

Educating Rita and Peter: theoretical and methodological considerations for a gendered history of the Open Foundation Program, University of Newcastle, Australia, 1974-1994

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Willy Russell's play, *'Educating Rita'* (1980) explores a powerful matrix of the themes of gender, class, adult education and academia. But what kind of story could have been written if the protagonists were Rita *and* Peter? This paper outlines a proposal for a history of a university access program called the Open Foundation Program, from its inception at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, in 1974 until 1994. Thousands of Ritas and Peters have by now gained entry into university through this program and there is no sign of demand dying out or 'steading'. The paper explores some of the theoretical and methodological considerations for this proposed history. It briefly considers the deployment of gender as an analytic category in history, and then it canvasses the history of higher education in Australia. The paper goes on to examine some international gender studies of adult students in higher education. Finally it outlines the theory and methodology for the study, and explores the task of framing research questions on tertiary adult experience.

INTRODUCTION

The first production of Willy Russell's play, *'Educating Rita'* was performed in England in 1980 and became a famous movie, starring Julie Walters (the original stage Rita) and Michael Caine, in 1983. The play concerns the education of Rita, a 26 year old Liverpuddlian hairdresser who doesn't just want to live the expected life of a working class woman as wife to Denny and mother of his children — she 'wants to talk about things that matter'. This dissatisfaction with her gendered future and her quest for self improvement leads her to the Open University, an open access scheme to university study which began operation in the United Kingdom in 1971. It also leads her to her tutor Frank, a drunken, profoundly dis-

pirited university professor, who believes that academia is 'much less than meets the eye'. Russell's play (and screenplay) explores a powerful matrix of themes of gender, class, language, adult education and academia. It shows the transformative power of tertiary education on a working class woman's life, and the problems that adult women, especially working class women, encounter when they enter higher education. The higher education of women is posed as a profoundly disturbing social act that challenges entrenched gender roles and expectations. At the end of the play, however, it is not only Rita (now the authentic 'Susan') who has changed, but also Frank who, inspired by Rita's example, has recovered his will to take charge of his life. In the end Rita, the educated hairdresser, now with choices she did not have at the play's beginning, cuts Frank's hair and symbolically liberates him from his old self before he migrates to Australia (perhaps imaginatively positioned as the new world) ¹.

The story of Rita's awakening and Frank's revival could indeed be taken as a metaphor for the entry of women and the working class into tertiary education, surely one of the most significant stories of the twentieth century yet to be fully told (Donato and Lazerson 2000, 11-12). But what kind of story would or could have been written if Rita was Peter? And Frank was Fran? Would Peter's transformation as a result of his encounter with academia have the same features as Rita's? And what if Rita and Peter came to class together? Would they tell different stories? Would Peter construe his desire for higher education as a flight from his gender role as Rita did? That is, are there gendered features to the tertiary educational experiences of adult learners? If there are, what are they? Further, is the *lietmotif* of the transformative (enlightening) power of tertiary education (Baxter and Britton 2001, 87), a meta-narrative, a mythology that is supra-gender? And if it is then, does it matter that Rita was a woman in this story? Would a Peter be likewise transformed? Is there such a thing as 'supra-gender' — that is, to what extent does gender condition all experience or narratives of ex-

perience? Is tertiary education empowering for all adult learners or only some? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in my research on the Open Foundation Program.

This paper outlines some of the theoretical and methodological considerations for a proposed oral history of the University of Newcastle's Open Foundation Program from its inception in 1974 until 1994. What were the experiences of the women and men who were students, teachers and administrators in the program? Did the program and the experiences of it change over time? What impacts has the program had on these individuals and on the Hunter and Central Coast regions? In an attempt to map this terrain the current project will require a blended historical methodology that accommodates documentary, quantitative and oral history research. Gender will be a primary lens through which the material will be analyzed, as will class. Firstly the paper provides some brief background material on the Open Foundation. The study then turns to a consideration of the deployment of gender as an analytic category in history, and specifically the history of higher education in Australia. Thirdly, the paper examines some international gendered studies of adult students in higher education that point the way in terms of methodology and themes for the present study. Finally, it briefly outlines the theory and methodology for the study.

BACKGROUND: THE OPEN FOUNDATION PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

The Open Foundation Program was first established as a one year tertiary preparation course to allow interested adults, female and male, to gain a place at university. There were (and are) no educational qualifications required to study in the Open Foundation. The program had its 'trial run' with an intake of forty students in 1974, 54% of whom were men. By 1977, women predominated with 58% of the total (Wright 1992, 139). In the following year it took 80 students and by 1978, there were 224. It was believed at this time that the

'market' for the program would quickly even out (Griffin 1989). To its first director, Dr Brian Smith, it seemed 'likely that the demand for the course [would] steady at about 100 people per year' (Record A6304 iv). Some even believed that the 'market' would not last five years. After thirty years of continuous operation, the Part Time Open Foundation Program in 2004 enrolled 1,106 women and men, and about half that number again will enrol in the Intensive Open Foundation in the middle of the year. The Open Foundation takes about a third of all adult enabling students in Australia. There is no sign of demand dying out or 'steading'. By any measure, the Open Foundation is a serious historical phenomenon that as yet has no written history.²

In a recent paper based on the documentary record, the author examined the establishment of Open Foundation at the University of Newcastle in the years 1970-1978, and maintained that the event could only be understood by a telescopic layering of international, national, local and individual historical contexts. It was shown that Newcastle's Open Foundation can be directly related to the establishment of the Open University at Milton Keynes in Britain in 1971. The creation of the Open Foundation occurred within the context of an Australia-wide debate about the Open University, and the broadening of tertiary access to more mature-age students. In 1972 two reports by a University of Newcastle Senate Committee, chaired by Professor L.N. Short, recommended that the University set up a department of adult education, called the Department of Community Programmes, with a wide ranging brief to enter the field of adult and continuing education (University of Newcastle Senate Minutes). Dr Brian Smith, a former mature age student from Western Australia who had taught in the Open University in Britain in the summer of 1972, was appointed the first Director of the new department (Wright 1992, 138). On the basis of this background, Smith created the Open Foundation Program. At the widest contextual level, the study suggested that the opening up of universities through such programs as the

Open Foundation in the last thirty years can be understood as essential mechanisms for the actualisation of the post-industrial 'knowledge economy' in the so-called 'developed nations' (May 2003i). Further study is needed now to show how these influences have translated into the experiences of the women and men who availed themselves of the opportunity to seek access to tertiary education, and those women and men who administered and taught in these programs. Gender analysis is central to this line of enquiry and would bring the experiences of the sexes alongside. Most gendered historical studies at present provide single sex gender analysis and the vision of gender history tends to be bifurcated.

RITA OR PETER: THE BIFURCATED VISION OF GENDER HISTORY

Before about 1970, Australian history was 'sex blind' (Allen 1989), saturated with unexamined 'masculine universals' (Matthews 1984). The recognition by some historians, mainly women, that gender structured consciousness, experience, history, politics, economy and social institutions in fundamental ways recast the terms of historical enquiry. Old stories have been told in different ways and new areas such as reproduction, sexuality, and the family have been opened up. Concepts such as the sexual division of labour, family ideology, the two spheres and patriarchal relations have arisen to explain history with women in it. Now thirty years after these fundamental questions were first raised, where are we in writing gendered history in Australia?

The first thing that strikes one in the gender studies historical literature is that there are two main orientations: in the most prolific and older body of literature, dating from the mid 1970s, 'gender' equals 'women'. Sometimes these histories were feminist, sometimes not (Thom 1992). In the other more recent and less prolific (but rapidly expanding) type of gendered histories, 'gender' equals 'men' (Crotty 2001). This largely bifurcated vision has resulted in gender analyses being regarded still as a specialism, whereas it was the hope of

some earlier researchers that gender would eventually be central (Macdonald 1980) and would be integrated into historical understanding, rather than added on to it (Allen 1989; Lake 1986; Olson 1991). While school-based education history has done so, the history of Australian higher education has been particularly slow to explore gendered analysis, bifurcated or not. As Heenan (2002, 43) noted for the United Kingdom:

Although gender and education in schools has been the subject of extensive research, gender and inequality in higher education is still a relatively under researched area.

But the same can be said for Australia.

GENDER AND THE HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA — OR RITA HAS A PLACE BUT PETER IS ALMOST INVISIBLE

The history of higher education is interesting from a historiographical point of view and in terms of gender. Historical studies of higher education are balkanised. They are about discrete institutions and are usually by men about men, with little consciousness of gender. It has been noted elsewhere that those who benefit from a system of unequal power relations, such as are caused by gender or class regimes, are least likely to be conscious of those regimes or to problematise them. That is, researchers of higher education do not study men as men or the institutions they have built as gendered historical products/dividends of patriarchal society and culture. Indeed, as far as the researcher is aware, in the literature for example on the history of the 'idea of the university' no-one has subjected it to a thorough-going gendered analysis that traces the rise of the institution in terms of the entrenchment of patriarchal power. The disciplines have been studied in this way, but not the 'university' (Caine, Grosz and de Lepervanche 1988). (The researcher is still investigating this line of enquiry, however, and has not given up hope of a contrary outcome.) In the history of higher education, men are everywhere but nowhere to be seen as men.

The trees are not visible — only the forest.

Histories of higher education, with particular reference to Australia, tend to encompass histories of single institutions that sometimes have 'women' in the index — but not 'men' (Connell, Sherington, Fletcher, Turney and Bygott 1995; O'Farrell 1999; Davis 1990; Poynter and Rasmussen 1996; Wright 1992); biographies of prominent academic personalities — mainly of men, for example, John Anderson (Baker 1986) and George Arnold Wood (Crawford 1975) at Sydney University; autobiographies of some women, such as Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Solid Bluestone Foundations* (1983); and histories of disciplines, faculties or clubs. Histories of higher education with a gender focus are few although there are some 'gender equals women' studies of women's participation. Alison MacKinnon (1997) has been active in the latter area.

Further there has, as yet, been no attempt to account for the rise of universities in Australia in an integrated way, although there is now some postgraduate work presently occurring at Melbourne University looking at the history of federal policy on tertiary education (Laming 2001). In addition these studies have largely concerned themselves with staff (male) but few historians of higher education have turned their academic gaze to students (Barcan 2002; Beer 1998). Students are the faceless entities on the other side of the lecture podium. And the historical phenomenon of the adult tertiary student has been largely overlooked, although educational and sociological studies have been carried out (West, 1986; Gough and Maddock 1979). What kind of methodology could be employed to recover the history of universities from the students' perspective that also embraces gender as a central analytic focus and that problematizes male as well as female experience? Before answering this question the paper will turn to a number of interdisciplinary international studies, not strictly historical, that embrace gender and adult tertiary students. This literature points the way in terms of methodology and possible themes to explore. As Ryan and

Bernard (no date) comment: 'Richer literatures produce more themes.'

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ADULT LEARNER — LESSONS LEARNED FROM AFAR

Interest in the experiences of adult tertiary students has been especially marked in the United Kingdom where there is a long history, some of it written, of adult education programs. For example, a 1999 article by Lawrence Goldman charted the rise of university adult education in England since 1870 (Goldman 1989). In 1995 in Britain (not including Scotland) there were 1200 recognised tertiary access courses accounting for 30,000 students (Heenan 2002, 40). Other recent studies tend to be sociological and use semi-structured interviews, focus groups and/or surveys as their evidentiary bases. These studies focus on a single sex (female or male) or increasingly, on both.

Single-sex studies of mature age students tend to examine experiences and impacts of their non/participation in higher education. American researcher Frances Maher (2001) examined the educational vision of English women studying in women's studies program at the University of East London. She found that the women gained a new vocabulary and acquired political aims through their involvement in the course. They were actively involved in reflexively constructing themselves and their personal histories in the light of what they were learning. These women were aware however of their marginal status within academe — as well as the marginality of their women's studies program. Maher argued that the embeddedness in universities of gender-based binaries that oppose experience and theory, subjective and objective, teaching and research, credentialism and knowledge for its own sake, has kept some students (mature-age women, the working class), some subjects (such as women's studies), and some teaching faculty (females and student support teachers) at the margins' allowing the malestream university of dominant disciplines to proceed

'fundamentally intact'. Another researcher, Diedre Heenan (2002), reported on her study of mature women who successfully completed an access program in Ulster, Northern Ireland, but did not continue to degree programs. She found that mature women had three particular reasons for not continuing to higher education, largely arising from their gender role and their position in society. The reasons were, in order of importance to her interviewees, caring responsibilities, financial constraints, and lack of career advice. Less numerous are single sex studies of adult men in higher education — this despite the fact that men's studies is a growth area. Archer, Pratt and Phillips (2001) though held thirteen focus groups with 64 working class racially mixed men, aged 16 to 30 years, from London, to discuss their reasons for not participating in higher education. The authors found that working class males were likely to interpret higher education participation in terms of their gender identities — as loss, risk and threat to the maintenance of their working class male identities.

Studies that deal with both sexes also occur in the British literature. They focus on the mature age students' experiences of tertiary learning (Illeris 2003), or on the risks of higher education for mature students. Baxter and Britton researched a group of mature age male and female students. These students reported that there were risks in higher education for them. The risks centred primarily on challenges to their gender roles in domestic relationships, especially regarding the domestic division of labour and responsibilities (Baxter and Britton 2001). Women reported a greater risk than the men. Furthermore the males' partners adjusted to them, while the female students adjusted to their partners. Both sexes also reported risks in terms of class and social mobility. They became more confident and acquired a new vocabulary. However this placed old friendships in jeopardy, more so for working class students. These findings vindicate the men in Archer et al's study mentioned above in their fear of loss of working class identity through higher education.

From this brief survey of the recent literature from the United Kingdom, it is clear that adult students' experience of higher education is risky – it threatens gender and class based identities. Willy Russell reflected both types of effects in *Educating Rita*. In the course of her higher education, Rita was exiled from her former life as a working class wife. The researcher's proposed project will explore gender and class effects for mature age students of both sexes.

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF A GENDERED HISTORY OF EDUCATION—RESEARCHING RITA AND PETER TOGETHER.³

In terms of methodology, the literature from Australia and overseas shows that qualitative studies, employing some kind of narrative or linguistic analysis, have been the primary type of methodologies that researchers have employed to enter the experience of higher education for the adult student. The use of such evidence is also recommended by many researchers in gender studies and education history. In the field of men's studies, for example, Jackson (1990) advocated the use of experiential/subjective data found in, for example, men's biographies. This would assist the 'critical understanding' of the process that:

connects up the web of social, cultural and psychological forces that go into the making of masculinities, at different historical moments and in different regions and places (3).

Many of the researchers in men's studies in fact use autobiography as a means of entering their exposition of masculinity (Jackson 1989; Jesser 1996; Seidler 1989; Redman and Mac an Ghail 1997). Furthermore, they advocate the interdisciplinary approach taken in the feminist literature. Jesser, in particular, calls for the use of data that is 'idiosyncratic, subjective' and says that men's studies 'must be eclectic'. Men, he says, must speak for themselves' (Jesser 1996, 9-10). As research in men's studies has steadily grown over recent years, some investigators have targeted schools (not universities) as important sites for the construction of masculinities (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Mac

an Ghail 1996; Mangan and Walvin 1987).

Feminist researchers in the history of education have long affirmed the subjective realm of human experience as a valid field of enquiry (Purvis 1985). Australian researcher in the history of education, Blackmore, has argued that a feminist epistemology has four basic elements. Firstly, there is an insistence on the value of experiential knowledge. Secondly, the dualisms such as fact/value, culture/nature, emotion/reason, mind/body, need to be transcended. Thirdly, there is the necessity to recognise the validity of the subjective, and, fourthly, a preference for complexity rather than the reductionism of linear, causal frameworks. The study contemplated here would embrace these elements.

The proposed study will examine the experience of both women and men. This follows a trend in the literature already discussed and is in keeping with calls to explore gender as a central category of analysis, that is, where the two main orientations of masculinity/ies and femininity/ies are explored side by side. The main theoretical basis for the gender analysis of the Open Foundation in its first twenty years of operation is, then, that sex/gender regimes empower and circumscribe the lives of everyone. While it is undeniable that males in Australia (and elsewhere) have been advantaged by an historical sex/gender system which has as its central fact the economic, political and social subordination of women (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985, 590), it is also clear that males did and still do indulge in more risk-taking behaviours, die younger, suicide more frequently, and are more likely to be in prison, than females (West 1996). In order to understand these phenomena, men must be studied as men (Brod and Kaufman 1994, 4; Horrocks 1994, 12). Furthermore the research will contextualize the analysis of gender by employing other theoretical lenses, especially class and age. The experience of one's sex and gender is uneven within society: some men and some women are more advantaged, or disadvantaged, than others, depending on their social location. For example, rich women have had more economic power than

poor men. As well, the history of gender relations varies over time (Connell 1987). The cross analysis with class, age, race and ethnicity will add nuance and complexity to the study.

The project will test the findings from other research. For example, Kimmel (1994) has suggested that the socialisation of males is more restrictive than gender socialisation for females:

Women have greater latitude in defining their identities than men ... Such are the ironies of sexism: the powerful have a narrower range of options than the powerless, because the powerless can also imitate the powerful and get away with it. It may even enhance status, if done with charm and grace – that is, is not threatening. For the powerful, any hint of behaving like the powerless is a fall from grace (139).

The notion that higher education is progressive and liberating for adult students will also be tested, as will the findings from school based studies where research has shown that there are unequal outcomes for females and males (Spender 1989). Other researchers have shown how education empowers or subordinates students at the same time (Wrigley 1992). Was this true of the Open Foundation experience?

WHERE TO NOW?

The research on the history of the Open Foundation is in its development phase. This paper has been a foray into the first task of framing the research questions in the light of some of the literature from here and overseas on tertiary adult experience. The task of data identification and collection proceeds. It is hoped that a large-scale oral history project will eventuate in which students, lecturers and administrators will be interviewed about the program in the first twenty years of its operation. There is some urgency in this – for example, the founding director of the program, Dr Brian Smith, died last year. The first students who were in their forties in the 1970s are now in their seventies. If the early experience of the program is to be captured, it had better be soon. Then we also might be in a better position to answer

questions about the no-doubt multiple impacts the Open Foundation has had on the lives of those who have been involved in it and on the communities it serves. We might also be able to show how the many 'Ritas' and 'Peters' experienced the program, and the gendered differences and the similarities of their stories. And that might illuminate the limits, if any, of gender in experience and in the construction of memory.

NOTES

1. There is another much less positive way to construe the subtext of this ending of course – has Rita/the woman emasculated Frank/academia in the manner of Delilah shearing off Samson's locks, and he doesn't even know it. Such is his confusion and seduction by her that he submits willingly to the haircut and then runs away to Australia/the colonies/the beach as if it would be a better life. Have women, by entering the academic cloisters, stolen men's power? Surely Russell included this biblical nuance to introduce an ambivalent note at the end of his play.
2. There has been a flurry of recent interest in the Open Foundation by educational researchers, employing quantitative methods and looking at such factors as individual differences, effectiveness and performance in degrees. See Sid Bourke, Robert Cantwell & Jennifer Archer 1998; Robert H Cantwell, Jennifer Archer & Sid Bourke 2001; Robert H Cantwell & Rosalie Grayson 2002. None of these studies has a historical focus. Previous research was also sociological and presentist: see John Collins and Bethia Penglase 1991; Bethia M. Penglase 1993. The present author has also written about her experiences as a lecturer in the program: Jo May 2003ii.
3. This section draws heavily on the author's PhD thesis, May, Jo, 'Gender, memory and the experience of selective schooling in Newcastle, New South Wales, 1930s to the 1950s.' Unpublished PhD Thesis, Newcastle, NSW, University of Newcastle, 2000, chapter 2.

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