt that what they have learned in this seminar can also be applied outside the class room, as well as to other fields of study, I regard as one of the main achievements of this course.

### **Conference Panels**

- 1) Gender and Popular Culture
- 2) Gender in the Class Room
- 3) Gender and Language
- 4) Gender and Race
- 5) Gender and Politics
- 6) Gender and the Media