

Creative Teaching Spaces: Home Movies

by Barbara Hammer

I was struggling to be hired as a teacher. I pleaded with the authority, the chairman of the film department, to tell me why I wasn't hired. He didn't say a thing about my being a lesbian but I was sure that was the reason.

I dressed up in my straightest two-piece jacket and skirt, nylons, and high heels to attend the teachers' meeting. I wobbled in the heels as I hadn't worn them for years and was out of practice.

The chair of the department confesses to me that he feels guilty teaching the five hour a week class on film as art because he is not an artist. My heart surges with imagination and expectation. I'm hungry for just such a teaching position. But he hires a man for the job.

I HAD THIS DREAM on the morning I set aside to begin writing this essay on teaching outside the patriarchal institutions of learning, on teaching at home.

I am a radical lesbian-feminist and my films reflect my politics. When I apply for a teaching position at a university, although I have the educational and teaching credentials required, I am inevitably turned down with a form letter noting the number of applicants, the difficulty of decision making, the hopes that I will find rewarding and gainful employment elsewhere. Nowhere does the letter say I am too radical, feminist, or lesbian.

It is important to examine feminist education outside of a traditional institution as many of us find ourselves too radical for the

existing mode of pedagogy. I decided to open my live-in studio to women who want to learn the skills of filmmaking.

To connect with students, I generally post flyers around town, advertise in the local women's newspaper, and rely on word-of-mouth advertising by former students. The class meets for three-hour sessions once a week in the evenings as many women are employed during the daytime hours. The financial costs for the student depend on how many are taking the class, but I try to figure on earning between \$20 and \$30 an hour. The students pay for their film and related materials, and I provide my personal equipment for their use.

I find that the women who choose to study outside an institution are empowering themselves through their choice of private lessons in a subject area usually discouraged for women. I am interested in their personal struggles, ambitions, and decision making. The intimate setting of my studio, with thrift shop rug, comfortable furniture, and used projector and editing tools helps relax their inhibitions around filmmaking as prestigious, expensive, and impossible. I am able to teach methods for inexpensive filmmaking, and I can cover a particular technique until each class member understands. Usually no one is left behind in such an intimate grouping. Finally, I am rewarded by self-activating students who advertise, arrange, and show their films in a public setting.

I hear a knock at the door. The six women who have decided to study Feminist Filmmaking arrive. Their faces are open and excited, filled with expectation and hope. Surely in this private class in a home/studio environment they won't be disappointed. I tell them they can make any film they wish and that their fantasies may become their realities. They needn't worry about the equipment and skill building for I will be beside them in a one-to-one teaching situation as the class progresses. Now it is time to find out why they have come to make cinema.

Some come to class with a conscious intention to tell us their stories, dreams, and descriptions of visual pictures. Others want to be filmmakers but are not sure what form or content they want their film to take. One of the important beginning lessons for me as teacher is conveying that film is simply narrow strips of celluloid with gelatin layers holding disparate pieces of silver grains or color sensitive dyes. It is necessary to see film beyond

the "Hollywood presence" and recognize that film is not a story, a document, or a poem. It can be any of these but it can be something else, too. It is a plastic and transparent medium that, when developed, is capable of accepting an image or nonimage. When used with apparatus, electricity, and a projection system of transport motor, lens, and light, it is capable of displaying a magnification at a distance from its plastic self. That approach allows the student to see film for what it is and then recognize that what she wants to do with it is her projection on the medium. This overall realistic view provides opportunity and consciousness, two determinants for effective choice.

The students have introduced themselves and I have introduced "film." We sit in a circle on the floor. The informality, as well as the round form, encourage a sense of comfort and "at homeness" and help set an attitude of equal consideration for all. We will work as a group, I explain, and each woman will contribute a part to the content of the film as well as to the physical making of the film. I will facilitate the processing of the class and act as resource person and equipment/technique teacher, but the form and content of the film will be up to them.

Believing that images are at our disposal within ourselves and only need to be retrieved and brought to consciousness, I begin a guided meditation to facilitate this process: first a relaxation exercise so that each woman feels herself relaxed and lying on the floor without tensions; then a "dropping into" herself deeply through a countback or a leaf-falling image until there is a deep inner resting place for each woman. I ask her to allow an image to come to mind on a blank screen of her mind. I ask her to note it, to notice how she sees, from what angle she is seeing, what the colors and smells are. This is an awareness exercise in noticing and remembering. Can she imagine then another image following the first, I ask, leaving silences for her to see and note. I remind her that this is a place available to her whenever she wishes to return to it, and then I ask her to come back to an awareness of her body and surroundings and her breathing. With the lights now on, she sits up and takes as much time as she needs to write down the images she has seen. The images become her personal script.

While they are scripting, I prepare tea for the group. Then each woman shares her script with the others. They arrive at a common theme, selecting from their individual scripts an image or se-

quence that will fit the theme. With relief and pleasure they laugh at completing an emotionally demanding task of personal image finding and group decision making.

That describes a typical first session in the home/studio classes I have been teaching for the past three years in North Oakland, California. The individual attention, the teacher's "seeing" of each woman, the small class size, the informality, the chance to explore, experiment, and take risks with provocative teaching methods, the personal availability of teacher to student as well as group process would be difficult to achieve in the traditional instructional setting.

Teaching filmmaking or artmaking in a nontraditional setting reduces anxiety. As women, we have been led to believe that we do not have an aptitude for mechanical skills. Many women approach cameras, tape recorders, and editing equipment with trepidation and sometimes even with terror. Students have told me that they have dreams of accidents leading to equipment destruction while they are learning filmmaking. Introduction to personal cameras in a home setting is less threatening. The student has the opportunity to express fears, take her time, and handle equipment in a relaxed atmosphere.

"Educational anxiety" may take the form of floating fear provoked by memories of competition, judgment, and potential failure. Many of us have been victims of a quantitative system that pushes students through as fast as possible, proclaiming itself to be providing equal opportunity but providing rushed incompetency instead. We were not allowed the opportunities to test ourselves with our own projects. We were tested with information or skill building that others, usually men, thought important. This does not imply that the feminist educator accepts the work of her students without critical thinking or evaluation. Many times I am tempted, in a world that so little acknowledges the efforts of women, to nod my head and appreciate the smallest effort. This is unfair. As a feminist educator, I must see the potential in my student for her greater work, stronger achievement, and continuing effort by envisioning a grander scope of her possibilities. I cannot take the easy way out with bland acceptance of the mediocre but must expect from her work that has the potential to be revolutionary.

This quality of "being seen," this taking in, this sense of recognition of student by teacher and vice versa is the prime

modality of effective feminist teaching. This is teaching according to the needs and capacities of the student. One teaching mode will not do for all. Individual recognition was imperative to me in my own education. Two "Master Teachers" with whom I have studied taught outside of a traditional institution. I studied with Terry Sendgraff who developed the movement form "Motivity" based on body movement in accordance with the forces of gravity, often using trapezes and other suspended apparatus to emphasize the natural principles of motion. With gentle guidance in an informal structure, I was able to create, improvise, and invent while "being seen." In addition, I was privileged to study poetry with Deena Metzger, known for her evocative symbolic imagery, who pointed out pathways to an inner journey. She was an audience to our own work and led many of us to see that we could identify ourselves as poets were we to accept the work and discipline demanded for that designation. For each of us, whether studying movement, poetry, or film, the task of individual work begins when the class ends.

Feminist education must stimulate the inner guide and voice, the self-recognition of the need for expression, the commitment to demand of ourselves long and arduous hours of concentration, and the courage and practice of sharing completed work. That is a tall order for a short class. The teacher will be participating in the reciprocal process of feminist education by demystifying equipment, reducing anxiety around movement/words, and demonstrating through her practice a commitment to work as a belief in self-expression, while simultaneously recognizing the same potential and practice in her students.

If Feminist Art is included in national and international women's studies curricula, the scope and the vision of education can be expanded for the entire community of scholars, artists, and activists. As a feminist teacher, I am responsible not only to my continuing choices as an image-maker but to the enhancement of possibilities for other women to make those choices and to become part of a community of self-responsive and responsible cultural workers. In unofficial, self-created classes we, as feminist educators, reach for new ways to combine reason, intellect, emotion, and intuition for a clearer direction and comprehension of our lives.